

# HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

In Scripture and Prayer and The Great Cloud of Witnesses

Week of May 22, 2022

*Collect for the Sixth Sunday of Easter*

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. ~BCP 225

## **Acts 16:9-15** NRSV 1989

<sup>9</sup> 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.”

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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.

## **Revelation 21:10, 22–22:5** NRSV 1989

<sup>10</sup> And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

<sup>22</sup> I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. <sup>23</sup> And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. <sup>24</sup> The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. <sup>25</sup> Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. <sup>26</sup> People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. <sup>27</sup> But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

## 2

<sup>22:1</sup> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup> through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup> Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; <sup>4</sup> they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup> And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

### **John 14:23-29** NRSV 1989

<sup>23</sup> Jesus answered Judas (not Iscariot), “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. <sup>24</sup> Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.”

<sup>25</sup> “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup> But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. <sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. <sup>28</sup> You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. <sup>29</sup> And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.”

### **Psalm 118:14-29** BCP 585

- 1 May God be merciful to us and bless us, \*  
show us the light of his countenance and come to us.
- 2 Let your ways be known upon earth, \*  
your saving health among all nations.
- 3 Let the peoples praise you, O God; \* let all the peoples praise you.
- 4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, \*  
for you judge the peoples with equity  
and guide all the nations upon earth.
- 5 Let the peoples praise you, O God; \* let all the peoples praise you.
- 6 The earth has brought forth her increase; \*  
may God, our own God, give us his blessing.
- 7 May God give us his blessing, \*  
and may all the ends of the earth stand in awe of him.

## ✿ Supplemental Resources ✿

### A Commentary Excerpt on Acts 16:9-15. An Exegetical Perspective

*Paul W. Walaskay, Professor of Biblical Studies, Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, Richmond, Virginia*

[...] **Lydia (vv. 11–15)**. Luke has accurately described Philippi as “a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony” (v. 12). Ancient Greece was composed of two Roman provinces: Macedonia in the north and Achaia in the south. Philippi was founded in 356 BCE by Philip of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great), but remained an insignificant village until it was “rediscovered” by Emperor Augustus as an ideal place for retired army officers who had faithfully served him during the battle of Actium (31 BCE). Peter Oakes<sup>1</sup> offers an excellent description of the social composition of the city with a population of about 15,000. Oakes approximates that the elite comprised 3 percent of the population; landowning farmers and pensioned colonists made up 25 percent; skilled workers, merchants, and service providers amounted to 45 percent; and the poor comprised the remaining 27 percent. Slaves (about 20 percent of the total population) were included in the households of the first three groups (elites, farmers, and colonists had several slaves for a variety of tasks; families in the service class might have had one or two slaves per household). The church that eventually formed at Philippi probably had a modest membership of perhaps seventy-five to one hundred persons who mirrored the general population. Paul’s letter to the Philippian Christians also sheds light on this congregation. The tone of his letter is joyful (in spite of his imprisonment) and full of thanksgiving for the Philippians’ generosity toward him, which reflects a measure of their social and economic status.

This social schema is in the background of Luke’s narrative. He recounts that on the Sabbath “we went outside the gate by the river” looking for “a place of prayer.” It may be that Paul and his companions were searching for the local synagogue, a place Paul would typically visit on his first Sabbath in town. The reader is not told exactly where Paul was when he “sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.” This sentence contains a couple of fascinating details. First, Paul sat down to speak—the typical posture of a teacher at work. Second, it is a bit of a surprise that this well-known Pharisee and teacher from Jerusalem would carry on a serious discussion with a group of women.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

One of the women listening to Paul was Lydia, a “worshiper of God ... and dealer in purple cloth.” Again, Luke has included significant details. As a “God worshiper,” Lydia was a Gentile attracted to Judaism, but not yet ready to make the full commitment of conversion. As a “dealer in purple cloth,” she was a businessperson accustomed to dealing with the elite class of Philippi, who were allowed to wear the color purple. Moreover, she was head of her own household (no small feat in the exceedingly patriarchal Roman Empire), and finally, she was Paul’s first convert in Europe!

After her baptism (a rite symbolizing conversion to this messianic sect of Judaism), she implored Paul and his companions to enjoy her hospitality. As if to put a fine point on her significant status, Luke notes that Lydia asked them to stay at “my house” (*ton oikon mou*, v. 15). Our narrator notes that “she prevailed upon us.” Who would dare decline such an invitation?

