

6th Sunday of Easter

Sermon 5.1.16

Scripture: Acts 16:9-15
John 14:23-29

Last time I preached on these stories from Acts, I kept asking you all this question, “When you tell your story, are you the principal actor in it?” This was to say, as you reflect on your life or your day or whatever hunk of time you’re reflecting on, are you mainly the one who takes action, who has taken action? Do you mainly perceive yourself to have acted? Are you ever acted upon?

The book, *this* book, the Acts of the Apostles is an action-packed book full of active people. No surprise, this. The title gives it away: the *Acts* of the Apostles. Obviously, this is going to be a book about action. This isn’t wisdom literature, in which there’s ponderation on the meaning of things or pontification on how best to live. This isn’t existentialist philosophy or absurdist drama. This is firm-footed action-taking, done by people who’ve been called and sent out. Apostles, they’re even called, which is to say someone who’s been sent out. And so they did go out—to the streets of the city, to the outlying villages, to lands across the sea, this morning remembered even to have ventured to Europe. Macedonia!

The funny thing is, though, these apostles are most often acting in response to the spurring action of the Holy Spirit—so the book might better be called Acts of the Holy Spirit. Sure, the apostles do act, but often because they have first been acted upon. What’s more, they often don’t act in such a way that has a clear aim (other than to spread the good news of Jesus crucified and raised, which you just have to trust me is good news because to go into that now would be a whole other sermon). And their having taken action doesn’t often end in such a way that is the achievement of their original (though vague) aim.

Purposeful wandering, we might call it; missional meandering.

Consider, Paul hadn’t gone to Philippi in order to meet up with Lydia. Though that is, indeed, what ended up happening, Paul hadn’t gone seeking a convert in this wealthy Gentile woman. No, Paul had gone to Philippi because he had received a vision of a man saying to him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” It had nothing to do with Lydia; it had everything to do with this mysterious man.

Who exactly *he* was: well, that isn’t clear either—isn’t clear in the story and apparently never became clear to Paul. After all, once Paul reached Macedonia, he never then connected

with this man, never it seems saw him again. In short, the reason for Paul's effortful trip apparently never came to pass.

And effortful it was. Getting from Troas to Philippi amounted to traveling 100 miles, maybe 150 miles; it also amounted to traveling over land and over sea—several days spent walking, sailing, wading again. From Troas to the island Samothrace in the Aegean Sea to Neopolis and at last to Philippi, the journey brought Paul and his friends from modern day Turkey to modern day Greece and amounted to this being Paul's first visit to European soil and the gospel's first hearing among European people.

And all of this, of course, adds up to mean that this, Paul's journey, was, and is, significant in many ways. But, listen, none of the ways in which it was and is significant have anything to do with what first got it going: a vision come to Paul of a Macedonian man saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

What's more, it's funny that this urgent call landed Paul in what seems a state of remarkable calm. In Philippi, Paul and his friends are remembered to have "remained...for some days." They're said then, on the Sabbath Day, to have gone outside the gate by the river in search of a place of prayer, and at last to have come upon some women gathered there. No trouble; no distress; no deep need for good news, for gospel news: Philippi seems then to have been a comfortable place for Paul and his friends to have landed. Whatever help the Macedonians might be said to have needed isn't immediately apparent—at least not to me, and perhaps not to Paul. Whatever the situation in Macedonia that spurred the Spirit to speak to Paul about coming over, it wasn't one of any obvious urgency.

I wonder if I'd have been in such a state of calm after all that. I wonder if I wouldn't be a little annoyed that I'd gone to all this trouble for this certain someone who needed my help and begged my attention and then didn't show up. That someone else *did*; that Lydia was there and open and receptive, and that she had a whole household to open up to me and moreover to open up to the Holy Spirit: these would have satisfied, I suppose. But, you know, I'm busy. I can't just be wandering off for days, weeks at a time, for vague reasons that never come to pass. A miscommunication earlier this week had me "wasting" a half hour. And it was fine. It was *fine*.

But you know, Paul and his friends had a frame of mind that we lack, or at least I imagine they did. I imagine this because they had this thing more prominent in their language

than we have in ours: the middle voice, which I remember preaching on a lot when we were immersed in these stories of the acts of the apostles last time. (The acts of the Holy Spirit.)

