

Sermon Series: Philippians -- Good News

February 9, 2014

Title: "Go West, Young Man!"

Text: Acts 16: 1-10

Summary: God always has a plan vastly bigger and more creative than anything we can imagine. If we are willing to seek His Presence, He will equip us as He did Paul when Paul received the order to "Go west, young man!"

A Man with a Message

"Go west, young man!"

The year was 1865. The Civil War had just come to an end. The Union was intact. And now the United States of America could get back to so many things that had been put on hold during the dark, horrible years of the war. The West was still untamed. A long-planned transcontinental railroad was yet to be built. Wagon trains still rolled slowly across the plains and through mountain passes. But with the war ended, the nation began to hope again.

It was at this time that Horace Greeley is said to have written these words to returning Civil War veterans:

"Washington is not a place to live in. The rents are high, the food is bad, the dust is disgusting and the morals are deplorable. Go West, young man, go West and grow up with the country." (as cited in Wikipedia)

"Go west!" Go make a new future in a largely unexplored land. Go make America into something brand new. "Go west...and grow up with the country."

In many ways just such a life-changing and world-changing opportunity lay before a man named Paul as he and his companion Silas set out on Paul's second missionary journey. Little did they know, but their itinerary was about to be blown out of the water by a command from God's Spirit to "Go west, young man!"

Some time before the Jewish Christian leader Barnabas had sought out Paul to help lead an exciting new venture involving both Jews and Gentiles as one church in Antioch. This same church had sent Barnabas and Paul on a missionary journey into Paul's home region, an area in what is now southern Turkey. They had planted churches that included Jews and Gentiles. And they had not compelled the Gentiles to first convert to traditional Judaism.

Now he is "on the road again," returning to visit the churches that he and Barnabas had founded, but this time with a special message from the church fathers in Jerusalem:

Acts 16:4-5 NIV

As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

So just what were these decisions that Paul came to deliver to his churches? And what did they have to do with "going west?"

The Council in Jerusalem:

The decisions that Paul came to deliver were in the form of a letter from the founding church of the Christian movement, the church in Jerusalem. It was written to communicate a momentous decision on the part of the founding fathers of Christianity -- with far-reaching implications for Paul and his mission to the Gentile world.

The council had been convened because of the controversy occasioned by the success that Paul and Barnabas had experienced in their first missionary journey. Their first journey complete, Luke tells us that they came back to their home church:

Acts 14:26-27 NIV

From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Now the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and elsewhere in the Roman Empire had to decide what to do with these newly converted Gentiles. Would they be forced to become Jewish first, and only then accepted as followers of Jesus? Or would they be accepted just as they were?

The leaders of the church gathered to discuss and debate the issue:

- First, Peter pointed out that God had poured out His Spirit upon Gentiles, just as He had done for Jewish believers.
- Second, James, the leader of the church, quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures concerning God's plan to include all peoples in His family, and concluded:

Acts 15:19 NIV

"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God."

- Finally, James proposed a resolution to the Jewish/Gentile issue that would allow God's work to go forward. It was this decision that was written up as a letter to be shared with Gentiles throughout the Roman world.

The Council's Decision:

So just what did the church leaders decide in that fateful council? Their letter says it all:

Acts 15:23-29

**The apostles and elders, your brothers,
To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:**

Greetings.

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing.

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

With this letter the first generation of Christians liberated the Good News so that it could reach the entire human family. You and I would most likely not even be here today if those brave people had not dared to defy their social customs and make room for outsiders.

Reading the letter you might wonder why the Jerusalem church placed specific prohibitions upon Gentiles: food sacrificed to idols/blood/meat from strangled animals/sexual immorality.

Ben Witherington offers a helpful explanation of these restrictions. All four of these restrictions referred to things that happened when Gentiles worshiped their pagan gods.

- "Food sacrificed to idols" clues us in to the fact that the church was forbidding Gentile Christians to go to pagan temples and partake of sacred feasts -- something that was a part of life in the pagan world.

