

Waiting on God in ... our life's direction: Acts 16.1-10

I have been asked to speak in a series you are doing here on waiting on God in and my topic is our life's direction. I usually stick pretty close to the biblical text in preaching but I am going to depart a bit from that this morning and begin by telling you a bit about my own journey and experience and how that had happened and then reflect on my story by connecting it with a story from the bible. I've just turned 70 so am not going to go through it in detail as that would take the rest of the day, but is very real for me as with finishing my current role at the end of this year the last 18 months a major question has been so what is my life's direction for the next part of my life – you see its not a once and for all settled answer we get – we have to be open to ask the question all the time, although hopefully the major questions of where we are going in life do get settled for us – toward God and growing more and more into the kind of life that Jesus came to show God has for us – as one of the early church leaders said “The glory of God is a human being fully alive” – and that can only happen when we are in a right relationship with God, as well as other people, and so we naturally want to help other people find that. So that needs to be our base on which to get settled – our *turangawaewae*, our place to stand - which I finally found when I was 20.

I grew up on the wrong side of North Street in Timaru, which meant that most of the families I went to school with working class people – fisherman, wharfies, freezing workers, wool store workers, mechanics, builders like my dad – he with a friend had actually formed their own firm after they came back from WWII alive. I was a bit of a ratbag at school, more interested in sport than learning and had brothers either side of me who were both brainy earnest students and dux of the school. Timaru divided into those who went to the Tech (most of my friends) and those who went to the High School – and that significantly determined your future life. My dad decided that unlike my brainy brothers I would go to tech and be a builder and so be able to carry on the business. Fortunately for my future I had a teacher who was a family friend and also involved in the church and told dad I had more to offer than that. And the way my life has tracked out I am so very grateful for that teacher and have often wondered if God had not been able to use him how different my life might have been. Because as a result dad decided I could go to the High School and become an architect – shows the kind of world I grew up in. I made the top class but again studies were not my focus, sport, the Beatles and girls much more so. So, I failed a fair bit especially maths which cut out the architecture side. Then, once I got to the senior classes and could focus on history, geography, classics, english – subjects I enjoyed I became a student and ended up getting the arts cup in my final year.

So, I decided I would become a high school teacher and off to Canterbury University I went. By that stage I had dropped out of church and enjoyed all the freedoms and temptations of university. But then my life's direction changed completely. God caught up with me in a most unexpected way – through a girl who had been my girlfriend my last two years of High School – and who I had hooked up with again during my second year at uni. And God coming in an overwhelming kind of way into my life for the first time was not the outcome I was looking for from that. And by the end of the year I found myself going forward at a service in the summer holidays in my home church in Timaru when a call for people to commit themselves to full time Christian service was made, as much to the surprise of myself as everyone else in the church.

That was 50 years ago this month, and there were a couple blips in the journey that pulled me off course for a brief period, partly because I loved teaching (esp. coaching the 1st XV), but both times God cut in and called me back on course again, allowing me to wander just long enough to learn some important things in the diversion.

One of these was after I had done 8 years of parish ministry and had moved from Wellington to a new church in Auckland. I was a bit burned out having seen 6 years of very rapid growth in the church from about 80 to well over 300 and doing 3 services a Sunday, and had also let some of the foundations of my spiritual life decay and was relying too much on my own abilities and too little on God. So, when some difficult challenges came up in the church I went back teaching – thinking that was it for my life in ministry. When I was doing theological study I was offered a scholarship to do doctoral study in Switzerland, many saying I would end up in theological teaching. A number in my first church said that also. But I was a full blown charismatic Christian, significantly involved in leadership in the exciting charismatic movement of the 70s and 80s, and completely resisted that. Parish ministry was what mattered and too much academia got in the road of what God could do. I already had spent many years getting 5 degrees or post graduate diplomas, and was glad to get away from it.

But then of course you are guessing what happened. God came busting in again after a couple of years, calling me again out of school teaching and I found myself at Bible College of New Zealand in Christchurch, the beginning of 30 years of teaching theology and training church ministers and Christian leaders.

But there was another surprise in all of this yet to come. You know the one place I knew I would never end up was in that terrible liberal Knox College, involved with that declining liberal Presbyterian Church, and the last place I wanted to live was in cold wet archaic Dunedin!!!!!!!!!!!!!! How on earth did I end up here for the last 17 years and pretty sure I will be here for the rest of my life. Some kind of divine joke???

After 13 years of teaching and being in my early 50s I knew I needed a change – I have never been someone who could sit down and do the same job for 50 years – I am energized by new challenges and change. After exploring a couple of options within Bible College which hit dead ends, I knew I had to get out or become the grumpy frustrated old man. And I guess that is an important thing about finding your life direction – you need to discover who you are and become comfortable with that and not try and be someone else or who someone else thinks you should be. At just this time something opened up – Principal of Baptist College in Perth. Not long before I was due to fly over to be interviewed I travelled south to take up an invitation to be the speaker at the Dunedin Anglican Diocesan Clergy School in Manapouri. They also arranged for me to run a seminar in Dunedin. The Principal of the SOM as it used to be called was at that, and afterward he took me out for a drink and said I've just had a resignation today, would you be interested in applying???????? Mmmmmm – where was God in this? Then just after that I was invited to be the speaker for a retreat for Presbyterian Ministers in Rotorua. Interesting places indeed to be invited into as a Baptist minister, lecturing at Bible College, pondering what God had next for him, to be in.

