Acts: “God’s Loving Roadblocks”
Acts 16:6-10

As we return to Acts 16 this morning, our text is Acts 16:6-10. Please stand and let’s read God’s Word together. Now remember that Paul and Silas, along with young Timothy, are on a missionary journey. When they originally set out, Paul’s plan was to visit all the churches he and Barnabas planted on their first missionary journey, and then continue to preach the gospel to new cities and villages throughout Asia Minor. As we just read, their trip basically goes according to plan for the first several weeks, but listen to what happens next in Acts 16, beginning with vs. 6:

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to 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.

Now, I’m sure all of us are very well versed in ancient Middle Eastern geography, but in case you are a bit rusty, please join in me in looking at the map here, and let’s see if we can get a better picture of what Luke is writing about here. (show map)


First of all, Luke mentions that the mission team travels through Phrygia and Galatia. Remember that the churches Paul had planted in Lystra, Derbe, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch were in the regions of Galatia and Phrygia respectfully, so we can assume that this part of the journey was part of Paul’s itinerary from the beginning. However, we learn that Paul was already eager to head southwest, into the region of Asia. Now…I know when you think of Asia you are thinking about a continent, but that’s not what Luke is referring to here at all. Luke is referring to the ancient region of Asia which is essentially the west/southwest corner of modern day Turkey, as you can see here on the map. Paul was likely desiring to go to Ephesus which was a strategic city in the region of Asia. But surprisingly, God says, “No.”

Luke goes on to write that the team also looked to visit some of the famous, wealthy cities along the Black Sea, such as modern day Istanbul in the region of Bithynia; but again, the Spirit of Jesus would not let them go there either. So look at what is happening here. Paul wants to go south, but he is blocked by the Holy Spirit. Paul wants to go north, but he is blocked by the Spirit of Christ. So Paul continues along the main trade route to the city of Troas…which apparently is not at all where Paul WANTED to go.

Can you see what is happening here? Can you see how God is working in Paul’s life? This is so important…
Paul…like so many of us…sets out on his journey with a plan. He’s got a great team that’s going to do great things for God. He is smart, he is responsible, he is competent, and he is committed. Even more importantly, Paul is experienced. He has traveled these roads before; he has been to many of the cities along the way; and he’s pretty confident that he knows how this trip is going to work out.

Does that sound familiar? Sure it does. Paul is just like the rest of us. He wants to accomplish something noble with his life, and he is setting out with a plan, and he’s going to work the plan.

Paul’s team is also like a local church, if you think about it. They know what their mission is: to preach the gospel and make disciples. That’s the mission of all Jesus followers. But even more specifically, Paul’s mission is to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles…the non-Jews, so he is focusing his efforts in cities that are primarily occupied by Gentiles.

So Paul sets out on a journey with a mission that includes a plan on how they are going to accomplish their mission.

But then something happens to Paul and his team that often happens to the rest of us—including local churches—which is simply this: things do not go according to plan, and no doubt Paul and his team are frustrated and confused.

You see, Paul wants to head to Ephesus in the region of Asia because Ephesus was second only to Athens as the epicenter of the Greek-speaking world. If you’re going to influence a lot of people for the Kingdom of God, of course you are going to invest your time in Ephesus. But for now, the Holy Spirit says, “NO.”

So Paul assumes he understands what that closed door means…it means go north, to the large, wealthy cities on the Black Sea; but again, Paul gets a huge, honkin’ “NO” from God. Thus Paul and his team have no other choice: they either turn around and go home because their plan fell apart, or they keep walking down a road that leads to an unknown, un-sought-after destination.

How many of you can relate with this story so far? Man, I know I can. This is the story of my life! This is the story of my last 12 months as your pastor and my last 30 years in ministry! No matter how good our intentions, no matter how well thought out our plan, things almost never turn out the way we think they are going to. No matter what journey we are on, we cannot help but observe that God seems to have His own agenda for our lives, His own agenda for our church, and He is quite capable of getting us where He wants to go and keeping us from going where we think we should be going. Can I hear an amen?
One of the ways that God gets us to where He wants us to go is by throwing up “loving roadblocks.” Think back over your life…what are some of the loving roadblocks God has used in your life? What are some of the ways that God has said “no” to your plans? We didn’t get the job we were applying for; we didn’t get into the school we wanted to attend; we didn’t get to marry our high school sweetheart; we didn’t get the promotion; we were struck down with sickness or had a career-ending injury; a key person left the team right when we were ready to launch a new product; or some other unexpected interruption, right?

It takes faith to see these “roadblocks” as God’s loving way of directing our steps, but that is how it works, and we see that right here in Acts 16.

Now it seems as though it would have been much easier if God had come to Paul and his team in a vision and said, “Don’t go into Asia, don’t go into Bithynia…my long range plan for your team is to go into Macedonia, so just go straight there and avoid taking any other turns to the left or to the right.”