David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C, vol. 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

### **Commentary on Acts 16:9-15. A Pastoral Perspective.**

*By David C. Forney, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Clarksville, Tennessee*

Visions are surprising things. When we talk of “God’s vision” today in church, we typically mean strategic planning, as one step in a congregation’s planning process. Perhaps we are comfortable with talking about God’s vision in this way because it seems manageable to us. We can discover what the vision is by following logical steps: (1) pray, (2) thank God for working in our congregation, (3) discern God’s vision for us by calling a consultant, and so on. In a way, Paul’s vision in Acts 16 does move him and his companions to Macedonia, “being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them” (Acts 16:10). However, our well-conceived scripting of God’s vision, if it is even that, is a very different affair from receiving from God a vision.

In the biblical witness, visions from God are not the exception but the norm. Beginning with Adam and Eve and moving throughout the Scriptures to the Apocalypse at the end, God is demonstratively engaged with human affairs to catch our attention and transform us. Yet transformation is often difficult and painful, especially when we know the way we want to head. Maybe this is why we like logical planning steps to name God’s vision; it gives us the false idea that God is predictable and controllable. When God does visit us, however, we are undeniably changed. Clearly, in Paul’s life, Jesus’ visit to him on the road to Damascus radically changed Paul’s direction (Acts 9:3–9).

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As in chapter 9, God sets Paul's course in Acts 16 through a vision by vetoing Paul's strategic plan. After being forbidden to travel to Asia (v. 6) and Bithynia (v. 7), Paul hears "a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us'" (v. 9). The route Paul finds himself on is "to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony" (v. 12). This Spirit-led route—sailing from Troas and straight to Samothrace, then to Neapolis (v. 11)—brings Paul to Europe for the first time to continue witnessing to the gospel "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). As recorded in Acts, this will be Paul's first visit to Philippi, where fond relationships will be forged, ones for which he will thank God with joy every time he remembers them (see Phil. 1:3–11).

Now that Paul's attention has been set on Philippi, he puts in motion his ministerial plan for the city. Once Paul and his unknown traveling companions reach Philippi, they remain "in this city for some days" (v. 12), waiting for the "sabbath day" (v. 13), and thus discover who the devout Jews in the city are. Visiting with devout Jews in a new city is the way Paul typically meets people and introduces the gospel. However, instead of meeting a man of Macedonia, Paul sits down and speaks to the women gathered there (v. 13). Yet again, God's mission takes a different course. The first convert recorded in Philippi is not "a man of Macedonia" but "a woman named Lydia ... a dealer in purple cloth" (v. 14).

In New Testament times, visions from God were not strange occurrences, but a woman cast in a role beyond that of being property was exceptional. In Acts we hear several stories of women responding to God's vision with the same faithfulness as their male counterparts. These women—like Rhoda, Tabitha, Eunice, Priscilla, and Lydia—lead the first-century church with integrity, energy, and command.

Lydia is a "dealer in purple cloth" (v. 14), an extravagant textile affordable only to the wealthy. She is a businesswoman of no small stature and is in charge of her own household. Notice that Lydia is not associated with a man, indicating that she is in full command of her property. She does not depend on a man to confer her status. She is a financially independent woman who is Paul's first convert in Europe. More important than her station, however, is Lydia's vision of what God is doing.

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In verse 14, we learn that Lydia worships God and that the Lord has “opened her heart to listen eagerly” to what is said by Paul. For Lydia, God uses a foreigner, a stranger to Philippi, as the one who brings the good news. The vision Lydia receives moves her, and indeed her whole household, toward the greatest Christian expression of transformation, namely, baptism (v. 15). This prominent dealer in purple cloth, who has been in full command of her life, is now a humble servant of God. This change is evident in Lydia’s gracious hospitality when she urges Paul and his companion to “come and stay at my home” (v. 15) and later, in chapter 16, when after leaving prison Paul goes to Lydia’s home again (v. 40).

