



UNEXPECTED JOURNEYS

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John 5:1-9; Acts 16:6-16

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In this season of graduations, all across the country students and their families are gathering in stadiums, gyms and theaters for the requisite Commencement speech that must be endured before diplomas are received and mortarboards are tossed in the air. Commencement speeches aim to celebrate the accomplishment at hand and to inspire those going out to commence the new chapter in life that is also at hand. The singular job of the speaker is to be encouraging, positive with a side of humor, and brief. The popular graduation gift, Dr. Seuss' book, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*, begins with such unbridled confidence and exclamation marks flying:

“Congratulations! Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places! You're off and away!
You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
You're on your own. And you know what you know.
And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go.”

It strikes just the right tone of bravado and autonomy: charting one's own course, striking out on one's own, forging ahead with singular resolve. And I'm sure there are plenty sitting in those folding chairs wearing cap and gown who feel so self-empowered and certain. Yet I'm sure, too, that in every crowd and among attendant families, there are a good number sitting through that ceremony overwhelmed and unsure about what is next. Some may take the road well-traveled and others the road less travelled...but there are plenty who greet the confusion of



multiple junctions with anxiety, having no clear sense of direction at all, no clarion call of purpose.

A graduation can bring this on, but truthfully such endings that necessitate a commencement, planned or unplanned, come our way throughout our lives. Acts 16 makes for an interesting and instructive text. Paul, Silas and Timothy are on their way through town after town with perhaps the greatest of all commencement speeches to inspire: Go, therefore, preaching and teaching and baptizing to the ends of the earth! Talk about a plan and great purpose! They are off, then, starting churches, visiting the ones already underway, strengthening them through teaching, informing them of important polity decisions made at the most recent General Assembly meeting in Jerusalem. Paul and company have charted their course and are forging ahead with singular purpose. They intend to bring the Gospel next to Asia Minor with Dr. Seuss-like confidence: “You can steer yourself. You’re on your own. You know what you know. And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.”

But just listen again to Acts 16:6: “They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so...they went down to Troas. Then, during the night, Paul had a vision and there stood a man of Macedonia pleading, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”

These verses are startlingly different in this book called, “The Acts of the Apostles.” This is the book where the Spirit fills, empowers, enables, sends... But here? What does it say? “...having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit...they attempted to go...but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them...” We make our plans, feel confident enough that we are on the right path, headed in an ordained direction...then something changes, interrupts, falls apart. Doors close. A stumbling block is put in our way. And sometimes, I suppose, we might say things just don’t work out, sometimes that’s just the breaks. It was a run of bad luck, nothing more. So, pull yourself together. Get on with it. But sometimes, it is worth



noting, the Holy Spirit is in it—even if we do not recognize it at the time—changing the plans we have made for ourselves, redirecting our steering, setting us on a course we had not intended and could not have imagined for ourselves.

Our theological forebear, John Calvin, did not believe anything was a matter of mere fortune or chance or fate. Believing God’s power over the world was absolute led Calvin to the strong belief in the providence of God, that God is guiding and directing us toward God’s own good purposes. Most of the time, Calvin was willing to admit, God’s purpose remains hidden...it is a “secret providence” that we may not perceive in the moment, but years later, looking back, we detect the hand of God that was guiding, helping, moving us where we did not want to, or had not imagined we might go.ⁱ

Bryan Stevenson is the author of the book, **Just Mercy**, and is the founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, AL. He and his organization were the inspiration and work behind the museum that opened there in April of 2018 that explores the effects of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and especially the legacy of lynching in this country. He has received a MacArthur Genius award among many other awards and honorary degrees.

But before all of that, Bryan Stevenson was a college student majoring in philosophy. And he says that he didn’t realize until his senior year that no one would pay him to philosophize when he graduated. So, he started a frantic search for a “post-graduation plan.” Without a true sense of direction, he applied to law school, not really sure what he wanted to do with his life. He felt intimidated at Harvard Law School, surrounded as he was by other students who seemed much more certain and experienced and well-connected than he was. His second year, he signed up for a course that would take him off-campus for a month, working for an organization he didn’t know much about, assisting condemned prisoners.

Within days, Bryan found himself being sent to meet with a man on death row. The nonprofit had not yet found a lawyer to take the man’s case, and no one else had time to go, so they sent the intern. As he drove through rural Georgia, Bryan was

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



scared to death to visit a man he had never met, who had been sitting on death row for 2 years already. He wasn't sure he could fill up 15 minutes let alone an entire hour of the visitation time. His only assignment was to let the man know they were trying to find him a lawyer and to tell him this much: "You will not be killed in the next year." Scared, intimidated and apologetic for his ineptitude, Bryan Stevenson met the prisoner, Henry. But when he gave the "good news" that he wouldn't be executed for at least a year, Henry grasped Bryan's hands and thanked him profusely. Soon, they were sharing their life stories, lost in conversation about their lives and their families. That unexpected journey, a desperate last-semester application to a graduate program he wasn't sure he wanted, led Bryan Stevenson to his God-directed vocation.ⁱⁱ

Sometimes we don't, can't even, steer ourselves in any direction we choose. Sometimes we get steered. Sometimes it is the Holy Spirit blowing us where we would not otherwise go. Calvin would say, forget "sometimes."

