The Space Between

Acts 16:6-15

Home Moravian Church, May 25, 2025

Do not envy Paul his time on the Mediterranean: His travels are no leisurely cruise. By the 16th chapter of Acts, he's traveled some 1400 miles, from the coast of Syria, across Cyprus, and up into present-day Turkey. He has parted company with or worn out at least three traveling companions. And that's just his *first* missionary journey, with two more to go. All to spread the story of Jesus Christ. All to build the church. All at the risk of the same kinds of punishment to which Paul himself, in his former life as Saul, subjected those who believed in Christ. Onward Paul goes, taking on a new assistant, Timothy, and setting out for even more places with names we can't pronounce. Craig, I did you a favor today by taking the Acts passage so you wouldn't have to read them.

I don't envy Paul and Timothy the wheel-spinning that began this second missionary journey. According to the text, the travelers had to change their route because they were "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia." They skipped Bithynia because "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" to go there. They landed in Troas but didn't stay, because, in the middle of the night, Paul had a vision of a man begging him to come to Macedonia. Back in the boat they went, to hop from coast to island to coast to Philippi, where they were able to stay long enough to be there on the Sabbath, so they could get some rest.

See how the Holy Spirit, after saying "no" here and "no" there and then, just as they'd settled down for a night, pulling them back onto the water, has finally drawn Paul and Timothy away from the roar of crowds, the crash of waves, the shouts of angry officials, the clamor of city

centers—away from all that noise, and into a space of quiet. They have come at last into stable lodging, and then into a Sabbath; and then into a leisurely walk, and then into a place where custom suggests they might pray in peace—a place by a river (can't you hear its murmur, and feel the cool air blowing across its surface?). There, at last, they have sat down with a group of women, and the Spirit has drawn them into conversation. The conversation is quiet. In fact: We can't hear what anyone is saying.

Because there's no dialogue. The text doesn't relate how Paul says *this* and his listeners say *that.* All we know is that Paul and Timothy "spoke to the women who had gathered there," and that a "certain woman," Lydia, was listening—indeed, listening "eagerly," because "the Lord opened her heart" to do so. We don't hear her speak till after her baptism.

Wait, what? Was there a baptism? When did that happen? Did we *miss* it?

Throughout the book of Acts, we see baptism after baptism: of crowds listening to Peter; of Simon the magician and all his fans; of Saul himself, before he becomes Paul; of households full of Gentiles; of a distraught jailer whose prisoners have just been freed by the power of God. Dramatic scenes of baptism, like the one where Peter is riding in a chariot with an official of the Ethiopian court, and the official cries, "Look, here's water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" and he and Peter get out of the chariot and walk down to the river and accomplish the baptism then and there, right out in the open where we can all watch.

But on the riverbank with the women of Philippi, there's no mention of the baptism until it's already done. On the riverbank, everything just goes quiet. Between Lydia's eager listening and Lydia's speaking, there is a space. In that space, the baptism happened.

When a person is baptized, what happens?

Ah, now, there's a question for centuries of theologians… and, as my theology professor (Craig Atwood) said, since by the Greek roots "theo/logians" are people who talk about God, we are all theologians. And if we have ever stood on the corner of Church and Academy streets at dawn to read the Easter morning liturgy; or, indeed, if we have ever, as witnesses to the sacrament, read together the Moravian liturgy of baptism; then we have already done some significant talking about baptism, to the point where we sound like experts.

In the Easter morning liturgy, we theologians say: *By holy baptism we are made members of the church of Christ, which he has loved, and for which he gave himself, in order to make it holy, cleansing it by water and the word.*

So, one thing that happens when a person is baptized is that they become a member of the church; which means they become a member of the body of Christ. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, "In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." (12:13)

In our baptism liturgy, we theologians say: "Our Lord Jesus Christ instituted baptism as the visible means of entry into the new covenant." As the Moravian bishop Jay Hughes wrote in an essay on baptism: "A covenant is always a two-way promise, with God playing the initiating role."[1] When a person is baptized, there is a human response—on the part of the person, or, if the baptized is an infant, on the part of their parents—to God's initiative. God's initiative is always there; but one thing that happens in baptism is that the human responds to it.

There is evidence that these things happened to Lydia. We didn't see her baptism, but afterwards, she asks Paul and Timothy to weigh her faithfulness, as someone living into a covenant might do. And she offers hospitality for the church of which she has become a member;

[1] Hughes 9

she invites Paul and Timothy to stay at her home, and by the end of chapter 16, that home is a gathering place for all the believers in Philippi.

Whether these details represent a change in Lydia, we don't know. From the text, we deduce that she was wealthy, with her own home and her own business—a business in which she likely had contact with educated foreigners whose ideas were new to her. So maybe she was always hospitable as well as engaged with the divine; the text does call her a "God-worshipper." We can't conclusively demonstrate a connection between her baptism, her faithfulness, and her hospitality. Our confidence that something has happened to Lydia must come from a deeper place of faith, growing out of a deeper mystery.

So follow me, fellow theologians, deeper into the baptismal liturgy, to a question whose answer you may know by heart: "You who were baptized into Christ Jesus, how were you baptized?"

Into his death.

Death, the central mystery of our lives, is also at the center of the gospel story. Amid the noise of crowds, the crash of waves, the shouts of angry officials, the clamor of city centers; at the center of a whirlwind of activity and noise, the death of Jesus is a place where everything goes quiet. Do you remember the part in *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, where a dissonant, frightening sound collage builds and builds around the crucifixion until Jesus cries, "Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit" and then everything goes silent? It is the silence of death; it is the silence of the tomb. It is the silent space between Jesus' life in flesh and his life in resurrection. And we are baptized into it. In baptism, we enter that silent space where something is happening that no one can see; and we share that space with Jesus.

Think of baptism as a burial. It may help to imagine baptism by immersion: going down below the water, as one goes down into the earth. In the Moravian church we say that a person who has died has been received into the more immediate presence of Jesus Christ. If in baptism we die: are we, at the moment of baptism, in the more immediate presence of Jesus Christ? If so: how can we not be changed?

All of this happened to Lydia, and we didn't see it. It's like the moment earlier in Acts when Peter comes to see about a disciple, Tabitha, who has died. When he arrives to stand beside her body, the first thing he does is put all her friends out of the room. When they see their friend again, she's alive. She was raised to new life, in a moment that they could not see. With Lydia's baptism, I feel like someone has put me out of the room at the most important moment. When I see her again, though: she's alive.

What interests me about the missing moment of Lydia's baptism is that in the gospel of Luke—which most scholars believe was written by the same author as the book of Acts—we don't see Jesus' baptism, either. You don't believe me, you look it up; it's in chapter 3. Here's what it says: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus had also been baptized"—wait, what? Did we *miss* it? Yes, we did. Here again Luke chooses to keep the actual moment of baptism concealed, perhaps as an acknowledgment of the moment's deep mystery, perhaps as a way of drawing us closer. A mystery is something you want to get closer to.

What happens in baptism, that space into which we cannot see? We are made members of the church; we respond to God's invitation into covenant; we die. We die, says Paul in Romans 6, so that we are dead to the power of sin. When we die, we come face to face with Jesus. And after that, we rise.

Death is a space between, and we can't see into it. So is baptism. But we believe that in that space happens *something*—indeed, everything; everything that finally matters. The entrance into Christ's body; the entrance into God's covenant. The death to sin. The embrace of Christ. And the rising to new life. We don't have to see it. We *live* it. Thanks be to God. Amen.