

“A Good Sign”

May 26, 2019

Memorial Day

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

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Acts 16:9-13

Revelation 21:10; 21:22-22:5

I remember when I first came to Leonia, after I interviewed and was offered the job here, first as Interim Pastor. “Don’t you want to meet me first?” I asked the Session... “Because I want to meet you before I say yes.” It may have been just a matter of days before I was on the plane, with Pete Shanno picking me up at LaGuardia. Early in the day, Pete kindly drove me on a tour of the area. We stopped for a good view of the bridge from Fort Washington Park. He showed me around the surrounding towns: Fort Lee, Palisades Park, Cliffside Park, Teaneck, Edgewater, Englewood, Ridgefield and Ridgefield Park-- which at the time all blurred together for me, except for the signs at the entry into each town marking our entry and exit. I noticed the languages of the signs on storefronts, and just how many cultures had made their mark on this area. When we drove into Leonia, it only took half a conversation topic before we drove out of Leonia again, but I believe we may have circled back several times through so that I could get the idea of it.

I found other signs that showed me a bit about what and who the church was. The old church sign had words of welcome in three languages. There were the colors of the rainbow flag on the church sign, as well as at the church entry. I walked into the sanctuary and I smelled it-- I always smell sanctuaries when I enter them-- and noticed how the afternoon light entered through the stained glass windows and how the pew cushions sagged gently from years of worshippers. I took note of the baptism font, the bibles-- the pulpit and pew bibles, yes, but also the bibles of several different languages at the front of the church, the hymnals, and the communion chalice and plate, recognizing these as signs of Christian identity in sanctuaries around the world. Taking in all these signs, I suspected God was calling me here. As the day folded into night I gathered with many of you, who were so excited about the ways this church lives into Christian discipleship and how I might be part of that. Then, the Spirit led me to believe that I am called to spend some time in ministry among you here. From then on, it was no longer what you were doing in ministry, or what I was doing, but what we were doing together.

Where we first find Paul in the Acts passage, he has been spreading the gospel through Syria and up through what we know as Turkey today. When he was in Troas, which is the northern tip of what we now know as Turkey's western coast, just below Istanbul, Paul was given a sign. It was a vision of a man pleading, "Come to Macedonia and help us." Up to that point, all of Paul's travels were through what we would now call Asia. But this vision called Paul to cross a waterway into Macedonia, which is on the continent we now know as Europe.

If you follow the scripture, here you will note an interesting change. Up to this point, the narrator is talking about Paul's travels, saying "they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia... they went down to Troas... but after the vision, the pronouns change. The scripture continues: "We set sail from Troas..." to Philippi in Macedonia... and "we remained in this city for some days." It seems that for Paul as well, there was a shift from him doing ministry, to a "we" doing ministry together. This shift of pronouns is a sign, and from this sign we can guess that Paul picked up some people, including our narrator, in Troas, and they would be part of what the Spirit was doing next.

Next, the scripture says, "we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to a woman named Lydia." I find it interesting that this gathering, which we can suppose was a synagogue of sorts, was outside the city gates. Perhaps that is a sign to us today that their presence had no authority and no welcome within the city gates. Nevertheless, they worshipped God. Lydia, a dealer of purple cloth, who herself was an outsider to that place, since she came originally from Thyatira in Asia, listened eagerly to Paul's teachings, and the Lord opened her heart. She and her household were so stirred, that all were baptized that day! Then with enthusiasm urged them, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." Maybe Lydia's outsider status taught her something of how powerful it can feel to be welcomed. From there, she became part of the "we" of the gospel.

Friday night I took part in a discussion event where the majority of participants were Korean and Korean American, plus three Boro Council members, talking about how we can work for better inclusion and participation within Leonia-- in the schools, in the Council and affiliated committees, and even in the Fire Department. We grappled with the limits of language, especially for newcomers, and the perception that there is an "Old Leonia" group and a newcomer group, mostly Korean, and the two do not mix well. We explored where the bridges can be for communication and connection. I hope these kinds of conversations continue; I know our church has had a history in conversations like this such as decades ago when the church invited the Leonia Police to have an

open session with our Korean neighbors to answer things like what happens in a traffic stop; how police can intervene and help in a difficult domestic situation, and whatever other questions caused anxiety. Our English Conversation Program remains our biggest time commitment in mission, and as our teachers have just wrapped up their final classes many have hosted their students in their homes to celebrate the semester together. I know when I invited the ESL Family Music class that Michael, Barbara and I lead, some of our students said it was their first time in an American's home.

As I have listened to some old-school Leonians voice their confusion on what to do with the unfamiliar fruits and vegetables at the H-Mart on the corner, and get nostalgic for when another business ran the corner grocery store, I thought, "We have a sparkly new kitchen and some pretty amazing cooks. Why don't we invite the community in for a cooking lesson? We can not only learn and share how to eat those fruits and vegetables, but also create space where we can move away from seeing our community as a mix of "Us" and "Them" where we wonder and make assumptions about each other from afar. Instead, we can find the intersections where together, we can become a "We."

That is what the Holy Spirit led Paul and Lydia and those early Christians to do. When they encountered one another, they valued each person in their diversity and with what they could offer to the growing church-- such as Lydia with her purple cloth and ability to throw a dinner party at the last minute. Each one offered something unique, but essential, to the body of Christ.

Today our body is made stronger by those who will be joining our community today. I am sure our church will be changed by you and the unique gifts you bring to this congregation, and I hope your lives will be changed by being part of us too.

Take this as a sign: the mark of water, which will touch those who are joining today, is a sign that all members of the Church share. As Lydia and her household heard the good news, they all wanted to be baptized. Our Revelation passage speaks of a River of the Water of Life, which flows from the Throne of God and just spills into the streets of the middle of the city. May the sign of our faith spill out these doors, into the streets of the cities and towns where we live, offering blessing to all. Amen.