- When conducting sacrifices, pagan priests would often strangle the sacrificial animal in front of a statue of the god or goddess, hoping to cause the animal's breath to be communicated to the deity. Furthermore, the priest would often taste the blood of the dead animal.
- Finally, pagan rituals included having sex with temple prostitutes, something utterly abhorrent to God's Law.

In short, all the Jewish Christians were really requiring was that Gentiles turn away from the worship of other gods and worship only the One true God. With this letter in hand, Paul could now go forward with his revolutionary understanding of the Good News.

A Change in Plans

God's GPS:

Luke tells us that right in the middle of his journey Paul began to get some very different marching orders from God. Two times He stopped them dead in their tracks:

Acts 16:6-7 NIV

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.

When we look at a map of this journey we immediately see that God did not allow Paul and his companions to go north or south. Instead, if they wanted to move forward it would be "Go west, young man!"

Instead of evangelizing the rest of what is now Turkey, they found themselves staring at the Aegean Sea:

Acts 16:8 NIV

So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.

"Come help us!"

What do you do when you come to the end of the road? Imagine Paul and his companions: they have obeyed the Holy Spirit by not going into Asia to the south or Bithynia to the north. And now they've come to the end of the road. So what to do? Sometimes the best thing is just to wait for God to tell you what to do.

Paul's next orders come that night:

Acts 16:9-10 NIV

During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

East meets West:

The Aegean Sea marks the boundary between East and West. To the East were lands that had once been part of the vast Persian Empire. To the West lay Macedonia, Greece, and ultimately, Rome. The Persians had attempted to cross this sea in a failed effort to conquer the Greeks. Alexander the Great had marched east out of Macedonia to conquer the Persian Empire and spread Greek language and culture throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

Now this same Aegean Sea could be either a barrier or a pathway for the Good News. Left to his own plans Paul would most likely have not even come to Troas, much less crossed over from East to West. But God had different plans. A dream and a voyage would change the history of the entire world forever.

"Go West, young man!"

Expanded Mission/Same Good News:

I wonder what role that letter from the Jerusalem Council played in God's leading Paul to go west? Paul's plan had been to revisit the churches that he had planted -- churches that had been infiltrated by people demanding that Gentiles convert to Judaism if they truly wanted to follow Jesus. Paul saw his mission as clearing up this false teaching; and he was armed with the letter from the apostles in Jerusalem.

But God had vastly bigger plans. Rather than merely shoring up the existing churches, the Holy Spirit's plan was to *expand the mission* to the entire Roman world. And once the Jerusalem church had definitively ruled on the acceptability of Gentiles the path was clear for expanding the mission.

Looking back, it is impossible to imagine the New Testament without the letters to the Philippians, Thessalonians, and Corinthians. And yet, the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth were all the direct result of Paul's obedience to "go west, young man!" Even more importantly, bringing the Good News to the West ultimately resulted in the evangelization of Europe and the birthing of the Western Christianity that we call our own.

Lessons from the journey:

So what can we learn from God's leading and Paul's obedience?

First, we see that God *a/ways* has a bigger plan in mind. Paul was thinking incrementally; God was acting transformationally.

Second, God provides the tools we need for the next stage of the journey. On his first missionary journey Paul had been improvising -- walking off the map. Now, armed with the letter of approval from Jerusalem he could branch out into new territory without fearing that it would all be in vain.

Third, don't be afraid to let God take the lead. He alone knows where we're going! Paul understood that like Israel on the Exodus Journey he needed to rely upon God to do the leading. Paul's job: stay in the Presence of God and just do what God says.

Today we are the people who are on mission to bring the Good News where God sends us. God has a plan that is vastly bigger than our little ideas. He is out to transform our relationships and communities. God has equipped us with all of the authority and validation that we need for the task.

Our responsibility: to stay in the Presence of God and do what He says.