

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.

In the residence halls of St. Placid Priory, there is a needlework hanging that reads: "Life is discernment." In a Benedictine monastery, discernment can refer to prayerful guided reflection on the possibility that God is calling a person to holy orders. And yet, that needlework also reminds the sisters and all of us that life presents endless opportunities to explore what St. Ignatius of Loyola called the "motions of the soul."

Discernment is not the same as decision-making. Choosing between oatmeal or eggs for breakfast is a decision. Discernment is not "one-and-done." Discernment is the persistent daily turning to God with the prayerful question: "What, God, what would you have me do now?" Discernment is listening for the prophetic voice, allowing it to influence your life – and then asking and listening again.

Discernment is what the woman in our reading from Luke's Acts is doing. Let me tell you a little about her.

Lydia was probably born into Greek Macedonian nobility. She was raised in Thyatira, a trading hub in what is now Turkey that was famous all over the ancient world for its textiles and dyes. There were more artisans and guilds in Thyatira than in any other city of its day.

Even so, in the ancient Mediterranean, people didn't have an unlimited range of options for their lives. Most women expected to get married and raise children, while others anticipated being sold to a Roman house as a bonded servant. This was *not* the same kind of slavery as the transatlantic trade that

involved the kidnapping and transportation of Africans in the 16th through the 19th century. In collectivistic societies like those of the first century Holy Land, the clarity and order of roles based on the social standing you were born with are valued more than individuality and independence.

In Luke's writings, God is making all creation new through the Risen Christ. And in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke is particularly interested in the stories of people who embody a new kind of clarity, a new form of order, based on liberty with a more inclusive social status for all people.

And so, like Tabitha, the woman apostle, and Cornelius, the Roman centurion, Luke tells the story of Lydia – another person who didn't quite fit social expectations.

Lydia was a wealthy single woman. Now, when I say wealthy, I mean "one-percenter" wealthy. All Luke tells us is that she was "a dealer in purples from the city of Thyatira." Anyone hearing that reference in Luke's day, and for several centuries after, would recognize the reference to Tyrian purples – cloth that was richly colored with a dye made almost exclusively in Thyatira.

Throughout the Mediterranean, purple was the color of royalty. And cloth dyed with Tyrian purple was most highly prized because the difficulty in extracting it made it the most expensive. To make Tyrian purple, Phoenicians harvested sea snails called Murex. These they boiled for days in giant lead vats, producing a horrid odor and extracting the mucous that produced the dye.

It took about 8,000 snails to extract a gram of pure dye. One gram of dye was worth more than ten grams of gold and a pound of wool dyed with Tyrian purple sold for up to 1,000 denarii, an amount that would take a laborer three years to earn. A whole cloak might cost three times that and only the emperor wore a toga made entirely of purple cloth.

So, yes, Lydia was in a lucrative business. And she was good at it. She owned her business and her house, and that gave her an independence that only a small minority of people had. Lydia had options.

She probably thought that she had fulfilled her destiny as a successful merchant and skilled businesswoman. Her wealth and influence drew people hoping for her patronage. And her ability to protect and sponsor those who gained her favor would have been significant.

Lydia likely had an impressive constellation of connections with other tradespeople and businesses. Her stock and trade meant that she would also have an enviable list of wealthy private clients from noble and powerful families. Her network would have asked her advice about legal, business and civic matters and in return would freely offer their services to her.

Her independence and social status probably gave her the confidence to practice a spiritual life outside the established pagan religion of the empire. Luke describes her as a “worshiper of God,” a “God-fearer,” like Cornelius the Roman soldier. Both were Gentiles who prayed to the God of Israel, though they may not have observed the entire Torah.

Now, we don’t know why this complex and intriguing woman was in Philippi. She may have been traveling for business or possibly retiring to enjoy the fruits of her labors. What we do know is that there was a sizeable population of Jews in Thyatira and very few in Philippi.

Finding no synagogue in Philippi, Lydia knew that all she needed were ten Jewish men to form a synagogue. Apparently, there weren’t enough Jewish men in Philippi to meet even this minimal threshold, and yet she did somehow gather a group of Jewish women to form a prayer group by the river.

Luke tells us that on the Sabbath day, Paul and his companions spoke “to the women who had assembled” alongside the river. And it was here at a consecrated “place of prayer” that Paul met Lydia, the audacious woman who had taken the initiative to do the unusual by gathering together for worship, with no men at all.

God had something more for Lydia to do. And so, here in this place of prayer, God opened Lydia’s heart to hear the prophetic voice and allow it to influence her life.

Once her entire household is baptized, Lydia recognizes that God is asking something else of her. She sees what Paul and his companions need and is moved to share with them what God has given her. She challenges Paul to have faith in her: “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay there.”

Paul did, of course, trust Lydia and her house provided a place where the Philippian church could meet. For the next three years, her patronage

secured a base for Paul's teaching and mission. She will welcome Paul and Silas back into her home after they are released from prison, and Lydia's home will eventually become the center of the church in Philippi.

I suppose that's what she gets for trying to retire.

And yet, that seems to be how God works in our lives: Moment by moment, day by day and life-stage by life-stage. God never insisted that she give away all her earthly riches. She listened to the motions of her soul and found new joy, new life, in serving the followers of Christ as one of them.

Following Christ in the energy of the Holy Spirit means bringing our own gospel shape into the world where we live. We do that by offering and seeking forgiveness with those who yearn for it, and by repairing the damages we do when we dehumanize ourselves and others through self-centeredness, cruelty or greed.

Shaping the world around us, bringing resurrection life into the network of people whose lives touch ours, requires prayerful discernment. We have to practice watching and listening for what God is working into our character. We have to practice prayerfully to acquire the wisdom to know when to speak and when to remain silent.

Practicing with perseverance, we gradually become more capable of discerning new ways that things can be done; more generous in hearing the commitments held by people we've stopped listening to or never truly heard before; and we begin to encounter gifts that we have for others that they may not even realize they need.

Never spurn the small but significant symbolic act. God probably doesn't want you and me to reorganize the entire world this morning.

Life is discernment. Discernment is new life – larger life. Live into the questions. Listen and let God's response influence your life. Act and then ask again: "What is it, God, that you are asking of me now?"

Works cited or consulted:

Allen, Ronald J., Dale P. Andrews, and Dawn Ottoni. Wilhelm. *Preaching Gods Transforming Justice*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

Hart, David Bentley. *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

Kraemer, Ross Shepard, and Mary Rose. D'Angelo. *Women & Christian Origins*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Robertson, C. K. *Conversations with Scripture: The Acts of the Apostles*. New York: Morehouse Pub., 2010.

Wright, N. T., and N. T. Wright. *The Challenge of Easter*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009.