Visions from God are surprising things, for they utterly transform us and alter our course. In the early 1990s, George Gallup Sr. asked Presbyterians whether they had ever experienced a vision from God. Surprisingly, half of the church members he asked said they had had a vision from God, and even a higher percentage of clergy said the same thing.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps one reason this statistic is surprising is because we simply do not talk about our visions from God—and maybe for good reason. If we were to talk openly about God’s involvement in our lives, we could not control the plan, as we do in strategic planning. On the other hand, if we did share our visions from God, we might find ourselves with open hearts that readily receive the gospel that forever changes us, even to the point of providing hospitality to foreigners and those just freed from prison.

David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C, vol. 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> George Gallup Sr., public lecture, Princeton Theological Seminary, March 1992.

# Spiritual Day Hike

In the landscape where Spirit & World intersect

Week of May 22, 2022

## (Re)Introducing A Spiritual Day Hike



In our Spiritual Day Hike we'll walk among and walk with "Holy Women" and "Holy Men," who constitute a "Great Cloud of Witnesses." As 'day-hikers' we'll use "The Great Commandment" as a guide and compass. Without leaving the class we'll travel far and wide. We'll ask: "How did this person love God with all their heart, soul, and mind?" Likewise, "How did this person love their neighbor as they loved themselves?" More importantly we'll ask, "What does his/her witness teach us about the love of God and neighbor?" We'll depend on the Spirit to extend our questions into realms we can barely imagine at the moment. We'll depend on the Spirit to call forth our growth in holiness, in wisdom, and in action. Each week we'll select at least two "saints" to walk with. Also, I encourage you to explore on your own with "trail mates" you find interesting in the Great Cloud of Witnesses.

- You can find the calendar of saints to explore with here: <https://bit.ly/Learn104>.
- The short biographies, Collects, and suggested readings can be found on The Great Cloud of Witnesses web pages here: <https://bit.ly/Learn151>.
- OR, Google a name or visit Wikipedia for even more information.

~Fr. Dan

## This Week's Holy Women and Men (Witnesses to inspire us)

*Commemorations in the Episcopal Church are listed in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), in Lesser Feasts and Fasts (LFF), and in a Great Cloud of Witnesses (GCoW).*

*Here are the Holy Women and Men remembered this week:*

May 22 ..... [Helena of Constantinople](#), Protector of Holy Places, 330 *LFF*

May 23 ..... [Nicolaus Copernicus, 1543, & Johannes Kepler](#), 1630, Astronomers *GCoW*

May 24 ..... [Jackson Kemper](#), Bishop and Missionary, 1870 *LFF*

May 25 ..... [Bede the Venerable](#), Priest and Historian, 735 *LFF*

May 26 ..... [Augustine](#), First Bishop of Canterbury, 605 *LFF*

May 27 ..... [Bertha and Ethelbert](#), Queen and King of Kent, 616 *GCoW*

May 28 ..... [Mechthild of Magdeburg](#), Mystic, c. 1282 *LFF* or

May 28 .... [John Calvin](#), Theologian, 1564 *GCoW*

## 2

### Lydia of Thyatira

*Note: Lydia is commemorated in the Episcopal Church on May 21.*

Lydia of Thyatira was Paul's first European convert. She was a Gentile woman living in Philippi who, like many others, was interested in the Jewish faith, but had not converted. As what the Jewish community called a "God-fearer" she was undoubtedly accorded some level of respect by the Jewish community, but would not have been treated as a full member of the Jewish community in Philippi.

Paul encountered her on a riverbank where she and a group of women had gathered for Sabbath prayers. Paul and his companions began to talk with the women, and God "opened her heart" to hear what Paul had to say about Christ and the Gospel. Lydia believed what she heard and, as was the custom when the head of a household converted, her whole household was baptized along with her.

Lydia was a prosperous cloth-merchant and had the means to offer hospitality to the apostles during their time in Philippi. Her home, having served as a base of operations for Paul and his companions, became the location of a house church in Philippi. Although she is not mentioned by name outside of Acts 16, her significant role in enabling the spread of the Gospel in Philippi has led to her recognition as a saint in a wide range of Christian traditions, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and many Protestant traditions. In the Orthodox Church she is given the title "Equal to the Apostles" for her role in spreading the Christian faith.

*Lesser Feasts and Fasts, 2018*

### May 22: Helena of Constantinople, 330

Helena was an Empress of Rome and devout Christian, but perhaps most renowned for her discoveries of holy sites related to the life of Jesus.

