

**THE MESSAGE****May 2, 2010****Acts 16:6-15****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller*****Transformation***

I have an agenda. You have an agenda. We may not be aware of it but we all have an agenda when it comes to worship. Every Sunday morning when I stand up to preach I have the same agenda -- to get you to see and share in God's agenda.

Woody Allen once said that if you want to make God laugh, tell him all about your plans – your agenda. How true! I've come to realize that my plans are so pale in comparison to what God has planned for me as a servant leader in his church.

My plans were to finish high school, go to automotive trade school, move back to my hometown, live with my parents, get a job in the automotive industry, buy a house, get married, (notice the order there...) and raise a family way down the road. God had bigger plans. God had a bigger agenda.

After trade school I moved back home to Bedford, PA and lived with my parents, worked a few years at a few different jobs and then sensed God's agenda in my life, calling me. Five years after High School (in my mind 12 years was enough school) I went college to Millersville and received a teaching degree. I was a "C" student in High School. I was lucky if I even got a "C." I went to college and met my wife to be, Amber, there. I went to Gettysburg Seminary and then Harford Seminary. After serving over 10 years in a parish in Massachusetts, God called me back here to Pennsylvania to have you (listen to this) to have you help me grow into the servant leader I am today.

I've learned more about parish ministry here with you – learning about who I am in God's agenda – than I did anywhere else. I am a different person standing here today than I was five years ago. Thank God for that. I've been transformed.

I don't know if you are different but I sure am. When I think about all of the challenges and opportunities we've faced together these past five years, it makes me scratch my head in wonder about God's agenda in my life and in yours. I'm convinced that we are where we are because it's part of God's plans.

Proverbs 16:9 says, "*We make plans, but the Lord directs our steps.*"

This has been so true in my life, and I'm hoping you can say the same. So often things don't turn out the way we plan, but when we look back with eyes of faith, we can see how God has led us and directed our steps in remarkable ways.

That was Paul's experience in our reading from Acts. This is Paul's second missionary journey. He made plans. But God directed his steps in unexpected ways. Listen to our reading from Acts 16:6-15 (Read the text...).

They went to Phrygia, and then through the region of Galatia. Their plan was to go into Asia, but the Holy Spirit blocked that route. So they went to Mysia and tried to go north to Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them go there, either. Continuing through Mysia, they went down to the seaport Troas.

That night Paul had a dream: he saw a man standing on the far shore calling to him from across the sea, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" The dream gave Paul his direction. They headed over to Macedonia. Everything had come together. They knew God had called them to share the good news in Europe.

Side note: when they got to Macedonia (Philippi) there wasn't a Synagogue there but there was a group of Jews there. You needed 10 men to start a synagogue. We are told about a group of women led by Lydia who gathered for a prayer meeting down by the river. Paul goes down and joins them and they, this group of women, (Do you hear what I am saying – a group of women.) become the start of the church in Philippi.

Notice that twice Paul made plans. Twice God closed the door on those plans.

I wonder: how did Paul know that it was God blocking his path and changing his plans? How did he know it wasn't just a coincidence or a difficult circumstance to be endured? I wish I knew! It isn't always that clear for me when I'm in those situations.

I wonder if Paul lived with such openness to God's direction in his life that whatever happened, he just assumed God was up to something. Paul seemed to see everything that happened in his life to benefit God's agenda, which seemed to be Paul's deepest desire anyway. Paul says so in his letter to the Romans:

*"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."* (Romans 8:28)

Imagine what life would be like if we lived by those words. Imagine if we could trust God like that – that no matter what happened, no matter how many doors closed, no matter how often our steps got redirected, it would ultimately be okay, because its part of God's plan?

As I reflect on Paul's missionary journeys, I never get the sense that he was anxious, or upset when his plans went awry. Paul was persecuted, beaten, stoned, imprisoned, and shipwrecked. None of these things were in Paul's plans, but he saw them as working towards God's agenda.

Paul was like a leaf carried by the sometimes-turbulent currents of God's grace and power. Paul's trust in God gave him remarkable peace in remarkably difficult circumstances. WOW!

I don't know about you but I want that kind of peace. I don't know about you but I want that kind of assurance. Some days I have that peace and assurance and other days I don't. What about you?

What if, we could live by God's grace and peace and assurance 24/7 no matter what?

What if, instead of worrying about the future, or getting all fussed up when things don't go as we expect, we truly trusted that God is good, all the time, and all the time God is good.

What if we could see that ultimately all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose?

What if, like Paul, we made our plans but allowed God's agenda to carry us – to allow the Holy Spirit to direct our steps, to see our lives like floating leaves carried by the sometimes-turbulent currents of God's grace and power?

Sounds good to me. What about you? To live this way requires at least two things from us.

*First, it requires a growing trust in God's goodness at work in our lives.*

Have you noticed how easy it is to be faithful when life is going our way, but our faithfulness fades when life's highway turns in unexpected ways, especially down roads that are difficult or painful for us.

This growing trust in God's goodness is developed and maintained as we get and stay connected to God in worship, prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and reaching out to others.

*(Holding up the bulletin insert)* I am so amazed when people share with me that the weekly Bible readings we have listed in the bulletin have been so helpful in their spiritual lives as we continue our study of the book of Acts. They share with me how they have felt God at work in their lives.

*Second, we need to let go of our agenda and embrace God's agenda for our lives.*

Truth is, my agenda is always self-serving. So too is yours. Truth is, my agenda focuses on my gain or my comfort. So too does yours. But God's agenda focuses on healthy, life-giving relationships through repentance and forgiveness. God's agenda is about making the world a better place through mercy, justice, peace, and reconciliation.

As long as I hold on to my agenda, I will not be able to find peace or joy when the road of life takes me in an unexpected direction. I will not have peace or joy when the plans I made go unfulfilled. But trusting in God's goodness, and seeking out God's

agenda daily, we can live with our eyes open for the unexpected ways in which the detours of life will take us to God's greater destinations.

The Bible is filled with the stories of people who made plans -- who had personal agendas -- but for whom God had even greater plans, a bigger agenda.

Moses planned to be a shepherd, but God made him a prophet.  
David planned to be a shepherd, but God made him a king.  
Peter, James, and John planned to be fishermen, but Jesus made them disciples.  
Paul planned to be a Pharisee, but Jesus made him the greatest missionary of all times.

We all make plans but peace and joy comes when we trust that God directs our steps in ways that ultimately serve God's greater plan -- God's greater agenda. God can do anything with anyone, so the Bible tells us. God created us for God's purpose.

My agenda here this morning is that you leave here trusting that wherever God directs your steps, you will discover what Paul discovered: that God's ways, while not always our ways, brings blessings that we could never have imagined no matter how difficult the journey.

Now if you've been sitting there thinking about what your going to have for lunch or what you are going to do this afternoon. Here is the sermon in a nutshell -- *Wherever God guides, God provides...*

By God's grace, I hope and pray that you will be open to God's agenda in your life -- shaping your heart, your mind, and your will for God's greater purpose granting you real peace and real joy. So be it in Jesus' name! Amen.