

First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“We Just Happened to be in the Neighborhood”

Psalm 67
Acts 16:9 – 15

April 24, 2016

Over the course of my six years plus of being your pastor, I have, as you might imagine, made a lot of hospital and rehab center visits. Of course, the lion’s share of those visits have been pretty much local; like, for example, Southampton Hospital... the Hamptons Center for Rehab and Nursing, also in Southampton... the Westhampton Care Center... and the Peconic Bay Medical Center in Riverhead.

But my visits have also taken me over the length and breadth of Long Island. Among others, these trips would include dozens of forays to Stony Brook Hospital; and also visits to St. Charles Hospital and Rehab Center, in Port Jefferson; Peconic Landing and San Simeon by the Sound, in Greenport; Southside Hospital, in Bay Shore; St. Francis Hospital, in Roslyn; Mather Memorial Hospital, in Port Jefferson; and St. Catherine of Sienna Hospital, in Smithtown.

That’s a lot of visits to places that you probably wouldn’t consider to be exactly “nearby.” And the people whom I’ve come to visit usually recognize this; because, very often, after I’ve walked into their room, they’ll say something or other along the lines of, *“I can’t believe you came all that way to visit me!”*

And since the last thing that *I* want is for someone in the hospital or nursing home to be fretting because their pastor had to travel halfway up the island to see them... I always jokingly respond by saying, *“Well, you know, I was in the neighborhood! So I thought I’d just stop by!”* That usually gets a laugh... and then I reassure them that, really, I’m glad to be there, and the drive was no big deal, and the traffic was okay, and so on, and so forth; and then we can put the issue to rest, and go on with our visit.

All of which is simply to make the point that, sometimes we have to travel a pretty long and circuitous path... in order to arrive at the place where God can use us to do His will, and accomplish His work. And getting there may require some perseverance on our part... and a willingness to go the extra mile.

Now, I was thinking about the lengths to which we sometimes have to go, in order for the Lord to use us for His work... as I reflected on our lesson this morning from the Book of Acts. In our text, we find Paul the Apostle, in the midst of his second missionary expedition, arriving in the city of Troas... which would have been on the northern tip of the west coast of modern-day Turkey. And while in Troas, Paul receives a vision in which a man, standing in the region of Macedonia, beseeches Paul to “come over to Macedonia and help us.”

Then, according to the text, in response to this vision Paul and his missionary colleagues, “*put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace (which is an island in the Aegean Sea), and the next day on to Neapolis (which is a town on the coast of Macedonia.) From there we traveled to Philippi (which is in the eastern part of modern Greece), a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.*” And then the text goes on to describe the baptism of Lydia and her “household,” and their joining the Christian community; and then concludes by commending the hospitality which Lydia showed to Paul and his party.

So, to recap: in order for Paul to answer the visionary plea to “come over to Macedonia and help us,” he first had to take a boat from Troas to Samothrace; then another boat from Samothrace to Neapolis; and then make an overland trek from Neapolis on into Philippi.

And, it’s important that we understand that this was no simple, easy journey. It wasn’t like you or me making the trip from Sag Harbor to Orient Point; you know, jump on the ferry to Shelter Island, drive across, take the ferry to Greenport, and then on to Orient Point. No, no. The trip from Sag Harbor to Orient Point, via ferryboat, is a mere 18 miles. Well, each of the legs from Troas to Samothrace, and then from Samothrace to Neapolis, were **70 miles**. And that’s 70 miles of pretty much open, wild ocean... not the relatively calm waters of a sheltered bay. And, obviously, they were traveling in a first-century sailing vessel.

And then, having arrived in Neapolis, it was a further ten mile trek on to Philippi; not by car, or camel, or jitney... but probably on foot, walking every step of the way. So that’s 150 miles of traveling for Paul to get from Troas, where he had his vision... to Philippi, where he began the work which the vision had called him to do. And our first reaction to that might be something like, “*So, what? What’s the big deal? 150 miles is nothing. I mean, it’s a 180 mile round trip just to go see a Yankee game! 150 miles is just a trip to Princeton. Pastor Rick does that a couple of times a year.*”

Well, it’s true that I make the trip to Princeton a couple of times a year; and if the traffic’s not too bad, I can get there from here in maybe three, three and a half, hours. But Paul’s trip to Philippi easily could have taken a couple of **weeks**, or more... depending on how long they had to wait for a boat to come along that was going their way, and could give them passage; and depending on the weather conditions, which, if unfavorable, might have shut down travel altogether until things calmed down; and depending on the health of the travelers, with any sickness or injury potentially holding up the party for many days; and depending on any number of other contingencies which might have delayed any forward progress by the group.

In other words, answering the call to come and help the Macedonians was a very **big** deal for Paul and his friends; it was out of the way, it was inconvenient, it was dangerous, and it was a lot of hard work. But that’s where God called them to go... and so, they went! And because they did, a Christian church was founded in Philippi... which became one of Paul’s favorite and most beloved congregations; and which, later on, of course became the recipient of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, perhaps the most pastoral and inspiring of all of Paul’s New Testament correspondence.

