A Vision That Sets Our Hearts Beating
Acts 16:9–15

Nothing Ever Goes Exactly as Planned—And That's Life

Last week, I had the joy of reconnecting with a clergy couple from Chicago. They had just finished their Doctor of Ministry program at Boston University and were back in town for graduation. The ceremony was on a Saturday, but since they were leading worship the next morning, they booked an evening flight back to Chicago. The plan was simple: graduation ends around 4 p.m., so they booked an 8:30 p.m. flight—plenty of time. But the day before, they got a sudden notice: their flight had been moved up to 5:10 p.m. They weren't sure if they'd be able to stay for the whole ceremony. Then, on the day of graduation, another message came in—the flight was delayed. In the end, they got to enjoy the full ceremony and still caught their flight. Later, the pastor posted this on Facebook: **"I'm learning that nothing happens according to plan easily, but everything is done by God's grace. Thanks be to God!"**

We've all had moments like this—times when things didn't go the way we planned, but somehow, by God's grace, everything still worked out for good. That's exactly what happened to Paul. He had planned to preach in Asia—what we now call western Turkey—but the Holy Spirit closed that door. Then he tried to go to Bithynia, but that way was blocked too. So he ended up in Troas—a place he never intended to be. And it wasn't because he had bad intentions. Paul was trying to do God's work. But even good plans sometimes lead to closed doors.

And sometimes, that happens to us too. We make plans with the best intentions, trying to serve God, trying to do what's right—but the doors just don't open. But if we're honest, that's how life usually goes, isn't it? More often than not, things don't unfold the way we planned. That's just the nature of life.

Do you think I had it all mapped out? *"I'll go study abroad, and by my mid-40s, I'll be the pastor of Asbury UMC in Rhode Island."* No way! That was never in my plan.
We like to think of ourselves as the captain of a great ship, steering through the sea of life, confidently heading toward our destination. But the truth is, life feels more like we're in a small sailboat—carried by the wind, adjusting as we go, not always sure where we'll land.

Carried by the Wind of the Spirit

Some people might say that our being here together at Asbury UMC in 2025 is just a coincidence. Others might call it fate. But as people of faith, we call it something else—we call it *God's providence*. Earlier, I said that our lives are often like sailboats, carried by the wind. And in Scripture, wind often represents the Holy Spirit. So if that's true, then we haven't just drifted here by accident. We've been carried here—guided here—by the Spirit of God.
And that same Spirit will continue to lead us, all the way to the final harbor.

That's why the most important question is this: *Where is the Spirit leading us now?* Are we paying attention? Are we willing to follow? Life in the Spirit is full of surprises. It's not something we can control or plan out in detail. John 3:8 says, *"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you can't tell where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."*

In other words—we're not in the driver's seat. And today's passage shows us exactly what that looks like. Paul had planned to go to Asia and then to Bithynia—but both doors were closed. So he ended up in Troas. And then, Scripture tells us: *"During the night, Paul had a*

vision. A man of Macedonia stood before him and pleaded, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'"

After seeing the vision and hearing the man's plea, Paul and his companions didn't hesitate. They immediately prepared to go to Macedonia—because they were convinced that God was calling them to share the gospel there.

Do you think Paul had planned to cross over into Europe and start a whole new mission field? Not at all. His plan was to stay in Asia Minor—the region he already knew. But through this vision, God showed him a new direction. Because Paul was paying attention to the Spirit—not just following his own plans—he was able to step into something completely unexpected: the beginning of the gospel's journey into Europe.

When we trust the leading of the Holy Spirit—when we truly surrender ourselves—we begin to dream dreams and see visions we never thought possible. You all know Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *"I Have a Dream"* speech. Standing before what felt like an unmovable wall of racism and injustice, he dared to dream: "That one day, on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will sit down together at the table of brotherhood." "That even in Alabama, with its vicious racism, Black children and white children will join hands as sisters and brothers." That kind of dream only comes from someone walking with the Spirit.And we've seen that dream slowly come to life—step by step.

When we give ourselves fully to the Spirit's leading, the Spirit takes us to places we never imagined—into a life that's deeper, richer, and more beautiful than we thought possible. So the question is: *Where is the Spirit leading us?* Are we watching? Are we listening? Are we willing to respond?

Now, I know some of you might be thinking, *"At my age? You think I'm still supposed to dream?"* Or, *"I'm getting closer to the kingdom of heaven—what dreams could be left for me?"* But hear what the prophet Joel says: *"I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions."* (Joel 2:28)

It's not about how old you are. It's not about your situation. In Luke chapter 2, we meet two elders—Simeon and Anna—who recognized who Jesus truly was. Both of them were faithful. They walked closely with the Holy Spirit. And they waited patiently for God's promise. Then one day, Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the temple for the purification rites. And in that moment, Simeon and Anna saw him. They blessed him. They praised God. That's it. They waited, they saw, and they bore witness to what God was doing. And that may not sound like much—but it was holy. It was powerful.

And it's something each one of us can do. When we open our hearts to God, God invites us into something bigger—into a greater, more sacred vision of life. And the Spirit leads us to people and places we never could've imagined.

Following the Spirit's Vision That Sets Our Hearts Beating

Yes, there are times when it feels like every door is closed. Like every road is blocked. But often, that's exactly when God is preparing something new. Jesus always walks one step ahead—opening the way, even when we can't yet see it.

When Paul crossed the sea to Philippi, following the Spirit's leading, Lydia was already there—waiting. God had prepared her heart. And through that unexpected encounter, a new community of faith was born. What we need today is the same: Trust. Discernment. And a willingness to follow the Spirit's quiet voice.

There's a word we use—*"nudge."* It means a gentle push, like an elbow tap. And that's often how the Holy Spirit moves—softly, persistently, lovingly. "The Holy Spirit nudges you." Maybe the Spirit is nudging you today—tapping your heart and whispering: *"Come this way. Step forward. You're the one I want to work with."*

So let's open our hearts. Let's open our eyes to the vision God is placing before us. Let's tune our ears to the voice that still speaks. Instead of focusing on what we can't do, let's ask: *What sets my heart beating? Where is the Spirit inviting me to take one step of faith?*

And when we take that step—however small it may seem— God will meet us there. God will lead the way. So take the step. Trust the nudge. Follow the vision that sets your heart beating. Amen.