But that’s not how God operates…and we all know this. We rarely have a “vision” from God telling us “no”…we usually have to run up against something that hurts, we have to trip over something that humiliates…we have to run out of gas or out of time or out of resources before we’ll finally admit: that’s simply not God’s will for my life.

And let’s be honest: We don’t like those times in our lives when God says “no”…we don’t like them at all. And here’s why: because all of us feel a bit entitled to “unimpeded forward progress.” This is particularly true in our current Western culture. In other words, we feel as though we should be able to see clearly where we are to go, set a plan and execute the plan, and we should be able to go directly to that destination in a straight line as fast possible. To illustrate my point, just take a drive out here on 435 during rush hour traffic with a heart monitor attached to your wrist and you’ll see what I’m talking about. As soon as someone cuts us off, or we are forced to a crawl or even a dead stop in the middle of the interstate, our pulse begins to sky-rocket…at least mine does. At the moment that our forward progress is impeded, we begin to calculate the cost that this delay will inflict upon our plans. The result is resentment, anxiety, impatience, and even anger. And who are we angry with?

We get angry with the person that caused our delay, and if we can’t find a person to blame, we blame God. Now think about your life…think of how many times your forward progress has been frustrated…how many times things did not go according to plan at all. The result is this: many, many of us are walking around every day with unresolved anger at God because our lives did not turn out the way that we planned. Our marriage didn’t turn out the way that we planned; our kids didn’t turn out the way that we planned; our career didn’t turn out the way that we
planned; our health didn’t turn out the way that we planned; our retirement didn’t turn out the way that we planned…our hair didn’t turn out the way that we planned (ouch).

I get that…and again, I’m right there in the boat with you. I love forward progress, and I love to see a plan come together more than most people. But here’s something I can tell you with all certainty as we consider the truth of scripture: God is not all that interested in your plans or my plans, and that is a good thing. Why? Because God loves you more than you will ever know, and His plans are perfect and perfectly loving…not only for you, but for the good of the world. His vision is more important than our vision, and His plans are better than our plans. In Jeremiah 29:11-13 God says, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare[a] and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.”

Listen to the hope we find in Proverbs 16:9 A man's mind plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.

I love that verse, and every year that I live I find more reason to believe it is absolutely true. When you are frustrated that your plans aren’t coming together…when someone or something has impeded your forward progress, remember this verse: Proverbs 16:9 “A man’s mind plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.”

God is sovereign. He directs our steps, even when it feels like we are bumping into road blocks over and over again. To illustrate this point, look at what comes next in the story beginning with vs8, “So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”

Now…there’s so much here…let me show you.

First, note that Paul ends up in Troas even though he wanted to be in Ephesus or in Bithynia. He doesn’t know why he is in Troas, but he’s trusting God. For you leader types, here is how I want you to think about Paul’s arrival in Troas. Paul is pursuing his mission; but he’s having to adjust the plan—why? Because he’s not clear on the vision.

We talk a lot about vision and mission and plans, and even recently I shared with you that we are seeking God’s vision for our church. Here in Acts 16 we see a perfect way of understanding where we are as we relate with Paul and his team. Paul is clear about their mission, they have been tasked to make disciples and proclaim the Gospel, but due to the roadblocks he is encountering, he is gradually becoming aware that God has a particular vision for where he
should go and who he should reach—he knows that because God keeps saying “no” to his plans. Through the roadblocks God is saying, “No…not there, not now, keep walking”. You see that, right? We know God has a specific plan for us when we encounter His roadblocks that frustrate our predetermined plans. When Paul encounters the roadblocks to the south and to the north, he doesn’t sulk or despair…Paul keeps walking down the road God called him to walk…he keeps ministering…and his journey of faith leads him to Troas…a place he did not expect to be, nor was it part of his plan, and yet this journey to Troas has prepared Paul and his team to receive the vision that God has in store for them.

Colonial…that’s where we are as a church right now. Can you see that? We know what our mission is…to help people become passionate, selfless followers of Christ. We know what our strategy is to accomplish that mission…we lead people to encounter God, grow with others, and impact people. But like Paul and his team, we are walking down a road without a clear vision of where God is calling us to specifically go right now. In fact, I think it’s fair to say that over the past few years, we’ve bumped into some roadblocks to the right and to the left, so we have kept on walking this road of faith, and right now, as a church, we are praying for a clear vision as to where and to who God is calling us go in the next chapter of our life together.

So Colonial…dare I say, welcome to Troas! Like Paul and his team, we have come to a place that God has apparently called us to be at this moment in our history, though it is not the place of our choosing. If I had my way as the team leader, we would be in the place of astronomical growth…but we’re not in that place. We would be in the place of hundreds of new believers…but we’re not in that place. We would be in the place of more sites and church plants…but we’re not in that place either. You know where we are? We are in Troas…we are in that place that we did not choose, but to which God has directed our steps.

