

A VISION, A PRAYER, A NEW LIFE
ACTS 16: 9 - 15

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University Church of Chicago
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When one of the most remarkable women of our time died two weeks ago, President Obama spoke at her funeral in National Cathedral. Dorothy L. Height was ninety-eight years old, a founding matriarch of the Civil Rights Movement whose crusade for racial justice and gender equality spanned more than six decades. Ms. Height was among the coalition of African American leaders who pushed civil rights to the center of the American political and moral stage after World War II, and she was a key figure in the struggles of school desegregation, voting rights, employment opportunities and public accommodations in the 1950s and 1960s.

Dorothy Height was president of the National Council of Negro Women for forty years, a title she relinquished in 1997. Founded in 1935 by Mary McLeod Bethune who was one of Ms. Height's mentors, the NCNW consists of thirty-four national and two hundred and fifty community-based organizations. She helped orchestrate strategy with movement leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, James Farmer, Bayard Rustin and John Lewis. She stood beside Dr. King on the platform when he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. She said later that she was disappointed that not one person advocating women's rights spoke that day at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

Her work with the National Council of Negro Women emphasized self-help and self-reliance. These included nutrition, child care, housing and career counseling. She helped organize the Black Family Reunion Celebration which has been held in cities across the country since 1985. Those gatherings honor the traditions, strength and history of African American families while seeking solutions to such social problems as teen pregnancy and drug abuse.

As a high school senior and the valedictorian of her class in Richmond, Virginia, Dorothy Height won a national oratorical contest, and with it a \$1,000 college scholarship. But the college of her choice, Barnard in New York City, had already admitted its quota of black students—two. When Dorothy applied, she was informed that she would have to wait at least a semester before she could enroll. Instead, she went to New York University, where she graduated in three years and received a master's degree in educational psychology in her fourth year.

One of the life-changing moments for her was attending an international church youth conference in London. When she returned, she began her work as a social work caseworker, then a member of the staff of the YWCA, where she did leadership training and interracial and ecumenical education—all the time working full-time with the National Council. She loved to say, "If the times aren't ripe, then you have to ripen the times."

When I think of the role that women play in the Bible, I link them with women of our time like

Dorothy Height. Living as they did in a world even more dominated by men, those first-century women about whom Luke writes in the Book of Acts—Rhoda, Tabitha, Eunice, Priscilla—led the first-century church with integrity, energy and force. During the fifty days of Easter, our first lesson each Sunday is a reading from Acts instead of from the Hebrew Bible, and today’s lesson brings us the story of another of those women: Lydia, “a dealer in purple cloth” in the city of Philippi in Macedonia—today’s northern Greece.

We know almost nothing about Lydia, but what we do know is fascinating. Who was this woman who made her way independently in a world run by men? Who was this Gentile who sought the God of Judaism? Who was this woman who obviously dealt with the rich and powerful people of her day, the only ones who could afford to buy aristocratic purple garments.

The story begins with Paul’s vision in which a man of Macedonia pleads with him by saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” I don’t know about you but when someone tells me they have had a vision, my doubtful hackles begin to rise. You can tell me about a dream, a hope, a certainty. But a vision? Come on! This is Hyde Park! Do you see those gargoyles glaring down from virtually every building of the University? They were placed up there to ward off visions, dreamers, holy people who think they know what God wants.

When we talk of God’s vision in postmodern Protestant churches we typically mean strategic planning. We hold planning retreats to discern **our** vision, not God’s. We do this by following logical steps: (1) pray, (2) thank God for working in our congregation, (3) discern God’s vision for us by calling in a consultant, etc., etc.

An erstwhile clergy friend of mine who suffered through forty-five years of mostly fruitless ministry debilitated by his searing temper, foul mouth, inordinate need to control and inability to accept any criticism convinced his congregation in a nearby suburb to hire a consultant to help them deal with what he perceived as “their” problems. After countless interviews, focus groups, handouts and feedback, the consultant presented her report to the entire congregation during the social hour one Sunday. It declared that the pastor was the problem and as long as he served in that church, the people would perish for lack of a vision.

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. We know the way we want to go; we make logical planning steps to get there, and we expect God to ratify our vision. And in the process we develop the heretical idea that God is predictable and controllable.

So Paul “immediately” tries to cross over to Macedonia. He and his companions get to Philippi, a Roman colony. They visit with devout Jews, they explore the terrain and they introduce them to the good news of Jesus Christ. We don’t know what happened to the man of Macedonia; Paul’s first European convert is a woman. Luke tells us, that “God opened her heart to listen eagerly.” God uses a foreigner, a stranger to Philippi, as the one who brings the vision. And the vision Lydia receives moves her toward the ultimate act of faith, baptism.

