

6th Sunday after Easter, May 1, 2016 – Baptism of Amelia Alexander
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Acts 16:9-15

A Certain Woman

A certain woman named Lydia is mentioned in today's reading from the book of Acts. Acts is the story of the growth and expansion of early church: what happened after Jesus died and rose, how his disciples and other people, too—new disciples in new places, different parts of the world—were moved to share Jesus' message. They were able to do this because of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised the Spirit before he died—we heard that in today's gospel reading, which is an excerpt of a long speech Jesus gave on the night just before he died. On that night, the night that Jesus was betrayed, he and his disciples shared a meal. Jesus told his disciples to continue sharing a meal like that, do this, in memory of him, and he gave them final directions, instructions, comfort, peace, and the promise of a helper. Jesus told his disciples that even though he was leaving, they would have his Spirit—the Spirit of Jesus and of the Father—the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would be with the disciples, help them, encourage them, speak to them, speak through them. So it is that in the book of Acts, the Spirit sends the disciples to new and different places and people—and the Spirit is also always ahead of them, too, already working in those places and people.

One of those people is Lydia. Lydia appears very briefly in the Bible, here in the 16th chapter of Acts, where she is introduced: “a certain woman named Lydia,” with a note about where she's from, Thyatira. We also hear that that she is a businesswoman, a dealer in purple cloth. In the ancient world, purple dye was a luxury good, and the city that Lydia was from, Thyatira, was at that time a center for the production of purple dye. But Lydia doesn't live in Thyatira when we meet her in the Acts chapter sixteen. She's from Thyatira, which is part of Asia, but she lives across the Aegean Sea in Philippi, in what is now considered Europe. Perhaps Lydia took what she knew from home and moved abroad, started a business, established a household, built a new life in a new place. Perhaps she was also ready for something new, spiritually. Lydia knew something of God—that's the other thing that is mentioned in her introduction, that she was a worshiper of God. She would gather with others, they went down to the river to pray, as the song says. But then one day, one day especially, something moved in Lydia, an eagerness, her heart was opened. She was baptized.

Before I became a pastor I was in a different business, and I lived in a different country. I lived in Tanzania, in East Africa, and I worked as a school teacher. Like Lydia, I knew something of God. I was a God worshiper. Unlike Lydia, I had been baptized—I was baptized as a child and I grew up in the church. But after I grew up I moved around, first across this country then overseas. I started to build a life, started to build a household, had children. My husband and I had our children while we were living in Tanzania, and so it was that there was a certain woman, a certain infant, our daughter, Ruth, and we wanted her to be baptized.

Why do you want to be baptized, or have your child baptized? When I meet with people before a baptism I ask them. It's a hard question to answer. I know, I remember back to when Ruth was a baby, I remember talking with a Tanzanian pastor about having Ruth baptized. My husband Tim and I met with the pastor in his office to talk about baptism, just as I now meet with people here. I remember feeling a little awkward, but mostly I remember what gravity that pastor brought to the conversation. How he impressed upon us the seriousness, the sacred nature

of what we were doing, our responsibility as parents, how we have a holy calling to care for our child, to teach her what Jesus says, his directions about how to live, and to raise them in a community of other people trying to do just that.

At that point in our lives, Tim and I already had plans to move back to the U.S. in half a year. We would appear briefly in a chapter of that Tanzanian pastor's life and ministry and then just as quickly disappear. Still, he graciously spent that time with us, even though we would soon be building a new life in a new place. And then, in not too much longer, I got into another business, the church business.

Why? I think the answer is the same as why we want our children baptized, why Lydia was baptized, why as an adult you might seek that, and seek out a community of God worshippers, why you are here. The Spirit is moving in you, you have these hopes, these desires for something that is sacred. It may be hard to put it into words, but you feel in your heart a sense of eagerness. And then God's Spirit speaks through someone, to you. It may be one interaction, more often it's a number of them, a number of different ways in which someone offers you welcome, hospitality, grace. That's what it has been for me, different people, at all different times in different parts of the world have shared God's Spirit with me. And receiving that makes me want to live like that, too, live in that way of welcome, of kindness, and encouragement, and justice and peace, live in the way of Jesus.

So today, this day of the baptism of a certain young woman, Amelia Marie Alexander, who will be living in a different land—Bartlett, it's not another country, but still, as she and her household build their life elsewhere, we bless you. Take the grace you've received here, and be blessings to those who appear in your lives.

As Lydia was. We don't hear much more about her in the book of Acts, she's just here, briefly, in chapter 16. But this we do hear: after being introduced and baptized, she herself offers hospitality, she opens her home to others, and she becomes known, and honored as the first Christian convert in Europe, it's a key point in the spiritual geography of Acts, in the growth and expansion of the early church, a church that today is growing, especially, in Africa. As that Tanzanian pastor impressed upon my husband and me the holiness, the goodness, the grace that God freely offers us, and that God's Spirit moves us to offer others as well.