This text from Acts is filled with place names and we are tempted to find a map of ancient Roman colonies and chart the route outlined in these verses to see just how Paul and Silas and Timothy got from point A to point B, but the route is not, of course, the point. Instead, this text tells us of the God who has plans and purposes; how the Spirit of Jesus blows where it will, sets us on unexpected journeys.

The unexpected continues because when the Spirit prevented them from taking the Gospel to Asia Minor, sending them instead to Macedonia. Paul expected to encounter there men in a synagogue, which was the usual way of things. And that was the vision he had received, after all, a Macedonian man pleading for Paul to come and help. But after a few days in Macedonia, they walked beyond the city gate toward the river and encountered a place of prayer on the margins. But instead of men, it was a group of women.

Having been prevented by the Spirit earlier, Paul knows what he knows, and so pays attention to the opportunity given, however unexpected. Paul, Silas and Timothy and the women speak and listen, sharing their stories and their lives. One

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of them, Lydia, is a worshiper of God but not yet of Christ. She is a business woman from Thyatira, a dealer in exquisite purple cloth. In what is surely an unexpected outcome of her day, Lydia and her entire household—an unusual description since usually only men led their household—are baptized. This woman of means then offers hospitality in her home to these evangelists.

This is the story tells of how a house church in Philippi began—the church that seems Paul’s favorite out of all of them according to his letters. He fumed at the Galatians and constantly corrected the Corinthians, but gushes with affection for the Philippians. Steered where they did not plan to go, finding not the company they expected, taking the Gospel not to Asia Minor but here, Lydia becomes the first European convert to the Gospel of Christ. We cannot always see how God is at work. The Providence of God is theology in the rearview mirror.

The poet William Wordsworth recalled the moment he knew his true vocation was to be a poet. He makes it all seem straightforward and delightful. He was in college, walking home in the wee hours after a summer night’s dance. Two miles into his hike, dawn broke. Wordsworth found himself greeted by a morning, he wrote, “more glorious than I had ever beheld.” The sea seemed to be laughing in the distance. The mountains were bright as clouds. All of creation was pure delight: “Dews, vapors, and the melody of birds, And Laborers going forth into the fields.” Overwhelmed by beauty, suddenly, his heart full, he realized he was destined to become a poet.

David Brooks, the columnist, tells this story in his newly published book. In it, Brooks explores his own recent and momentous spiritual and personal journey of the past few years. He calls Wordsworth’s recollection of that moment in the early dawn as semi-mythical. “Wordsworth,” Brooks writes, “recounted this clear moment when he was older and looking back on his life, but it wasn’t so clear at the time.” In his mid-twenties, Wordsworth was still trying to figure out what to do with his life. He tried joining the clergy, but still liked drinking and dancing. He thought about becoming a lawyer, then spent four months bumming around London, fathered a child in France and abandoned the mother, tried to get a job as



a tutor in Ireland...all before a couple of unexpected turns of “fate” gave him the means to settle and begin writing poetry.

In the book, Brooks explores how his own sense of vocation and religious identity and connection to community has been transformed, and at one point he writes: “The summons to vocation is a very holy thing. It feels mystical, like a call from deep to deep. But then the messy way it happens in actual lives doesn’t feel holy at all; just confusing and screwed up.”ⁱⁱⁱ

But maybe that’s what holiness is...what the providence of God is like. The Spirit of Jesus guides, interrupts, prevents, allows, inhibits and empowers the unexpected journeys in our lives. A vision compels you to set sail from Troas to Macedonia despite other plans. Thirty-eight years of scrambling to get into the pool comes to an end after a brief conversation with a man you did not expect and do not know, who took notice of you.^{iv} And a new life commences, though you had all but given up. It can be confusing and screwed up, but that, doesn’t mean God’s not in it.

Scripture and theology rightly teach us to look back—seeing our life as it has unfolded with God’s love and guidance. Scripture and theology encourage us, too, to step forward with confidence and hope in the “secret providence” of God that may interrupt, prevent, propel and commence a journey unexpected. It is a messy and holy thing to be attentive to the Spirit who is leading us and all things toward the good plans and purposes of God.

Amen.

ⁱ William J. Bouwsma, **John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait** (New York: Oxford Press, 1988), 167-168.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bryan Stevenson, **Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption** (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 4-12.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Brooks, **The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life** (New York: Random House, 2019), 92-93.

^{iv} I am grateful to Jill Duffield for this insight on the connection between John 5:1-9 to this text from Acts 16. In her “Looking into the Lectionary” article for the 6th Sunday of Easter, May 16, 2019, from *The Presbyterian Outlook*.