

THE MACEDONIANS: ALEXANDER AND LYDIA

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Acts 16:6-15

Alexander and Lydia,
two Macedonians.

Though more than three hundred years
separated their days,
we know now,
they were major players
in the unfolding of God's good providence.

Since Presbyterians have a special interest in God's providence,
we do well to spend time now and then
with Alexander and Lydia.

Like most Presbyterians,

I've always been far better
at seeing the providence of God
with hindsight
than with foresight.

It's the way we do things...

see God's help in ages past
and thus be assured of God's hope for years to come.

All these years later,

for example,
and for many years now,
I have chosen to believe
that it was by God's providence
that my date
came down with the flu,
or so she said,
on the Thursday before a certain college dance weekend
in the spring of 1960.

Since dance weekends at Presbyterian College
were miserable without a date,
there was nothing to do
but call my old high school buddy, Martha Nichols,
explain the situation to her,
and beg her to come to my rescue.

She did.

Took pity on me, I suppose.

She was a student at Winthrop.

Sometime during that weekend...
while dancing...
was it to Johnny Mathis?
or was it to the Platters?...
we danced to both...
sometime during that weekend
I came to the clear realization
that this remarkable person
I had known since the fourth grade
was far more than a buddy...
even more than a good buddy.

Now, as a Christian who is Presbyterian,
I am unwilling to say
God caused my date to be sick,
or, as the case might have been,
I am unwilling to say
God caused my date to lie about being sick.
With great delight, however,
and with the benefit of twenty-twenty hindsight,
I am bold to believe
in the midst of it all,
a love full of wonder and grace
was given by the hand of God's good providence.

I will confess to you, however,
though I don't at all remember the details
and though, at the time,
I would not likely have thought of it in such terms,
I am sure,
when my date called with the news of illness,
I did not see it as a sign...
a sign
of something wonderful about to happen.

Moreover,
as a Christian who is also Presbyterian
I am not prepared to say
that either illness or lying about it
is a good thing.
Do you get my drift about the Presbyterians
and our way of believing?

Alexander and Lydia...
no romance there
though their names spoken together
have a kind of romantic ring to them,

don't you agree(?)...
but they didn't even know each other...
no relationship with each other at all
except, of course, in God's great mind.

Conceiving of the providence of God as foresight
is to me a fearsome undertaking.

I know some people who do it regularly
and with great ease.
I suppose I do it regularly too,
but seldom,
if ever,
with any ease at all.

"Lord, if you want me to have this new suit,
let there be a parking place
near the front of the Five Points Men's Store."
My friend Robert would pray such prayers regularly.
The Five Points Men's Store he had in mind
was in an old section of Jacksonville, Florida,
where the parking had not changed since the 1930s.
Robert would buy the suit
or not buy the suit
depending on the availability of on-street parking.
Availability of parking was, for Robert,
a matter of God's sure providence
and a matter to God of great importance.
How Robert decided whether or not to buy a tie
to go with the suit
was not made clear.

I suppose I never have been
on quite such familiar terms with the Almighty,
but some folks are;
and to hear them tell it,
it works for them.

Whether it's really parking places in front of men's stores or not,
I can't say for certain,
but sometimes there are signs
that God's providence is at work.

It is true.
Today's text tells of signs of things to come:
Paul and his company

forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak in Asia...
Paul and his company
forbidden by the Spirit of Jesus to go to Bithynia...
Paul and his company
given a vision of a beseeching Macedonian....
Perhaps like my friend Robert,
Paul could see the signs of providence to come.
For me,
it's mostly seeing providence in hindsight;

but even that...
providence seen in hindsight
gives great hope...
don't you think!?

Help in ages past...
and it follows...
Hope for years to come.

Alexander and Lydia:
two Macedonians,
one famous...
remembered by almost everyone who has ever cracked a history book
or watched ETV...
the other not so famous...
and remembered by no one outside the Christian community
and not even by all those inside the Christian community.
Both, however,
both Alexander and Lydia
played major roles
in the unfolding
of God's divine providence.
Paul saw signs of it in foresight.
Everyone else is limited to hindsight.

Knowing that what you see
is the providence of God
is a fearsome thing and not always clear.
As it happens,
Paul's idea of looking through a glass darkly
or seeing in a mirror dimly
fits our view of providence perfectly.
It comes from a famous passage
in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.
Even the finest mirrors of the first century
were nothing more than polished metal

and the image they gave was blurred.

So it is with our view of God's providence,
in light of which limited view
we do well to be cautious in our declarations
whether it's going to Macedonia or going to a men's store.

Did you see the report of the mother
whose son narrowly escaped death
when all others in their Humvee died
when the Humvee was hit by a roadside bomb in Iraq?
The woman attributed her son's good fortune
to the providence of God.

There are bright rays of truth, of course,
in what she said;
but what dark thing
does that say of God's providence
to the parents of the others who were killed?

All we can say
from the vantage point of God's providence,
seen through our clouded mirror,
is that we are sure
the bombing was not of God's doing;

and yet,
from the heart of God's great grief
we are equally sure some hope will be born of it...

no...more than that...
from the heart of God's great grief
we are sure
some hope has already been born of it...

not such as will make the road-side bombing a good thing,
but such as will say even horror-filled tragedy can and shall be redeemed.

