

BACKGROUND TO THE SERMON - 21 AUGUST 2016

(Rev Dr Brenda Robson)

ACTS 16: 1-12

Our reading from Acts 16 finds Paul on one of his main missionary journeys. Paul had had a major anointing of the Holy Spirit on the road to Damascus, he had been spreading the gospel throughout Asia, establishing churches and breaking new ground. We know that Paul undertook three major journeys around the eastern Mediterranean before the voyage to Rome and further travels. Paul was passionate, on fire, driven.

But he came to something of an impasse, a barrier, his way was blocked by God. It was about 20 years since the death and resurrection of Jesus. This was his second journey accompanied by Silas and then joined by Timothy and finally by Luke. He was stopped in his tracks by what he calls the Holy Spirit of Jesus when he came to the edge of Turkey.

He had travelled through Galatia. He had not intended to linger there or even to do much work there. His eyes were on big cities with thriving populations where he could make a big impact. Galatia was a Celtic culture with links to western Europe – a culture which emphasised living in village communities, not cities. This was not on Paul's radar – and yet God halted him in Galatia. Luke does not say what Paul did there but from Paul's letter to the Galatians about five or six years later, we are told that it was because of his illness that Paul preached the gospel to them. The thorn in his flesh? The illness halted Paul's travels but this was fruitful for the formation of the church in Galatia. It was surely God's plan all along.

Paul then left Galatia and he was still focused on the area of the Middle East, the countries of Jewish influence. He tried to go on to Bithynia where there was a big population of Jews but the Holy Spirit would not permit it. Bithynia would become an area of thriving Christian churches, Peter's first letter was written to the Christian Church in Bithynia – but it was not God's plan for Paul to establish the church there and God made that clear to Paul.

Although Paul did not know it, his divine mission was to take the gospel to the gentiles in Europe. And so it was that Paul was led to the ancient city of Troas on the edge of Turkey, opposite Macedonia and Greece, the gateway to Europe. How was Paul stopped by God, turned around by God, moved forward by God? We do not know exactly but we imagine that Paul was in close communion with God through Jesus Christ, spending time daily in prayer, sitting quietly and seeking his Lord.

He would have heard God's guiding voice within, seen signs in the world around him, heard the prophetic words of others he trusted who were also in communion with God.

There is a sense of frustration, an urgency to be moving on, of work to be done. But there is also a deep sense of waiting on the Lord, of not daring to step out in the wrong direction, a direction that the Lord would not bless. There is an obedience to the Holy Spirit, a desire to be in step with Jesus.

And God is with Paul in the waiting. In Troas, God comes to Paul in a vision, a vision in the night. Paul sees a man of Macedonia standing and begging him "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

Now Troas was an appropriate place for God to bring Paul at this time. Ancient classical stories by Homer and Virgil spoke of Troas being the meeting place where Europe and Asia clashed in great conflict. The Europeans represented by the Greeks carried off the spoils of war and became rich. Now Europe and Asia were to touch again and the gain for Europe would be the most precious treasure of all, the gospel of Jesus Christ. There had been a drifting of small groups of Christians into Europe but God gave Paul the task of leading a huge movement of the Holy Spirit into Corinth and Philippi and Athens and Rome and perhaps even to France and Spain, we are not sure.

As soon as Paul received this vision, he was off. He responded immediately, he knew with absolute certainty where God wanted him to go. He must have been hugely excited and animated and full of the Holy Spirit because although Timothy, Silas and Luke had not received this vision, they were happy to follow him. They too felt called by God and they got ready at once to leave for Europe.

SERMON – 21 AUGUST 2016 (Rev Dr Brenda Robson)

Readings: Ecclesiastes 3: 1 – 11; Acts 16: 1 – 12

THERE IS A TIME FOR EVERYTHING

It has been a week around the country of 4 and 5 year olds heading to school – and West Lothian will follow this coming week – photos of children in crisp new uniforms, carrying bags that drown them, big smiles as they wave goodbye, hankies out for mums and dads and grandparents!

I have been thinking about transitions this week – children are starting nursery, start primary school, start high school, some will soon start college and university – new beginnings

Life is full of transitions and times of change – some seem positive. Some seem negative.

Some people will have left education and have nothing to go on to at the moment – a waiting time

Some people are redundant from their work, others are at the stage of retirement, perhaps through choice, perhaps no choice

Waiting times can come about because of change in health, in finances, because of the loss of a loved one – times of uncertainty and questions about what the future will hold

We are about to start a new church year in the sense that the summer break is almost over and activities will restart. We need to take stock. Is God calling us to continue what we have been doing? Is he calling us to do something new? Is he telling us to give up something we have been doing, to have a time of sitting still and reflecting and re-energising, not doing.

I was given a book by a friend recently called “Sit, Walk, Stand” by Watchman Nee

Logically you might think the order would be sit, stand, walk. But Nee argues that before any activity, before any change, before any move of the spirit, the Christian needs to sit in the presence of the holy spirit for as long as it takes. Sometimes God is waiting for us to stop doing and just to sit. From that place of sitting we can then walk in the spirit, we can go out and do what God requires of us, still being in close communion with him, filled with the spirit, empowered by the spirit, walking the walk that Jesus walked because he walks it with us, in us.

