

Sermon: Acts 16: 12-15

Today kicks off our three week series about rad women in the Bible. Obviously, there are a lot more than three awesome women in the Bible, but Pastor Michael's only gone for three weeks.

This kind of story is told over and over again in Acts and in the letters of the New Testament. Paul and companions show up to a place, people hear the word of God, and they get baptized. Cool. Pretty straightforward. A lot of commenters have focused on this repeating pattern. A lot of commenters have also focused on Paul and his companions. Today, we're not doing that. Today we're looking at Lydia. Not as a footnote but as the main character.

The text doesn't tell us much about Lydia, but that's true for a lot of stories about women in the Bible. When focusing on someone like Lydia, we have to try to fill in some blanks. We need to read between the lines of text, or as "A Brief Statement of Faith" from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) says we need "to hear the voices of peoples long silenced." So we're going to be reading the text really closely and engaging our imaginations to hear Lydia's voice.

It's possible that Lydia isn't a name but points to where she's from, Thyatira. I like thinking of Lydia as a name because it feels much more personal to think of her as Lydia rather than this-person-from-that-place. But knowing where Lydia is from is important because we know she's not from the place we're talking about, Philippi. Philippi is a Roman colony. Most likely, Lydia is Roman; but she's not from this particular city. What brought her to Philippi? We don't know. Maybe she married someone from Philippi or her trade might've brought her to this colony or any number of other things.

The text also says she's a trader of purple which could refer to purple dye or purple cloth or both. Probably both. Saying that she sells purple cloth is a signal to the original hearers of

Acts. It would be like saying ‘on a trip I met Lydia, an investment banker who owns her own firm.’ You know that’s a powerful woman with some money. She probably wasn’t super wealthy since there would probably be a gap between her and the super wealthy people who bought her cloth, but her trade signifies she’s wealthier.

More than being from another city, more than being a wealthy person, Lydia is called a God-worshipper. So she’s a non-Jewish person who believes in the God of Israel which is interesting. We don’t get the background on that, either. Is this a recent thing for Lydia or did she maybe grow up with some Jewish influence? She’s hanging out with a group of women near the river at some kind of place for prayer on the Jewish sabbath. We can assume either there’s not enough Jewish men either in the city or enough men who showed up that day to establish a formal service. We don’t know who these other women are. They could be God-worshippers like Lydia or Jewish women. They might be native to Phillipi or transplants like Lydia. But there they are on the riverbank when Paul and Timothy and maybe a couple of other folks show up.

I wonder what that meeting was like. Have you ever been searching for a group you knew was in a place but hadn’t met before? It’s super awkward. Was there a sign? Was there an established place for these meetings that someone had told them about? Or was this just people sitting on a riverbank making the best of not having a formal sabbath service. Maybe Paul walked by a couple of times trying to figure out what this group was talking about before joining them. Maybe this group of women was a little suspicious of a small group of men coming up to them out of the blue and they had to convince the women to join them.

Because she’s called a God-worshipper, we know that God is already at work in Lydia’s life before Paul shows up. Sorry, Paul. He gets a lot of credit for a lot of stuff, but even the text

says that it was God who enabled her to understand Paul's message. Literally, Paul was just the messenger which is often how he frames himself anyway. He is the messenger or the servant or the slave of God depending on which translation you read. This text doesn't tell us what Paul's message was because it's already been stated in Acts. He's proclaiming Christ to both Gentiles and Jews. God helps Lydia embrace Paul's message about Christ, and Paul baptizes her. Luckily, there was a river right there. They didn't have to go far for a baptism. She also has her whole household baptized. Since this group is recognized as Lydia's household, people tend to assume she's a widow. But I'm a little confused. What happened to the other women? Were all of these women part of Lydia's household, or did the other women not get baptized? We don't know.

After her baptism, Lydia tells Paul and his companions to stay with her. My imagination starts churning and wondering. If Lydia is a widow and invited a group of random men unrelated to her into her home to stay, what do other people in the community think? This might have been normal. We know that hospitality in the ancient world was a huge thing. We know that Paul was working as a tent maker to make money to continue his mission, so a free place to stay was great. Paul and his crew have some other adventures in Philippi, end up getting arrested, and eventually after they were freed they went back to Lydia's house where they encouraged the household before leaving the city. And that's it. That's all we hear of Lydia because the story follows Paul.

But let's keep the focus on Phillipi for a little while more. It's important to remember that Paul was preaching Christ was coming back to-mor-row. Or at least really soon. Paul was a traveler who spread the message, but what happens after Paul leaves a place? What happens to that fledgling community? We get a glimpse into what happens in some of Paul's or Paul's student's letters. Paul does check up on the community in the letter to the Phillipians. He's still on the road but is planning to send Timothy and maybe one other person back to Philippi. He

mentions that it is this community in Philippi who helped him financially during his travels. So the community in Philippi sounds like it was flourishing. Scholars estimate the letter to the Philippians was written about ten years after Paul left the city. So who kept the new communities going after Paul's departure? That's a pretty leading question. You know since this is a sermon about Lydia, I'm going to suggest Lydia played a pretty big part. She's not mentioned in the letter, but we know that women like her had important roles throughout the early Christian communities.

Women in the early Christian communities were incredibly powerful, especially wealthy or at least financially comfortable widows. As the differences between Jews and Christians grew wider, Christians may have still gone to the synagogue but they also went to house churches. Christian communities needed a place that could hold the entire community and allow them to eat meals together. Whose homes did they gather in? Often wealthy widows. It may have been seen as these widows sharing their resources as the early communities did very literally. The importance of these women is one of the reasons that early Christianity was known as a religion for women and slaves, people who held little or no political power. Gathered together and sharing resources, they could support each other in ways the system didn't support them.

I imagine Lydia as a house church host. She was hospitable to Paul and his folks, and I think she would've been hospitable to the new fledgling community especially since her entire household had been baptised and was part of this community. Can you imagine what those meetings may have been like? Today when people join a Christian community we have centuries of history and practice. We have theology books and Bible studies and seminaries to train pastors. These early believers had so little to go on when embracing this new message of Christ.

It's absolutely amazing to think of these little communities thriving because of people like Lydia who heard the message and spent time between the Bible's texts building communities.

Now, of course, a lot of this has been conjecture or imagination. Just because widows often hosted house churches doesn't mean that Lydia did. Just because Paul say the church in Philippi helped him financially doesn't mean that Lydia bankrolled him. What's interesting is that this week while I was speaking to my friends (most of whom in this group had grown up in a church but are no longer practicing) about this sermon, all of them had heard of Paul. None of them knew Lydia. Not surprising. Paul's story and his writings make up a majority of the New Testament while we only get a handful of verses about Lydia.

I mourn the loss of Lydia's full story and the loss of so many other stories of women and other marginalized people in the Bible. Women's roles in the early church were greatly diminished as the church became associated with the powers that be, and it's only recently as in the past century or so that some churches have reclaimed women's roles in leadership. There are women leaders and thinkers throughout the church's history, but they often functioned informally or in spite of their church structure. I consider myself incredibly blessed to be in the third generation of ordained women within the mainline church and to look to the two generations of women above me for wisdom and help. It's stories like Lydia's that inspire a lot of Christian women leaders. We know that we are not the first, and we will not be the last either. I invite you today to think of women who have played an important role in your faith. A friend, a pastor, a mother, a mentor, an author. Reach out to them this week and share how they've influenced you.

Let's pray. Holy One, we thank you for the strong women of faith who have flourished throughout the centuries. Our lives are deeply richer because of them. Help us show gratitude to them and to your continuing grace in our lives. Amen.