

Sixth Weekend of Easter (RCL/C): A Deluge of Grace
Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22 –22:5; John 14:23-29
May 21-22, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

What's the last thing to which we listened **eagerly**? The play-by-play of a game we really cared about? Stock prices or market activity? Update on a loved one we hadn't heard from recently? News of a new season for one of our favorite shows? Good news shared by a close friend? Listening **eagerly** isn't really that common a thing. In today's reading from the Book of Acts, though, we meet someone who **listened eagerly** to the Gospel: Lydia.

Some of you will remember the poem that begins:

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me....¹

It's a pretty good bet that our friend Lydia wore purple on a regular basis, long before she got old. Her quite lucrative business was selling purple cloth. This was 2,000 years ago when purple dye was incredibly expensive to produce and to buy, so her clientele were either rich or royal. She was wealthy but not snobbish. This story from Acts tells us she owned her own home, big enough to accommodate guests, like Paul and his fellow missionaries whom she invited to stay with her. Besides for business know-how and achieving success in a man's world, Lydia had gifts of faith and hospitality.

Paul and his friends went to Philippi to evangelize, to share the Good News of salvation through our Lord Jesus' life, death and resurrection, with whomever would listen. Their prayer was that people would **listen eagerly**. Philippi was definitely Gentile territory: there were so few Jews there wasn't even a synagogue there. From previous experience, I guess, Paul figured that any worshiping community without a building would

be located near a river, and that's where he found Lydia and her lady friends. There's interestingly no mention of men at all. (Then, as now, a minyan, at least 10 Jewish males, would have been required for formal worship.) We're told that Lydia was "a worshiper of God," sometimes translated "Godfearer." That describes a Gentile who was attracted to Judaism, who worshiped the God of Israel, but who had never formally converted.

It's quite amazing, actually, that Paul conversed and worshiped with these Gentile women, baptized Lydia and her household, and then accepted her invitation to stay in her home, which obviously meant he and the other Jews would be eating at a Gentile table. As we discussed last week in talking about Cornelius, that was a scandal to some.... The Gospel turned a lot of things topsy turvy, including what was usually a very strict social structure in the Roman world, in which different classes of people didn't intermix.

Paul and his missionary friends went to Philippi in Greece because Paul had a vision of a man begging him, "*Come over to Macedonia and help us.*" (Acts 16:9) Paul could think of no greater help to give anyone than to share the Gospel and to offer baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Perhaps Lydia and other worshipers of God worshiped near the river to have access to cleansing water for healing rituals. There is no more healing ritual than Holy Baptism, which washes away original sin in the very young **and** the very old, heals soul wounds in those old enough to have suffered them, mends what is broken, opens the door to God's love and light, mystically joins us to our Lord Jesus' saving death and resurrection.

Living water washed Lydia and the members of her household, and living water flows in the heavenly Jerusalem that we hear about in this weekend's reading from Revelation.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb² 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. (Rev. 22:1-2)

That *river of the water of life... flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street* calls to mind the water that flows from the Temple in Ezekiel, chapter 47: the water is at first ankle-deep, then knee-deep, then waist-high, then too deep to even swim across. There is a **deluge** of God's grace that floods the earth in the most life-giving way. This image of water streaming down the steps and out the door of the sanctuary came to me after Superstorm Sandy and our subsequent hands-on involvement in the Furniture Bank and Family Promise. The Holy Spirit used the waters of Sandy to wash us out of the sanctuary into the community!

Again, from the Book of the prophet Ezekiel, foreshadowing what we hear in Revelation:

On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing. (Ezekiel 47:12)

Our world and we are so in need of healing. The Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports is preventing shipments of wheat and seed-to-crush-into-oil from being sent forth and feeding the world. There is huge concern about starvation in developing countries ensuing. How much **more** important in times such as these, is Revelation's witness that "the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations." These are words echoed in our hymn of the day, "There in God's Garden." Please pay special attention to the lovely lyrics that echo both Ezekiel and today's lesson from Revelation.

I attended a baptism in Milan on the Feast of St. Joseph, March 19. The basilica in which it took place was huge, especially compared to our intimate sanctuary. There were

side altars like in St. Patrick's Cathedral in NYC, floor to ceiling murals, a wall painting of Mother & Child that some attribute to daVinci. As we entered that unfamiliar place, not sure where we were headed, we were summoned by flute music to the apse behind the high altar, a semicircular worship space bordered by choir stalls in which we sat. In the middle was a lit Paschal candle and a baptismal font that looked like a giant clam shell on legs! The font was big enough that the priest who presided invited Baby Penelope's father to allow her to splash her hands in it, which she did, with glee! High over us was a cupola painted with angels and saints, praising God and looking benevolently down upon us! It was an incredible setting, but David Richard's baptism here in our simple sanctuary is no less mystical. His mystical joining to our Lord's death and resurrection in the waters of Baptism are no less awe-inspiring here than Penelope Rose's were in that Italian basilica. After her baptism there was a flute solo, musically inviting us to marvel at the miracle that had just occurred. May we be **no less awed**, reflecting on the gift of David Richard's baptism and our own dying and rising with Christ.

May we "listen eagerly" as Lydia did, sing soulfully, and look on in wonder as God's love floods our lives and God-willing flows out the doors of this sanctuary into the world.

Amen

¹Jenny Joseph, "Warning," from *Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe, 1992), scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham