

**Come Help Us**  
**Acts 16:9-15**  
**May 22, 2022**  
**Rev. Laurie Crelly at East Church**  
**Grand Rapids, MI**

One question I love to ask people is how they met their significant other or maybe how people became best friends. Many times, the stories are your run of the mill story. “Oh, we worked together or grew up in the same neighborhood.” And so forth. But once in a while you hear the most bizarre connections and at those times, I find myself saying, “Wow now that had to be a God thing.” “A God thing” is when something so totally rare and bizarre happens that you have to consider some form of divine intervention had to be at play to cause that to happen. Those God moments are often memorable and even the people involved are stumped in explaining how it could possibly happen.

I heard a story this week of a woman who experienced a “God Thing”. She normally avoids driving the freeways in Florida, but on this particular day she felt compelled by something to do so. There she came upon an elderly driver swerving on the highway and driving slowly. Out of fear for the driver’s safety she tried everything she could to get his attention and warn others including calling 911. He eventually exited and stopped to see what she wanted. She realized that he was extremely disoriented and confused. She was able to stay with him and get EMTs to check him out. He was over 300 miles away from where he thought he was. Now that is what we would call a God Thing. She listened to the prompting of the spirit and was at the right place when needed and probably saved his life and others.

There are times in our lives that unexpected, seemingly random things happen that shift us in a new direction of life. Sometimes life altering in an instant, other times a small nudge that opens up new doors and new paths that we can look back on and point to and say, “That was the event that led me to this moment in time. If I hadn’t caught that bus, or if I hadn’t happened into that random store I would not have met so and so.” Those chance encounters are what I call a “God thing”. God must have had a

hand in it. In my past life as a charismatic evangelical I was taught to not only expect such, “God inspired” encounters but to even pray for them. I still believe in this today and pray for it on a regular basis. I want to be led by the Holy Spirit and expect that every person I meet are God inspired encounters. This new person will bless me and I will bless them. We will both be changed by our interaction. It may be a one-time impact or a new path of discovery over many years. After practicing this mindset for over forty years I want to tell you that you see people differently and I love meeting new people, because I am always hoping to spot a God Thing in that interaction. So I encourage you to try it. Pray for the unexpected encounters in your day. Pray that you will be a blessing to a stranger and that a stranger will be a blessing to you then just be observant of the new people you meet.

As a kind of case study, I want us to consider Paul’s story today from Acts. The story begins with Paul having a dream of a man begging Paul to come to Macedonia to help him. This inspires Paul to change plans, he had been going around revisiting established churches and encouraging them with the news from the Jerusalem council regarding gentile believers. But because of this dream he decides to go up into Macedonia or modern-day Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria. Philippi is in modern day Greece.

So Paul heads that way and lands in Philippi to scout out the territory. It doesn’t appear that there was a Jewish settlement or synagogue so he went to the river to pray. There he happens upon a group of women. Maybe washing clothes, maybe gathering water or maybe praying. We don’t know. Paul strikes up a conversation and soon Lydia is identified and drawn into the conversation enough for her to believe in what Paul is saying. So she invites him back to stay with her.

So what do we know about Lydia from the story. She is four things: a trader of purple linens, a worshiper of God, originally from Thyatira, which is modern day Turkey, and she is head of the household. Well what does that all mean? Head of a household probably means that there is no man or husband in the picture. In fact, like in our story

of Tabitha on Mother's day, there are no other men present in the story except Peter or Paul. Tabitha had a growing ministry among the women and Lydia had a growing business. She may have had male and female servants, but she is the head of it all. From Thyatira and a trader means she traveled a lot and had a business. A trader of purple meant that she was selling to royalty and the upper classes of society. Purple was a royal color because it was quite expensive to import this color or to dye cloth in purple. She was probably rich and influential as well because of the business she was running.

So here we have what I call a God thing encounter. Paul goes to Philippi on a whim of a dream. Never finds the random man in his dream saying "Come to Macedonia and help us". But happens upon a group of women down by the river. Who is among them? A woman who is a worshiper of God and a powerful and influential woman of the community. I personally think they were down there worshiping and Lydia was leading the service. Lydia persuades Paul and his companions to stay with her and eventually she and her household convert to be followers of Christ.

Consider for a moment this phrase, a worshiper of God. It reminds me of Cornelius in Acts 10 – he was a centurion but also called a man who feared God and prayed constantly to God. We need to remember that God is always working in people's lives even if they do not have a formal connection to organized religion. Yesterday in our seminar we heard that approximately 78% of Michiganders see religion as very important, but 58% of them do not affiliate themselves to a religious denomination or church. That sounds like Lydia and Cornelius. Both devout people who prayed and believed in God, but were not going to an established community of faith to pray as far as we know. Lydia and these women were down by the river, like Paul. God was at work behind the scenes on both Paul and Lydia to cross their paths.

Now the dream makes you think that Paul was going to help Lydia and he does in the beginning, but really it was a two-way street. Lydia becomes Paul's inroad to the community in Macedonia and Lydia's home becomes his base of operation for a while.

Probably also his financial support while he is in the region. Some speculate that she even helped free Paul later when he is arrested and has to flee to another town. If Paul had been holding out to find the mysterious man from his dream, or looked down on women, refusing to believe that women cannot be spiritual leaders he would have missed out on God's blessing here. Now I know Paul gets a bad rap for being misogynistic in some of his writings. But I see him often honoring and working closely with women in almost every church he establishes. Priscilla, Lydia, Junia and Phoebe, whom Paul calls an apostle, to name a few. Paul honors them and acknowledges them as key leaders of several churches in his writings. But if it were not for the women of the Bible we would not be here today worshiping God as Christians. Remember the first evangelist of the resurrection was Mary. Lydia is the first convert to Christianity in Europe from today's reading. We all owe a lot to the women of scripture for many of the advancements of the faith. Oh but I digress. I will have to leave that argument there for now.

As a faith community we want to have an impact on others. We want people to grow in faith by being with us in worship and in ministry, but we need to remember that God is already at work in people's lives. When we cross paths with new people, we should be expecting that the blessing will go both ways. We will be a blessing to them and they will be a blessing to us. We will both grow and be changed by our brief encounters and even more so by new relationships. When we are resistant to new encounters, afraid of making new friendships or are suspicious of anything new coming our way we are denying God's unexpected blessings too. We need to remember that new people change us too and that's okay. We want to be blessed and be a blessing right?

I invite you to join me in this practice of praying to be open to the new people that you meet. Expect to not only be a blessing to them but expect them to also be an unexpected blessing to you and expect to experiences A God Thing.