So what happens in Troas? Two things happen in Troas for Paul and his team: 1) Paul has a vision; and 2) Paul makes a new friend! Both outcomes are incredibly important. First, let us acknowledge that The Vision comes at just the right moment, in just the right place. When Paul sees the man from Macedonia and understands God’s vision for their ministry team, they are in exactly the right town to jump on a ship and head directly to Macedonia. They are not hundreds of miles away in Ephesus, or hundreds of miles away in Bithynia…they are sitting in a port town with direct access to the place God is calling them to go. Huh…turns out God knew what He was doing after all…go figure.

And who is the friend that Paul meets in Troas? Let me show you.

Look at this passage again…but look at it slowly and carefully. Do you see anything weird or unusual about it? It’s weird…let me show you why. In vs. 8 Luke refers to the missionary team as he has throughout the book of Acts thus far: in the third person plural, using the word...
“THEY.” But look what happens in vs. 10. After Paul receives a vision from the Lord in Troas, Luke refers to the missionary team in the first person plural…and he uses the word, “WE.” Did you catch that? Can you put the clues together for why Luke suddenly transitions from the third person to the second person?

Think about it: Paul can’t go to Ephesus, and he can’t go to Bithynia—why? Why does he ends up in Troas—do think it might because he is sick? We know Paul had a “thorn in the flesh” condition that we read about in 2 Cor. 12, so it’s quite possible Paul was inclined to fall ill which wreaked havoc with his plans. Whatever the case, it would appear that when Paul arrives in Troas, he enlists the services of a local doctor who Paul then leads to Christ, and that doctor becomes a dear friend, and that doctor becomes a fellow traveler and a member of the missionary team. And who was that doctor-friend? His name was Luke, Dr. Luke, the writer of the third gospel and the book of Acts! Do you think it was important for God to get Paul and his team to make a stop in Troas? You bet! If Paul doesn’t meet Luke…we have no book of Acts and no Gospel of Luke…and that would leave me nothing to preach on!

Now…can you see why God said “no”…can you see that God lovingly threw up roadblocks that kept this team from going to Ephesus and Bithynia, and God lovingly allowed Paul to fall sick and to need a doctor; exactly so that Paul would meet Dr. Luke, lead him to Christ, and then take him along on the missionary journey to specifically engage the people of Macedonia? Do you see how God works? Do you see how God had a perfect plan, even though all Paul knew was that he was on a journey, he was sick, and things had not gone at all according to his plans?

Our text concludes with these words in vs. 10: And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

I love this story, and particularly this concept of vision. Paul had been on a journey of discernment…eager to accomplish God’s will, but clearly he must have been confused and frustrated as to where his team was supposed to be going. But then, at just the right moment, in just the right city, God makes the vision clear—God allows Paul to hear the cries of a group of people who needed Paul and his team to bring them the gospel. Once the vision was clear, Paul, along with his team, act immediately to help the Macedonians by bringing them the good news of the Gospel.

Let me ask you a question: What if this story here in Acts 16 is actually a story about our lives as individuals and as a church? Think about it. How often will God have to tell us “no”…how many times will we have to bump up against His roadblocks before we come to the place where we can see the vision and hear the hurting voice of those who are asking us to come and help? What
friends are waiting for us to show up and lead them to meet Jesus so that they might join our team to reach the world for Christ?

I would submit to you that this story reflects the journey of every individual Christian and every local church, whether we realize it or not.

So…if you are feeling frustrated, confused, and uncertain on your journey today; take heart, I’ve spent a great deal of my life feeling that way! WE all have. So let me remind you of a few things we can gather from this story in Acts 16 that should give us some hope and direction.

1) Hold your plans loosely, be faithful to the mission God has given us, and seek God’s vision for your life. His vision will always lead you to places you haven’t been to help people He has arranged for you to help.
2) Wherever you are today, trust that God is directing your steps. You may feel like you backed into where you are now…but God has always been at work to bring you to this place.
3) When God says “no” to your desired destination, it’s not time to quit or get angry; keep walking in faith. God can be trusted, and His plans are perfect.
4) Look for the Divine appointments wherever God leads you…He is never arbitrary…there is always a plan for wherever we are.
5) We often have to trust God in the “not knowing” before we receive the clear vision of where we are going.
6) When the vision is clear, pursue it immediately.

I hope you will be encouraged today…God Loves you. Jesus died to save us and to set us on a path that leads to the fulfillment of God’s purpose for our short lives. Once we are believers, we can trust God that all things work together for our good and for the purpose He has planned for us. So keep walking friends…keep walking. Let’s pray.