She was born into a lower class family in the middle of the 3rd century, though we are unsure about where. Many believe she was born in Drepana (now Helenopolis) in northern Asia Minor but this is uncertain. There are also later legends that place her birth in England, and for that she is honored with numerous holy wells across the country. Regardless of birthplace she would eventually become the wife, or at least consort, of Constantius I, who was co-emperor and ruled over Gaul (France) and Britannia (Britain). During this time Helena would give birth to a son, Constantine, in the year 272, but she would soon be divorced and live in the East in the palace of Diocletian.

Once her son gained the Western Empire in the year 312, she returned to Rome and was granted the title Augusta, or Empress, in 325. It was during this time that she made her famous journey to the Holy Land to find the places mentioned in the Gospels, with the most important finds being the Cross of the Crucifixion and the site of the Resurrection.

Long after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, the Emperor Hadrian had the area rebuilt. As part of this restoration a pagan temple was built on the very site of the Resurrection. Helena ordered this temple destroyed, had the area excavated, and discovered three crosses along with the epitaph that said, “Jesus, King of the Jews”. To ensure it was truly the cross of Christ, a woman near death was carried to the site and touched each cross in turn. On the third one she was cured and Helena declared this to be the one. She ordered that a church be built which would be called the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, a major pilgrimage site to this day.

Regardless of the truth of the legend itself, it is certain that she claimed to have found this and many other holy sites and relics on her journey. Unfortunately, she would not see the completion of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as she died in 330, five years before its completion.

Helena also had a reputation as a faithful Christian who cared for the poor. After her death several towns would be named in her honor and she would also eventually be given the title of “Equal to the Apostles”. Helena’s faith in her Lord was not a detached spirituality, but an embodied and historical one, such that she eagerly sought to find the very places where the Son of God had walked, taught, died, and rose again.

*Lesser Feasts and Fasts, 2018*

## **May 28: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mystic, c.1282**

Mechthild of Magdeburg was one of the most original medieval mystics, and the first to write in the German language. She was a Beguine, a member of a group of women who lived in a quasi-monastic community but did not take formal vows. Instead, they pledged to be bound by the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience only for as long as they lived in the community. Typically, Beguines lived in a communal house and supported themselves through their own work, such as nursing, weaving, embroidery, burial of the dead, and housework.

Mechthild is known to us primarily through her work *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, which consists of seven books written over a period of thirty years. It is clear from the work that she was familiar with courtly poetry and vernacular literature, but she does not seem to have had any formal training in theology or in Latin.

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Her work alternates between passionate descriptions of her love for God and scathing denunciations of many clergy and the laxity that she perceived in the official church of her time. Because of these criticisms, her work was at times controversial. Shortly after her death, a Latin translation of her work was produced by Dominican priests, who faithfully conveyed the majority of the text, but significantly toned down both her erotic imagery and her critiques of the vices of the clergy.

Mechthild spent the last years of her life at a Cistercian convent in Helfta, whose nuns were famous for their education and scholarship. It is clear that she felt somewhat uncomfortable in this very different environment, but the sisters seem to have warmly welcomed her and protected her from anyone who criticized her work. During the last years of her life, she became blind, and so the last chapters of her book were dictated to one of the sisters of the convent.

In one famous passage of her book, she writes:

“A fish cannot drown in water,  
A bird does not fall in air.  
In the fire of creation  
God doesn’t vanish:  
The fire brightens.  
Each creature God made  
must live in its own true nature;  
How could I resist my nature,  
That lives for oneness with God?”

*Lesser Feasts and Fasts, 2018*

### **More inspiration from Mechthild of Magdeburg**

“The soul is made of love and must ever strive to return to love. Therefore, it can never find rest nor happiness in other things. It must lose itself in love. By its very nature it must seek God, who is love.” ~ Mechthild of Magdeburg

Mechthild (of Magdeburg) (1953). “The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297):  
Or, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*”

“The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw and knew I saw all things in God and God in all things.” ~ Mechthild of Magdeburg

Sue Woodruff, Mechthild (of Magdeburg) (1982). “Meditations with Mechtild of Magdeburg”, Bear & Co

“Prayer is naught else but a yearning of soul ... it draws down the great God into the little heart; it drives the hungry soul up to the plenitude of God; it brings together these two lovers, God and the soul, in a wondrous place where they speak much of love.” ~ Mechthild of Magdeburg

[Mechthild of Magdeburg Quotes](#). Accessed 24 April 2022