And from sitting with God and walking in the spirit we can then stand....stand against the works of the evil one, stand against attack and persecution, stand against challenge and fear.

Are you sitting? Walking? Standing? What season are you in right now? I can recommend the little book - I read it on the train to work in Aberdeen last week.

Paul is a powerful example of one who sat with God, walked with Jesus and stood against everything the devil had to throw at him – beatings, imprisonment, shipwreck, persecution.

During the waiting time in Troas, God guided Paul with two negatives and a positive. Don't preach the word in Asia. Don't go into Bithynia. Do go to Macedonia.

Perhaps you feel you have been waiting for a long time for God to do something, call you somewhere, take you out of your present situation.

We don't know how long Paul had to wait in Troas and the surrounding area before he was called to Macedonia.

Moses waited patiently for 40 years tending his father-in-law's sheep before God called him to return to rescue his people from Egypt.

The Israelites waited somewhat less patiently in the wilderness for years before God allowed them to enter the promised land.

David waited until Saul died before he became king. His life was very hard during that time. Many times he cried out to God to rescue him, to save him from his enemies, to guide his path, to lift his despair. But he never gave up on God in the waiting time. He said in the 40th psalm -

I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire, he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.

Are you waiting patiently for the Lord? Have you tried to go in several directions but the Lord says no, a door has not opened, a job application has not been successful, you have offered for a house and didn't get it, you have started a project and had to give it up, you have wanted to do something but not had the courage or the energy or the opportunity.

Know that God is with you in the waiting. Jesus sits with you and watches over you. He knows the desires of your heart. His timing is perfect and we need to trust in that.

I love the verse we heard from Ecclesiastes 3 – **“God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men and women yet they cannot fathom what God has done from the beginning to the end.”**

We do not see the whole picture that God sees. We see ourselves as we were and we see ourselves as we are now but God sees us as we will be, he sees what we can be. Nothing is impossible for God.

As I read at a wedding last week from 1 Corinthians: 13 – **Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.**”

We are fully known to God, and knowing us fully, he still loves us with an unconditional love.

God says to those in despair and lost that he will find you and restore you– **“For I know the plans I have for you” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”** (Jeremiah 29: 11 – 13)

God is calling people to sit and wait and seek him with all your heart. No, don't go there, don't do that. Wait.

God is also calling some people to walk, to act, to go. To offer that gift that he has given you to serve others. To step out in faith into the unknown. To take that first baby step, not seeing too far ahead to the final destination.

When Paul got the green light, the vision of the man calling him from Europe, he got ready to go at once and he swept Timothy and Silas and Luke along in his enthusiasm. You can almost hear him say “At last, not before time, what took you so long God, let's not waste any more precious time.”

Not all the Bible heroes were as keen and enthusiastic as Paul.

When God called Moses, Moses said the people won't listen to me, I'm not a good speaker, the people won't believe you sent me, send someone else.

When God called Jeremiah to be a prophet, Jeremiah said “I don't know how to speak and I'm too young”

When God called Zechariah to be the father of John the Baptist, he said “I'm too old.”

When God called Jonah to go and preach to the people of Nineveh, he ran away in the opposite direction – and we know where he ended up!

Even the greatest prophet Isaiah, when he was called by God, said that he was not worthy of such a calling.

The interesting thing is that in every single one of these cases, in spite of the human response – No – God had his way and each went on to serve as God had ordained.

I had been contemplating Paul's stop, stop, go in Acts 16: 6 – 10 this week and on Thursday I saw the e-mail headline for the daily message from the Glasgow Prophetic Centre which said **Breakthrough into your purpose**. I thought that it might provide some insight into our topic for today and when I opened the e-mail I saw that the text for the day was Acts 16: 6 – 10! I took this as affirmation that God wanted this message to be heard today. The message went on to say –

You may feel as if you have been wandering around trying to find your calling for many years. Perhaps, as you journeyed towards one door that you felt was open, you soon realised that it was not the one to go through. If this has become a repeated pattern in your life you may well have thought about giving up on searching for your purpose.

But God has not called you to go round and round in circles forever. Rather, he has made you to be a determined one who pushes through and fulfils his purpose for your life. Believe again that you are about to breakthrough into your purpose.

Just like Paul before he made it to Macedonia, you have wandered from place to place, purpose to purpose, call to call, as each was closed off to you. But, just like Paul, you are about to receive your “call-to-Macedonia-experience” where God invites you into the adventure of your life. He is catching you up in a whirlwind of your calling and, in doing so, is releasing you to build and to work at the very thing you were made for.

So, child of God, take heart. For your going from one thing to another was never designed to last forever but it was meant for a season, that your heart was trained in obedience. Now God is giving you your calling moment. Listen well, act swiftly and begin to fulfil your purpose today,”

The call that God places on each individual life here today is unique and different. We need to spend time with the Holy Spirit to know what season God is calling us into or out of.

Is it a time to sit or a time to walk

A time to plant or a time to uproot

A time to tear down or a time to build up

A time to weep or a time to laugh

A time to keep or a time to throw away

A time to speak or a time to be silent

A time to rest or a time to work

A time to carry on with the old or a time to begin the new

Amen.