In English, we have the active voice, wherein the subject of the sentence is the clear instigator of the action of the sentence, and wherein that action often results in a clear effect or end. “I ran to the store,” which is to say I took action (running) and achieved my purpose (getting to the store).

We also have the passive voice, which the once-English teacher in me would have you avoid. It’s insipid. It’s uninteresting, even convoluted. The sofa is being sat on by the dog. The party was attended by Tobias and all his friends. It also can be irresponsible, as when public figures use it because mistakes were made and things were said and if people were offended then apologies are offered.

The middle voice, unsurprisingly, calls us into that middle place between where we are the sole actor on a given object to complete some clear task, and where we are obscured in the activity by rhetoric and passivity. And this is what English is all but missing—but the biblical languages have much more at the ready. The middle voice assumes, and gives quiet expression to, the fact that often our action is done in the context of some larger action or larger actor. What this sounds like in English is a bit labored, for example, “The turkey is cooking in the oven.” We know, when hearing that, not to imagine a turkey standing in our oven cooking something. But to say, “The oven is cooking the turkey,” is to reduce the process to too few a set a factors and actors. It removes the cook from the whole equation, the unnamed but essential mind and force making it all possible.

I think the middle voice makes room for God in the lived reality of the people who speak such languages as have the middle voice to give expression. I think the middle voice even assumes God, or Spirit, or the imminent-transcendent. I think any language and culture that makes regular use of the middle voice is more prepared to confess the reality of God at work in the world—and even at work in all things for good. Sure, those languages and cultures might not be as industrious and productive as we Americans are. There might not be as many self-made men, and self-actualized women, and individualized children as we have in the English-speaking West.

Admittedly, mono-linguist that I am, this is largely supposition. But what I *can* say for certain is that before I knew anything about the middle voice, I had nearly no way to explain

my experience of God-with-me without relying only on my own experience, which is easily dismissed as just some weird quirk about me — magical thinking or fantastical configuring of things; but *after* I learned about this linguistic construction I could imagine in some more worldly and wide-ranging a way something that I had long felt as true — that there is more to the unfolding of history and life than subject and object and cause-and-effect, cause-and-effect, so that when I tell my story in the truest way, I am not the principal actor in it, at least not always. Though I might be participating in some greater power merely by living and thriving, I am not in control really of anything; and in reality the more powerful the thing is in which I take part, the more I submit a feeling of control. What's still more, were I to exert control, I might obstruct the greater and more powerful thing that might otherwise occur.

Power and control are two very different things: as different as the middle voice is from the active voice — and so it is that sometimes I look back on my life or my day and notice the path I cut and say, “Hey, huh, look at that. Who knew?”

So, I asked you the same thing, the last time we were last immersed in these Holy Spirit stories in the Acts of the Apostles, Easter season now three years ago: “When you tell your story, are you the principal actor in it, or is there some other force or mind or end steering its course?” And I even told you a couple Holy Spirit stories, and asked you to tell us all yours.

This year, though...

In late winter, Jesse and I watched the HBO comedy “Transparent.” Its central character is a college professor in his 70s who's decided at long last to present himself as he's always felt he was — a woman. Divorced from his wife for some years now, and with his three children now grown and out of the house, he's decided it's now or never. He transitions from Mort to Maura.

But it's not that storyline that struck me as devastating. Actually, that story line had me thinking, “Okay.” It's a well-written show, and it's well-acted. There's nothing salacious or titillating about it all. It seems quite human. So, there's this one human who needs to radically change his self-presentation in order to feel like herself: okay. What devastated me, and what made me question whether this was indeed a comedy, was all the secondary characters, Maura's family members.

Each of them is unmoored from everything—relationship, responsibility, morality, meaning. One, in her early forties, married with children, blows up her life for reasons that are passing at best. Another, in his late thirties, can't seem to make it through a day without accidentally having sex with his neighbor's daughter or getting high with someone he met at the grocery store or some other damned thing. The third, in her early thirties, changes her mind about the fundamentals of her identity from one day to the next. It's actually very depressing.

But, fearing that I'm just being a typical Christian scold, I went off in search of what others are saying, and I found some relief in Spencer Kornhaber's article on the *Atlantic Monthly* website, which points to the show's "constantly looking for the line between self-actualization and mere selfishness...and its characters use [of] politics as a pretext for making ungenerous choices...Again and again, the show plays with the fact that doing what feels good can make other people feel very bad, especially when it means violating the previously agreed-upon terms of a relationship." Kornhaber even points out one character laying it bare: "...you need to do what you want in this life, not what you feel like you should be doing." And as for when a recently landed job turns out to be difficult (if hard won), the friend's advice is, "Just quit."