Visions are surprising things. They change our plans, our course of action and they transform us. 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. Friends, we are talking about Presbyterians! Having a vision from God.

Perhaps one reason this statistic is surprising is because we sophisticated, well-read, well-educated (dare I say cynical?) people simply do not talk about our visions from God—and for good reason. If we were to talk openly about God’s involvement in our decision-making, we could not control the plan. On the other hand, if we *did* share our quest, we might find ourselves with open hearts that readily receive the leading of the Holy Spirit.

It would also mean that we would change our loyalties from a system that crucifies people and destroys lives and builds vast institutions that wage war, tells lies and builds more and more, larger and larger sophisticated weapons to kill more and more people whom our militarists label as “enemies.”

It would mean that we would no longer align ourselves with a system that reverses the priorities of Mary's Magnificat: filling the rich with good things and sending the poor empty away, a system that makes one in every four American children live in poverty. It would mean that we would speak up in the name of the Risen Christ against an Illinois government that wants to reduce funding for the education of our children—in school systems which are already overcrowded, understaffed and bereft of direction. It would mean that we would speak up against Michael Madigan and Joe Berrios and Lou Lang and Terry Link as they seek to fund infrastructure improvement on the backs of the working class through video poker machine operator aligned with the Mob.

Did you come to church this morning because God gave you a vision like Lydia’s, a vision about prayer and hope and change? Or did you come expecting a preaching of God's grace that will not upset you or make too many demands? A service triumphant and filled with joy. But we have to deal with demands as well as the promise, and nobody speaks more forcefully, more clearly than the martyred Lutheran German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer who died sixty-five years ago this week by hanging with a piano wire around his neck. He spoke of the modern church's predilection to preach cheap grace:

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without Church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without contrition. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the Cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate."

D. H Lawrence wrote to Kate Mansfield, "Don't worry about it. God will forgive; that's God's business." True enough, but only if we are willing to confess, to be open to what makes us need forgiveness in the first place.

Easter is about change, about commitment, about the power of God to remove our doubts about death, to give us new life and to set us free.

When I was growing up in Mississippi, the most feared word and the most feared place was "Parchman," ranked as one of the two most brutal and racist prisons in the U. S. One of the people who worked to change the system was the Reverend Robert Spike who later was murdered in Cleveland while serving as Director of the D.Min. program at the University of Chicago Divinity School. In 1963 Spike was convincing the United Church of Christ to put up a \$10,000 bail bond fund to help release young blacks from Mississippi's Parchman Penitentiary, he hired a young graduate of Columbia Law School named Jack Pratt to go to that state. Some of those blacks had been hanging in handcuffs and placed in outdoor sweat boxes for weeks.

On the morning of August 16, 1963, Pratt finally led a four-car motorcade some two miles inside the main gate of Parchman to the death house. During delays for verification of papers, angry voices could be heard threatening to shoot the prisoners but eventually marched thirteen blinking figures down the dusty road. When they approached Pratt's waiting caravan, one of the tower guards aimed his rifle so convincingly that the black drivers dived for cover under their cars. Pratt instinctively raised his arm. "Put that gun down!" he shouted. "I am an officer of the court!" They put their guns down.

Pratt was terrified, trembling from the close call. Later that day he went to get more court papers so that he could go to yet another work farm in LeFlore County where jail superintendent Atterberry greeted him with deputies, shotguns and barking dogs, reinforced by several police squad cars.

Trouble came this time not so much from the guards as from the 44 prisoners themselves, who were reluctant to accept release into the custody of a white stranger after dark. Called from their cells, the male prisoners presented themselves around the walls of the jail entrance until the 17 female prisoners appeared hesitantly at the top of the rickety staircase from the upper cell block. All the prisoners deferred wordlessly to two frail women well into their seventies. They questioned Pratt, pondered his story and perhaps his accent, then announced a decision. "Praise God!" one of them called out. "The church has come and set us free!"

We are confronted with two choices: We can go out, work, sell, go abroad, live normally--happy hedonists who ignore the world's problems or we can answer the summons of God and in the midst of death choose life.

The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote an ambitious poem entitled "The Wreck of the Deutschland." It commemorates what amounted to a martyrdom of five Franciscan nuns drowned on the German ship Deutschland at the mouth of the Thames in the winter of 1875. One half-line uses a word in an unusual way: "Let him easter in us." Let Christ "easter" in us. What does he mean? I think he means at least to let Christ overcome the death we all fear and bring us to new life.