Now, I don't know if Paul joked to the Philippians, after his long and dangerous journey, that he and his friends "just happened to be in the neighborhood!" But what I *do* know is that their willingness to answer God's call and *make* that long and dangerous journey, opened the way for the gospel of Christ to touch hearts and change lives in Philippi... and to build the kingdom of God in that important corner of the ancient world.

Which brings us back to this morning, and our own efforts to answer our Lord's call to service and discipleship. And what I want us to understand is that sometimes, just like Paul, we, too, have to follow a long, roundabout, and potentially hazardous road in order to accomplish whatever it is that our Heavenly Father wants us to do. And I'm not just talking about having to drive to Nassau County to make a hospital visit; I'm talking about having to go out of our way... I'm talking about having our personal routine discombobulated... I'm talking about being sent off on some distant mission of mercy, when we'd rather stay safely nestled in the familiar status quo.

It doesn't happen to us all the time... it didn't happen to Paul the Apostle all the time; but, every once in a while, you and I get the message from God that there's some Macedonia that we need to get to, because somebody over there needs our help. And if we would be faithful to God, then we, like Paul, need to answer the call... and do whatever we can to lend a hand. And, really, there's simply no limit to what our own, personal "mission to Macedonia" might be: maybe somebody really *does* need our actual, physical presence somewhere... so we can help solve some problem. But it doesn't have to be something like that... where, like Paul, we actually have to travel over land and sea to be of assistance.

Maybe the Lord is calling us to take an unpopular stand in opposition to some kind of injustice. Maybe there's an area of our life where the transforming power of the gospel has not yet been able to penetrate... and God is calling us to kick open the door to our heart so we can become a different, and better, person. Maybe we know someone who's struggling under the burdens of life, and who needs for us to tell them about the love of God... and the hope which they can find in Jesus Christ. It could be anything.

It may not come in the form of a heavenly vision, but sooner or later, you can be sure that, in some way or other, we'll be asked to "come over to Macedonia..." so we can make a difference for the kingdom of God. And *that's* where the real challenge comes in. Because, if we're honest, I think that we're often surprised and frustrated when, like Paul before us, God expects *us* to do something difficult, or demanding, or far beyond the boundaries of our comfort zone.

I think we're a little shocked when we realize that God has plans for us that can't be easily boxed up, tied up, and shut up in some corner of our busy schedule... where we can get to it when we have more time and energy. And not because we're lazy, or uncaring, or indifferent; no, of course not! It's just that, for most of us, I think, there's kind of an unspoken assumption that, whatever it is that God might have for us to do, it ought to be pretty simple, and painless, and easily worked into our daily routine. And, most of the time, that *is* the way that our life and faith work; most of the time they *do* dovetail pretty well together; most of the time we *can* keep one hand on the steering wheel of our life, and the other hand on the rudder of our faith... and keep them both moving in the right direction.

Hey, most of my hospital visits are right here in Southampton. It's an easy drive to the hospital... sometimes, when the weather's nice, I even walk over there. It's important, but it's manageable... and I can usually drop whatever I'm doing, run over, make a visit, and not have my schedule disrupted. But, every once in a while, I'll get a call that someone's very sick out at Stony Brook Hospital. And *that* might cause me to completely rearrange my schedule; cancel an appointment or two; change the trajectory of my whole day, and maybe my whole week.

In both cases, the sick person matters the same; they're both of equal worth, both of equal value, both equally in need of the love, and support, and pastoral presence of their church family. But the circumstances of each are very different. And it's our willingness, as Christian disciples, to respond... no matter how challenging those circumstances may be; that makes all the difference, to our faith, and to the life of those to whom we're called to minister.

What would have happened in Philippi, if Paul had said, "*Ah, that's too much trouble and too far to travel. Somebody else can go help the Macedonians. And, anyway, I get seasick in those little boats!*" We'll never know the answer to that question; because Paul didn't say that. Instead, he said, "*Hey, we just happened to be in the neighborhood! What can we do for you?*" And the rest, as they say, is biblical history.

To what Macedonia is God calling you this morning? What potentially life-changing, and heart-touching, mission have you been putting off and avoiding... because it seems too far, because it might be a little risky? In what way do you need to get up, and get going... because your Heavenly Father is waiting for you to get the ball rolling? The answer to those questions will be different for each of us, but know this: if the Lord is calling you to do something, He's also equipping you so you can get the job done! If God is sending you to Macedonia, He's giving you the strength, the courage, the grace, and the love to make a real difference when you get there.

So, do we have what it takes, to just happen to be in the neighborhood where we're needed? To do *that*, is truly to answer the call of Christian discipleship! To do *that*, is to be the people that our Lord has called us to be! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!