What makes the show interesting, according to Kornhaber (and I would agree: it is interesting, just not necessarily enjoyable) is that it doesn't equate those living in acceptance of fluid gender identification with righteousness. This is no pious, politically correct tale of people living on a higher evolutionary plane. On the contrary, Kornhaber writes, "*Transparent*, thus far, is not interested in offering comforting dogma about a utopian, fluid future; it does not say everything will be okay once people start following their own truths. [What it has done is to force] viewers to think about what [such a] new world might really look like, and whether it would be better than the one left behind."

It's tough to know which vision more people in the viewing audience might hold as their own. It's tough to know whether more people would take a rosy-eyed view of such a fluid, self-actualizing future and so reject what the writers might also be saying, or if more people would agree with the show's developing notion that such unmoored following of one's own truth might also be fraught with complication, disappointment, ennui, a state of being lost. It's tough to know, so it's tough to preach—I who more and more like to preach against the grain, and because I suspect the gospel is so often against the grain.

“Not all who wander are lost,” a bumper sticker declares.

I think that’s true.

But some who wander *are* lost.

The question is, how to tell the difference—and not just as regards others, but as regards ourselves. How do we know when our wandering is spirit-led and when it’s something more akin to pleasure-seeking on a path of least resistance that is in actuality a life of deep frustration, having never accomplished anything?

Last time I preached on these stories of the Acts of the Apostles, which is also the acts of the Holy Spirit, I asked the question, “When you tell your story, are you the principal actor in it? When you reflect on where you’ve been and wonder as to where you’re going, are you always the one to act, or are you ever acted upon?”

I think that’s still a good question. But I’d correct it by adding this one: “When does letting go of control slide into become being irresponsible, unresponsive, a bumping up against this thing and that event and this occurrence until every day is but a series of pinball bumpers redirecting your trajectory which will end, well: it’ll end where it ends. Whatever. It’s all good.

I doubt very much Paul could have imagined a world in which wandering for the sake of the gospel could be summed up as “Whatever. It’s all good.” I doubt very much his journeying to spread the good news, surprising and spirit-led and unpredictable as this journeying was, could ever collapse into vagabondage. (Now there’s a word!) That’s just not the world Paul lived in. That’s just not the world of the ancient near east.

But I don’t doubt that many of us live in such a world now. So I don’t doubt that preaching as if the greatest challenge in people’s lives is letting go of control might not be all that helpful—not to some, not to those bound in a vagabondage. For, of course, there are those for whom letting go of control and some well-mapped-out plan is indeed a great challenge, even when such a well-mapped-out plan might threaten the surprising, upsetting movements of the Spirit. But these days there are also those who are so comfortable not being in control that this is felt as the highest ideal, imagined as the greatest and most highly evolved good.

When Jesus promised that he would not leave the disciples as orphans, that these whom he’d gathered would not be so bereft as all that once the time came that he would have

to leave them (and the time was coming, coming soon), he called the thing to come the *paraclete*, which is to say the one “called to one’s side.” This is the Holy Spirit, the advocate, the one who speaks for us when words fail us in a time of trial, and who speaks through us when the truth of what any of us might say surprises even ourselves.

I suspect this is the corrective. Correcting what controlling urge we might cave to, correcting whatever vagabondage might hold us fast though loose: the *paraclete*, the advocate, the Holy Spirit, I sense, is the corrective. It speaks to us in the most intimate, individuated way. (“The Spirit is within you,” Jesus is remembered to have said, and is also remembered to have breathed it on each of the disciples gathered on that first Easter evening when they were locked away in fear.) It speaks to us also in community, in relationship. (“The Spirit is among you,” Jesus is remembered to have said, while the Spirit is also remembered to have come down upon the whole city and the have brought the people together, each speaking their own language and yet understanding each other.)

And so we gather here, in silence that the Spirit might speak to us each, and in word and song, in homily of the pastor and the people, that the Spirit might speak to us all. We’re pilgrims, not vagabonds. We’re taken up by something powerful yet responsive to it and to one another, dwelling somewhere in a messy middle. We eat of one loaf of bread, yet broken and torn that we each might have a piece. We drink of one cup yet poured for many—each and all.

Thanks be to God.