

Text: Acts 16: 6-15
Title: Riding the Ripple to the River
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I read again this week that the vast majority of Americans believe in God.....

92% believe in God or a universal spirit.

81% believe in heaven.

65% believe that many different religious paths can lead to eternal salvation.

44% of Protestants go to a church different than the denomination in which they were raised.

So, most of us ~ friends, neighbors, fellow citizens, family ~ believe that there is a God.

Well, big whoop! The real question, it seems to me, is what is the nature of that God.

Is God a distant deity, a designer of creation but not a doodler in creation, or is God actively engaged in working out his/her will for this world? Is God standing back and monitoring the ordered laws of the universe and the tick, tick, tick of creation's clock?

Or, is God blowing here and blowing there to exercise some power and purpose in the present?

That question reaches from the heights of does God have any hand or purpose in tsunamis, tornados, and sunsets? (Those "acts of God") To, does God have a particular will for you ~ for career or spouse or fertility or health? That question even gets stuck in muck and mud of does God have a will for what dining room table you purchase or what parking spot you find? Two things to which I've heard Christians credit and claim God's spirit-led will.

I think the more interesting question is not does God exist or not, but is God active in this world working out his will, blowing his breath, and affecting change? Is God at work here and not there? Does God lead this way and not that? Or, is God just waiting and watching ~ like a faithful Cub fan ~ rooting, but finally unwilling or unable to engage in a way that shapes and changes the present?

Our text this morning is the story of a God who is active. Or, at least, the characters in our text credit what happens as the will, direction, and action of God. The Apostle Paul and his companions believe that they are following the Spirit of God. To borrow language from last week's sermon, they are riding the ripple that rolls out from the resurrection and reaches to farthest horizon and distant shore.

Paul is convinced that he is called to share the good news of Jesus Christ beyond the boundaries. So, he travels to the far reaches of the Roman Empire.

He tries to go to the province of Asia, but the Spirit blocks the way.

He tries to cross the border of Mysia, but the Spirit blocks the way.

The vision of the man from Macedonia sets his itinerary, and the Spirit makes a way.

Now, there is no indication how the Spirit blocked their travel ~ broken wagon wheel, leaky boat, bad weather, road closed ~ but the Spirit guided them there not here, now not then. And,

without record of wringing hands or angst filled spirits, Paul lines up with the Spirit and sets sail for Philippi in Macedonia. His journey coalesces with the wind of the Spirit and he sails in two days a journey that later took five. He was in the windy will of God and he lands in what is modern day Greece. The Spirit leads them all the way to the European continent.

There were only a few Jews in Philippi so there was no temple. According to Jewish law a temple required ten men – the heads of ten families. So, without a temple people went down to the river to pray. With echoes of singing by the rivers of Babylon, a displaced people in a foreign land gathered to pray. So, following the ripple to the river, Paul preaches to the women gathered there and Lydia, a god-fearing Gentile, hears, makes room for Jesus, and invites Paul and his companions to stay with her.

The Spirit blows Paul to Philippi.

The Spirit opens Lydia's heart to Paul's word.

The Spirit ripples out until a Gentile woman is offering hospitality to a Jewish man.

Let us, therefore, affirm this: The testimony of scripture is that the Spirit of God is active, working out the will of God. It is not just that God will one day gather creation back unto *shalom*, but there is some way in which God's spirit is blowing and directing and making a way.... even in Philippi,.... even today. The winds and waves of grace move out beyond the boundaries. The Holy Spirit ripples out.

If that is true:

How then do we know the will of God?

How do we know where the wind of God is blowing?

How do we know that God is blocking one way and opening another?

How do we follow the Spirit?

Laird Hamilton is a surfing god. He started to surf when he was two years old, riding the front half of his father's board. Today, in his 40s, at 6' 3", 215 pounds, with the chiseled looks of movie star, he has built an extraordinary career as a surfer. In his book, Force of Nature: Mind, Body, Soul, and of course, Surfing Hamilton writes:

We're all equal before a wave. The wind, the tides, the pulse of the swell, the rhythms of the ocean, all went into creating its power. The best riders are attuned to every nuance of their environment. If you don't understand the wave, you can't respect it. And if you don't respect it, it's only a matter of time before the ocean teaches you to respect it. Surfing connects you to nature, it brings you into this moment...

