

### A Clash of Empires

As we know, the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all tell the story of Jesus Christ. What story does the Book of Acts tell? The story of the Apostle Paul? In a large way it does, from the very end of Chapter 7 to the end of the book. But it also tells the story of other important characters, like Peter, Barnabus, Timothy—and now today, Lydia. And of course the most important character, even more important than Paul. Any guesses? The Holy Spirit.

The Book of Acts also tells the story of the Church. How it started with a small group of frightened disciples who, once filled with the Holy Spirit, began to spread the good news of Christ, from Jerusalem to as far away as Rome, the very center of the world at that time.

The Book of Acts tells the story of a “Clash of Empires.” Namely, the Roman Empire on one hand, with Augustus as its emperor, and on the other an alternative empire that we could call the “Kingdom of God,” with Christ as its Lord Emperor, and with the church as its missionaries.

I don’t know if you noticed, but I was struck in this morning’s First Lesson that Katie read by two separate references to the churches being strengthened by Paul’s visits. And I can’t help but wonder, on this Sunday in July: in what ways do you, the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church, need to be strengthened? Where are you weak, or tired, or uncertain? I invite you to keep that question in your mind as you listen.

For now, let’s come back to the Holy Spirit. It’s quite clear from our Second Lesson Katie just read that the Holy Spirit is completely in charge. Luke writes that it “forbade” Paul and his companions from “speaking the word” in Asia. What does that mean? Did the Spirit literally seize their tongues to keep them from speaking? Make them an offer they couldn’t refuse? Then in the very next verse Luke says that the Spirit of Jesus “did not allow them” to enter the region of Bithynia, up north along the Black Sea. Again, what’s going on here? Did the Spirit hobble their horses? Give them the proverbial flat tire? Or was this simply Luke’s way of saying that things didn’t work out as they had initially planned, that some “doors” had closed to them? We know what that’s like. We just might not be ready to say it’s the Holy Spirit who’s closing them.

And then there was the nighttime vision Paul had of the man from Macedonia. Which was and still is part of Greece, directly across the Aegean Sea from where they were. Macedonia, in other words, was in Europe. A continent to which Paul had not yet gone (but had been wanting to). The man in Paul’s dream was “pleading” with Paul to “come over to Macedonia and help us.” What kind of help did he and his people need? Start a church? Strengthen their already existing church as they faced off against the Roman Empire?

So Paul and his companions went. “Immediately,” Luke writes, with an apparent sense of either excitement or urgency. In Troas on the Aegean Sea they boarded a ship that bounced from port to port, first Samothrace, then Neapolis, then Philippi, where they disembarked. And we can’t help but wonder, was it their choice to disembark there, or did the Holy Spirit choose for them?

As it happens, Philippi was a Roman colony. An important, powerful outpost of the Roman Empire. Lois shared last week that she and I went to Philippi as part of our “World of

Paul” tour. And let me tell you, the Roman empire has left a lasting imprint on this ancient city in Greece. Two thousand-year-old ruins, still standing. Perfectly situated on the “Via Egnatia,” that rock-hard road leading all the way to Rome, miles westward.

Back to Paul, Luke writes that on the Sabbath, after he had been in Philippi for “some days,” he went outside the city gates to go down by the river. As if he was looking for something. And indeed he was. It was his “modus operandi” whenever he entered a new city to first find the local synagogue, if there was one. To find “his own people,” as a place to start sharing the good news about Jesus Christ. He knew there were Jews in Philippi. But when he didn’t find an actual synagogue there, he must have figured that the riverside, just outside the city gates, might be a logical place for Jews to gather on the Sabbath.

And he was right. Interesting, isn’t it, that it was a group of women who had gathered there to pray and worship. What were the men doing? And interesting that at least one of these women wasn’t even a Jew, but rather a Gentile, originally from the Asian city of Thyatira, known for its production of purple cloth. Luke makes sure we miss none of the significant details. Her name was Lydia. She was a dealer in purple cloth. Which meant at least two things: she was a relatively independent owner of her own business, and she was a woman of means. What was the Holy Spirit up to? Luke writes that “the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly” to Paul. And, lo and behold, Paul ends up baptizing her right there in that river. Along with her entire household, which may have included a husband and children, and almost certainly included some servants and slaves. She was so moved by what Paul told her about Christ that she persuasively invited Paul and his companions to come stay with her. She became his benefactor. And undoubtedly she was one of the founding members (perhaps the first founding member) of the church that formed in Philippi. One of Paul’s favorite churches, because of their faithfulness and generosity.

Lydia, a woman, a Gentile, a seller of purple cloth, in one of the leading cities of the Roman empire, became the very first European Christian. What was Luke trying to tell us? Probably this: it’s not by the designs of “men” that the gospel spread so rapidly and that churches started popping up all over the Roman empire. It was by the designs of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, carried out by men—and also, by women.

When Lois and I visited Philippi several weeks ago we went down to that riverbank just outside the ancient city of Philippi. And I stepped into that river, and I wondered: what is the Holy Spirit up to these days? In Lois’ and my lives? In your lives, as the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church? What is the clash of empires we are all facing?

As I stood in the river where Lydia had been baptized, along with her entire household, I thought about my own baptism. And I wondered, what did it mean to me at the time? What does it mean to me now?

Many of you are baptized. What did and does it mean to you? Here are the faith questions we all answered just prior to our baptism, however many years ago. (Or questions very much like these. They are from the Mennonite Minister’s Manual that Lois and I always use.) Listen for the clash of empires implied by these words. “Do you renounce the evil powers of this world and turn to Jesus Christ as your savior? Do you put your trust in his grace and love and promise to obey him as your Lord? Are you ready to participate in the mission of the church? Are you willing to give and receive counsel in the congregation?”

If your answer today is still yes, then, brothers, sisters, of the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church, in the name of Christ and the church, I give you my hand and bid you to rise and walk in

newness of life by the same power that raised Christ from the dead. May each of you, independently and together, be strengthened for the tasks and ministries which lie ahead. Amen.

Questions for pondering and discussion:

In what ways are we experiencing a “clash of empires” in our world and time? What kinds of things do we clash over?

Where does the Church position herself? Where does LAMC position itself? Where do we position ourselves?

When you were first baptized, what did it mean to you? What does it mean to you now?

What is the Holy Spirit up to in our church?

What kind of person was Paul? What was his personality? [His Myers-Briggs?] What might he have looked like? What kind of person was Lydia?

Where does LAMC need to be strengthened right now?