I hope and trust and pray,
on this eve of Memorial Day,
that those who have lost loved ones in defense of noble cause
can find comfort in knowing
all such death is nothing but tragedy
born of human failure to get along...
unless it is sad more even than tragic...

and, yet,

we are bold to believe that all death,
tragic or natural,
is redeemed by the gracious providence of our God.

Alexander and Lydia,
both Macedonians,
both players in the providence of God,
and both players in today's text,
though one is not at all mentioned in the text.

Alexander, the Macedonian,
is otherwise known as Alexander the Great.
He lived more than three hundred years before Christ,
Though he died at the young age of only 33,
he managed by heroic conquest
to rid the world,
as he mostly knew the world,
of Persian domination.

Taught by Aristotle,
and an avid reader of Homer,
in the course of his conquests,
he left a legacy of thought and language
everywhere he went.

Thus, by the time of Jesus,
and the apostle Paul,
the Old Testament had been translated from Hebrew into Greek
and Greek could be largely understood everywhere
in the world where Christianity was to have its birth.

Are we, then, to conclude
that God caused the Persians to dominate the known world
and then caused the bloody conquests of Alexander the Great
of Macedonia?

The answer to such a question,
at best,
is seen by us as through a glass darkly...
or is it as in a mirror dimly?

What we do know is that while God did not cause the bloody mess;
we can be bold to believe
that from the heart of God's grace,
some great good came of the conquests
of Alexander the Great.

That's Alexander, the famous Macedonian.

Now let me tell you about the other not-so-famous Macedonian.

Lydia was her name.

She *is* mentioned in the text:

trader in purple goods;

business woman

(highly unusual for a woman to be in business in the First Century)

she was a worshiper of God

but the form of that worship is not known.

We do know she was gracious in hospitality.

But listen to this:

Lydia was the first European convert to Christianity.

Starting with Lydia,

Paul's decision...

dare we say it,

Paul's *providential* decision

to take Christianity to the west

rather than to the east

was confirmed;

and, brothers and sisters,

as a result of Lydia's conversion,

here we are...

at worship

on Sunday, May 28, 2006,

at The Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church of Rock Hill, South Carolina.

If you ever get to thinking your faith is an unimportant cog
in the wheel of God's providence,

just remember

we are here today at worship

as much because of a Macedonian named Lydia

as because of a Macedonian named Alexander.

I have, then,

this word for the church:

Our future is both unknown and certain...

unknown because the Christian Church as, in general, we know it

and the Presbyterian Church as, in particular, we know it

are on shaky ground;

and as important as they are,

I'm not talking just now

mostly about current denominational bickering.

The issues are far broader and deeper than that.

One group of careful observers has referred to Christians as resident aliens.¹

That is to say,

as Christians, all over the world
we are living in a culture in which we are aliens
which is another way of saying
that we Christians, all of us,
live among people who don't think and act
like we think and act.

At least,

they don't think and act like we think and
when our thoughts and actions are faithful
to the Gospel we profess.

Another group of equally careful observers has said, as Christians, we are living in exile.²

That is to say,

nowhere in the world
are we, as Christians, at home.

That's hard to swallow,
but think of it:

Nowhere in the world is our view of truth dominant.
Nowhere in the world is our standard of behavior normative.
Nowhere in the world is the ground of our hope seen as foundational
for the majority.

The Presbyterian Church is the church of my father's birth
and of my mother's choice.

It is the church of his mother's birth
and of his father's choice.

It is the church of both her mother and father;
and I suspect the bloodline,
of whatever color, goes
farther back than that.

My commitments to the Presbyterian Church are almost idolatrous.

That is,

my commitments to the Presbyterian Church
are almost as strong as my commitments to

¹ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, Abingdon, 1989.

² Walter Brueggeman has led many scholars, preachers, and other observers in this thought. He has many books on the subject. See also the introduction to my offering, *Prayers for the Lord's Day and Other Times The Exiles Are At Worship*, Geneva 2001.

the God of the Presbyterian Church.

Nevertheless,

I must recognize that I cannot say with certainty
that the Presbyterian Church as we know it
will be the church of my children and grandchildren.

The same is true for our friends in other mainline denominations.

What I can and must say this and every day

is that the uniquely Presbyterian view of God's providence
is the gift without price
that has been given into our hands, our hearts and our minds...
not just into our hands, and hearts and minds,
but uniquely into Presbyterian hands, and hearts, and minds.

That doesn't make us better than anyone else,
but it does give us a particular responsibility.

Now,

whatever form the church may take;
and I am sure the Church of Jesus Christ will have form
so long as life endures...

whatever form the church may take;
wherever in God's providence we may be going,
the uniquely Presbyterian view of God's providence
is the gift given to the Presbyterians
to preserve for the whole church.

That, my new friends in Christ,
fills us with optimism and hope for the church

During this time of sabbatical journey,
as you with your pastors and leaders
dream about God's call to Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church,
I strongly encourage you to weigh these things carefully