

“Listen” (Fourth in the Series “Drawn In”

Acts 16:6-15; Hebrews 11:1-13

February 15, 2026 (Annual Congregational and Corporation Meeting)

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Hebrews 11:1-3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

Acts 16:6-15

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.

On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth.

The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

Sermon

Perhaps you've heard the quote: "Not all who wander are lost." Written by J.R.R. Tolkien, this quote is reassuring to those who wander, and it encourages exploration and adventure. But those who study Tolkien and read his literature, remind us that he celebrates wandering with convictions, with purpose, with a direction toward an end . . . assisted by maps and guides, with assistance from and reliance on God and dear friends, and with a desire to seek wisdom." (drinkings.coffee)

Anyone observing the changes in plans for Paul's visits to various places on one of his missionary journeys might assume he is wandering, perhaps even lost. But as we read the scripture in Acts we hear such phrases as "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia" and "when they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them." Then Paul had a dream and he was convinced that God had called them to proclaim the good news to the people of Macedonia."

These frequent itinerary changes would make some of us nuts. We would be anxious, pointing at our itinerary for the day and saying: "Wait a minute, this isn't in the plan. I didn't sign up for this." Some of us are much more change- and risk-averse than Paul. Others see changes in plans as an adventure or at least as a purposeful detour.

The Apostle Paul is receptive and obedient to the Holy Spirit. What looks like wandering is actually God-directed, and it is purposeful. How was Paul so aware of God's guidance and open to change? He listened. He was open. He considered himself to have a singular purpose: to do God's will wherever and for whomever it took him.

Professor Jaclyn Williams says: 'Life in the Spirit is a wild ride. John 3:8 tells us, 'The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Our text for today illuminates this reality. If we surrender to the movement, the Spirit's wind will **pick us up and place us in positions of flourishing beyond our wildest imaginations.** Sometimes the movement comes in like a whisper. Sometimes it rushes in like wildfire. These verses illustrate how the movement of the Spirit delivers the catalyst when motivation is needed and comfort when compassion is needed. **Paul is Spirit-moved to geographic locations. He is also**

moved to spiritual locales of the heart.” (workingpreacher.org, May 25, 2025, Jaclyn P. Williams)

Some years ago, after reading a recommendation to do so, I put in my electronic calendar, which I can access on my phone, a daily reminder. The first thing on my calendar every day at 7 a.m. is **“I surrender my agenda to God today.”** I still make plans and have lots of appointments, meetings, and events scheduled on my calendar. However, that daily reminder **“I surrender my agenda to God today”** helps me remain open to the Spirit **“picking me up and placing me”** somewhere I haven’t planned. It helps me to be open to being **Spirit-moved to geographic locations or other spiritual locales of the heart.”** It involves listening. Sometimes I’m better at that than others.

We don’t hear in our scripture passage for today all that God would accomplish through Paul’s Spirit-led detour to Macedonia, which was the first time the Gospel of Jesus was heard in Europe. But we do read that he met a woman named Lydia. When she heard Paul speak about Jesus, **“the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”** She and her household were baptized. The city where Lydia lived was Philippi, and as the first European convert to Christianity, she was instrumental in Paul’s ongoing ministry in her community and beyond.

This passage encourages us to ask how receptive we are to the movement of God’s Spirit in our lives. It may not be a geographical move that we are being called to make, it may be a move to other **“spiritual locales of the heart.”** Are we open to God changing our minds, our attitudes, our hearts? This is a good question for us individually and as a church.

Part of what our leadership teams in the church have been doing this past year is trying to be open to the Holy Spirit’s direction, even if the direction is a change from what we’ve been doing for a long time. We’ve allowed our minds to **“wander”** with the Spirit’s help to new possibilities for our church. Change is difficult because it often means losing something in order to accept the new thing God is doing. Change is difficult because it involves risk. It involves leaps of faith.

The writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews says: **“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.”** When we are Spirit-led, words like **“assurance”** and **“things hoped for”** take on new meaning. Words

like “conviction” stand beside the words “things not seen.” That is not easy. We think of “assurance” as something that we know for sure rather than “hope for.” We think of “conviction” about something as based on facts that can be verified with our senses, not things “unseen.”

Last week you received a letter from us about The Agape School of the Virginia Peninsula and the Session’s decision to lease portions of our facility to this new school, initially for students in kindergarten through second grade and growing from there. We believe the Holy Spirit has led us, opened doors, and created new possibilities to benefit our church and our community.

All of this means change, loss, and gain. As we shared, we will be closing the Denbigh United Presbyterian Preschool at the end of this academic year after 58 years of service to our community. This is a loss about which we grieve. This is change. We also believe the new school is a gain for our church and community.

Is this wandering? We believe it is Spirit-led wandering with conviction, with purpose, with a direction toward an end . . . assisted by “maps and guides,” with assistance from and reliance on God and dear friends, and with a desire to seek wisdom.” We have listened and we will continue to listen. The outcomes are unseen but assured by faith. We have convictions about this opportunity based on some data we can see and some which we cannot see. This is a step of faith. It will not all be easy. But I believe it will be an adventure worth taking.

Today, as we are in the midst of our Annual Meeting and as you’ve had opportunity to receive and perhaps read some or all of our Annual Report, we encourage all of us to listen for God’s voice as we live our daily lives. May we surrender our agendas to God. May we be open to Spirit-led wandering and taking risks. The Spirit will move us – perhaps geographically in any given day from our original plans or, perhaps the Spirit will change the spiritual locale of our heart to be more aligned with God’s heart and God’s will.

“Not all who wander are lost.” May we wandering with convictions, with purpose, with a direction toward an end . . . assisted by maps and guides, with assistance from and reliance on God and dear friends, and with a desire to seek wisdom.”