Now, the closest I've ever been to surfing is body surfing ~ getting tossed around in a frenzied mess of wave and foam and crashing next wave and sand in my shorts and undertow and water up my nose and falling over and, I guess, being taught respect....

But, I've always wanted to be a surfer ~ the lure and the romance of being in synch with wind and wave and water has tugged at me since I was a kid visiting California. But, I grew up in Iowa and surfing was a dream, so I read books by Laird Hamilton.

I think (I imagine) at its best moments surfing embodies how we can be connected to nature, when we are fully present in the moment, when we are attuned to every nuance, when we are in a groove. It is a moment of Zen; it is a glimpse of *shalom*. And, not unlike Eric Liddell in “Chariots of Fire”

*I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast.
And when I run I feel his pleasure...*

Somehow there can be that transcendent moment when we are fully present and we feel God’s pleasure. And spirit and body and intention are in synch, and you’re living into the will of creation riding the wave..... of the Spirit.

Is that a helpful analogy or metaphor?

The experience of faith is in part a longing to be so attune to the will of God that we know where he is blocking this way and opening that way. Faith is in part a longing to be so connected to God that our bodies, spirits, and intentions are in synch with God’s.

We long to live by the Spirit’s leading
where our steps are ordered after God’s will,
where person and purpose converge in *shalom*,
where in the pursuit of God’s groove there is some sense of God’s pleasure.

Now, maybe it is a peculiarly contemporary American phenomenon that we pray for, search after, and seek God’s particular will for our lives. And, maybe there is more emphasis placed on finding God’s purpose for our lives than scripture warrants. But, part of faith is the desire to realize those moments where the Spirit is leading and we’re following.

Some are confident of finding that wave. They experience God leading them to parking spots, dining room tables, and career changes. While others, get pulled down by the undertow and are far less certain about finding their footing in God’s active will....

But, based on the testimony of scripture, can we say that, when we are reaching toward others in love we are in the flow of the Spirit? When we move with Peter beyond the boundaries or sail with Paul toward others, we are in the Spirit.

I don’t know if the Spirit leads you
to Hope rather than Calvin,
to the Cubs rather than the Sox,
to this career, or that spouse, or that vacation home.....

But, I know that when we love friend and enemy, we are in the flow of the Spirit.

When we love Jew and Gentile, we are in the flow of the Spirit.

When we love Christian and Muslim, we are in the flow of the Spirit.

When we love gay and straight, we are in the flow of the Spirit.

When we love family and foreigner, we are in the flow of the Spirit.

That is not to deny that the Spirit may also lead you in a variety of other ways. That is not to deny that some devotional practice may make you more in tune with God’s more particular will.

Neither is that to suggest that the flow of the Spirit is easy. There is some notion that following the wind of the Spirit will lead to our good fortune.

Well, one certainty is that the Spirit would not push, pull, or flow contrary to the purpose of Christ, contrary to the path of Christ, and that path leads to sacrifice and to crucifixion. Paul was riding the crest of a wave and he ends up beat, jailed, shipwrecked, and eventually killed. To be in the flow the Spirit does not mean easy sailing on smooth waters with the wind at our back.

But, with confidence we can proclaim that to be in the Spirit is to reach beyond the boundaries in love.

And is that it?

Is that all we can know of the will and way of the God based on this text?

Maybe one last thing...

John Calvin (the one with the college) writes that

To Christians the Spirit of the Lord is not a turbulent phantom, which they themselves have produced by dreaming, or received ready made by others; but they religiously seek the knowledge of him from scripture...

That's a wonderful little phrase, "a turbulent phantom." I think it captures the notion that the Spirit is blowing about as a mystery ~ hither and thither with a freedom that is all its own, and that it is somehow our task to catch and discern and follow...

When it seems clear, that over and over in scripture, what the Spirit of God is doing is pointing to Christ. Over and over the waves of the Spirit keeps crashing onto the beach of Christ ~ throwing us again and again into his arms....

The function of the Spirit, even in our text this morning, is not the setting of a divine itinerary but the proclamation of the gospel. And, that is at least one way that the Spirit of God would be active in the world today. Pointing us to the good news of Jesus Christ: You are accepted, loved, forgiven, and made right with God in Christ.

May that wave rise up and carry you today.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.