

Acts 16: 9-15

⁹ During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

¹¹ We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district^[c] of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³ On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her

heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

Will you pray with me please. May the Words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O Lord, Our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

I have my mother's hands, And I have my mother's voice And I have my mother's eyes, Though I have a daughter's choice I thought I carved my own life In unknown, uncharted lands I never thought I'd look down and see my mother's hands.

I first heard this song, My Mother's Hands by Debi Smith, a few years ago and it reminded me of

the conversation I had with my mom when she recounted to me the time that she looked at her own hands and saw her mother's hands instead. That conversation and this song came back to me as I sat down to write today's sermon.

We forget, sometimes, in the male dominated world of the Bible, that there were women who were disciples of Jesus during his lifetime and after. Some we know by name, others are nameless. We know about Mary Magdalene, the sisters Martha and Mary; we know that Peter and James and Johns mothers were among some of the early believers. There is the woman at the well who accepted Jesus forgiveness and grace and the Samaritan woman who challenged his ministry.

We know that it was Jesus' mother and other women who stayed by him at the cross when the men could not or would not, and it was women

who first saw the angel and heard of the resurrection, the first to encounter the risen Christ.

In the Old Testament we find women of tremendous strength and courage, like Naomi and Ruth and Esther. Women who loved their husbands but were unable to have children like Sarah and Rachel, women who loved their husbands, but were not appreciated in return, like Leah and Hagar. Women who stood strong against wrongful rules like Moses mother, Pharaohs daughter and the midwives Shiphrah and Puah. Women who served as judges and raised songs of praise like Deborah.

They are there, these amazing women and when I think of the hands of these women I envision strong, capable hands, hands that are brown from the sun, hands rough and dry from the arid climate with fingernails split from hard work.

The hands of women like Pharaoh's daughter, and Esther that showed the advantage of a privileged life style, but that were capable of loving an adopted child and saving a nation. Women's hands that held babies and swords, water jugs and soothing ointments. Hands that covered eyes filled with tears and hands that clapped in joy and celebration. Hands that worked in the fields with the men: hands that cooked meals for the Lord; hands that wrote songs of praise for a loving God; hands that lifted a son's body from a cross.

In today's scripture we meet a woman by the name of Lydia who is a dealer in purple cloth. This is actually a modern translation; a strict translation from the Greek says that Lydia is a seller of purple, just that, a seller of purple.

To identify someone as the seller of purple may strike us as odd, we who are able to get any color that we want. It didn't used to be like that.

Dyes were natural, not synthetic. "Tyrian Purple," the purple dye mentioned in today's story was produced from the mucus of the hypobranchial gland of various species of marine mollusks, notably Murex. It took some 12,000 shellfish to extract 1.5 grams of the pure dye which made about a yard or two of very expensive purple cloth, worth its weight in silver; wearing purple was a statement of status and wealth and Lydia was selling this fabulous commodity!

Purple could only be sold by special permission, by a royal decree, so when Luke tells us that Lydia is a seller of purple, he is letting us know that this is not just an average trader; this is someone who is rich, someone who is prestigious and a woman!

The conversion of Lydia is a small part of a larger story in the book of Acts which is basically the story of the early church and the founding of

Christianity as a religion. It chronicles Paul's travels as he moves through the world preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ. We know that many people came to Christ through his preaching and teaching but very few people are mentioned, so it is significant that Lydia is singled out by name.

Lydia's name indicates that she is European; she is not Jewish, but she believes in God. A God-fearer, like the Ethiopian Eunuch we encountered with Philip last week, someone who worships, but hasn't converted to Judaism.

In that time and place, in order to have a synagogue, there needed to be 10 men who would meet together to say prayers. Phillipi, it seems, does not have 10 religious Jewish men to pray so the city does not have a synagogue. In the absence of a synagogue, any Jews who is in town or passing through would know to meet near the

river on the Sabbath to pray. This is where Lydia goes and it is where Paul and Silas met her.

Paul has just recently arrived in Europe from Asia, he feels called by the Holy Spirit to go to Macedonia. He senses that this is where the next big thing in the life of the church is going to happen. Imagine how discouraged he must have felt when he arrives in Philippi and finds there is no synagogue where he can preach the gospel. He goes to the river looking for the Jewish leaders and finds "only women." There may be "only women" there but one of those women is Lydia whom we are told has had her heart opened by the Holy Spirit so that she can hear the message of God.

Here on the banks of the river Paul meets the woman who is to become the founder of the first European church. Lydia, a rich tradeswoman, the head of her household, which, as far as we can tell did not include a husband or even, possibly

children, this woman, opened her home to Paul and Silas. Lydia invited the Word into her life, and into the lives of her household and her friends, and when she was baptized, her whole household was baptized as well.

I wonder what Lydia's hands looked like? She was a woman of wealth, so she probably benefited from being able to afford lotions and oils to put on her hands to keep her skin soft. At the same time she was a woman who worked. Did she have calloused hands from grinding shells to extract her purple dye? Did her fingers have a faint bluish/purple tinge to them from dying cloth? Were her fingers long and slender, or short and stout? Did she have strong hands? Was she ever bothered by a touch of arthritis in the joints? Did she fold her hands in prayer or lift them in supplication to God? We don't know. We do know that because of her willingness to open her heart

and to witness to the people in her own home, a church was started.

Witness...there is that word again. Witness is basically sharing the proof of what you believe to be true. The story of Lydia helps us to understand that even women...maybe especially women, have the ability to witness, to be leaders of faith. I do believe that our witness can be more deliberate, but understand that when you tend to children in the nursery, teach Sunday school, fix food for a meal after a celebration of life, or send a card to a shut-in, you are a witness. When you read liturgy or sing in the choir, when you share your faith during small gatherings or Bible study you are a witness.

Being a witness does not have an age requirement, you can be young or old or somewhere in between. Being a witness does not require you to have a biological connection to a person; you just have to

see everyone, as they are: a child of God. Being a witness does not require any grand gestures; it just requires an open heart to listen for the Holy Spirit to move in your life. Being a witness does not require any fancy words, just a willingness to share your faith with your household, be it large or small. Being a witness is the hardest job you will ever have, but if you grow weary, if you wonder if your words and deeds are enough I encourage you to look at your hands, and when you do, don't just see your own hands, but look closely and see the hands of the women of the faith who have gone before you. HA