In one of the classes I was teaching I had this bit of an odd ball Pentecostal minister. He could hardly write coherent sentences. One day as I was pondering moving to something else he came up to me after class and said I had a picture of you while you were teaching, and it was like you are just fishing in the shallow waters and its time you let go of the shore and launched out into the deep. Mmmm... what might that mean? Also, just after that I was preaching in a Presbyterian church in Christchurch, and as I was greeting people on the way out, this older man said to me "I see you having a significant role in the national church." Nothing else, just that. I had no idea till I moved into my role at Knox what "national church" meant in a Presbyterian church. I asked the minister who he was and he said Gilbert Reid, he has quite a prophetic ministry.

Anyway, I flew over to Perth spent three days there and was virtually offered the job on the spot but had to go through due process. It had a lot of attraction, I mean being Principal which I had set my goal on, but as I flew the 8 hours back I had an uneasy feeling about it – it didn't quite sit right. I arrived in Christchurch at 6am and had 3 hours teaching in the morning and then another 3 hours in the afternoon. Having my lunch break and my phone rings. My penite friend. Are you ok. Yes, why? I was praying this morning about 5.30 and felt I needed to pray for you. So explained what going on without giving the details. I had a decision I needed to make about my future.... two places – even though the 2nd didn't even have an interview date for – or even if I would get one. So keep praying for me.

Two nights later the phone rings – “go to the place with the flag flying”. What does that mean? Next morning I head out on my daily run and start laughing. The house across the road is a uni flat and flying on the chimney is a Dunedin City flag which I had never noticed before. And when I am picked up from the airport and driven up into Knox College for the interview I was eventually given guess what was flying on the tower – a St Andrews flag. One of my fellow lecturers was a Pentecostal, and he said tell that to the Presbyterians interviewing you, that is why this is the job for you – it will really guarantee it for you.

So if I was to say one thing about my journey with God it is remain open to God, don't count out anything, be expecting surprising turns – and don't rush into the first option which comes up – which I had done in moving to Auckland, partly seduced by the desire to move to the big smoke where I could really do something big.

But what else is important. In the passage from Acts I think there are a couple of sets of important principles in finding God's guidance in making decisions that will impact on your life's direction.

The first section of the reading describes Paul with his companion Silas and Timothy, travelling around various churches in what is called his second missionary journey. But why did they decide to go? His first journey was initiated by some special guidance from God – the Holy Spirit through some prophets in the church in Antioch had directed them to do this. But here it is much more ordinary. Towards the end of ch. 15 we are told Paul said **Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they were doing.** No voice from heaven. No prophetic word. No vision or dream. They just decided to do what was the normal natural thing for someone called to Christian ministry and mission – to check up on how those under their care were doing. And so they travelled to Derbe, Lystra and Iconium and then on to other towns and as they did the faith of the churches was strengthened and they grew in numbers as others came to faith. They were following what God had called them to do and simply got on doing it using their common sense, moral and spiritual judgements to make the detailed decision about where to go next, how long to stay, what exactly to do. They didn't hang around waiting for some special sign from God before doing anything – like waiting for God to tell you what kind of cereal to have before you start eating breakfast. And that is what much of being a Christian and heading where God wants us to go is. Get on with what we are doing instead of sitting there waiting for something spectacular to crash in.

But notice as they are doing this something happens. They end up travelling through **the regions of Phrygia and Galatia** not because that was where intended to go but because they were kept by **the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.** Then when they tried to enter Bithynia **the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them.** Repeatedly God's Spirit kept redirecting their journeys, blocking

their path. Had that when you are following GPS in your car? It is as if the divine GPS was neglecting to tell them where to go but only hooked in when it produced roadblocks. How did it do that. Was it a clear divine message. That annoying voice – change direction, turn around, searching for new route. A prophetic word, A vision. Maybe it was like me, that inner feeling – that just doesn't sit right. I don't feel peaceful about this. Or maybe it was physical roadblock. Or maybe your passport wasn't quite right for that area. Maybe a verse that jumped out at them from scripture. Or maybe it was just some advice from a friend – or even a stranger. Notice in my story all kinds of people. The minister who was my mentor when I began my Christian journey at 20, and has remained a voice of wisdom for me for the 50 years since (and it was wonderful having him speak at an event in Christchurch a month ago celebrating my 70th birthday and one or two other milestones) often said God can speak to us through Balaam's ass. Sometimes God's spirit uses physical circumstances to fortunately block us. Sometimes it is that intuition that we feel. Occasionally it might be some special kind of revelation. We have to be open to all – God guides in all kinds of diverse ways.

So often our guidance comes from our own common sense and accumulated wisdom or the wise advice of friends and companions, and that was much of my life's journey. But there are times, as I have indicated in my own life that God's Spirit guides us in quite clear and unusual ways. And of course that is what happens when Paul ends up in Troas as a result of his being prevented from going elsewhere. And here he is in Troas, a seaport facing Macedonia the nearest part of Europe and he has a vision of a **man from Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."** And we read **After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.** What has become known as the Macedonian call, which many earnest Christians spend a lot of time waiting to receive, which some do and some never do.

One thing it is important to see in this narrative about God intervening through the Spirit to give us guidance in our life's direction. Twice the guidance is negative and once it is positive. What one commentator on Acts from the 19th c. century, who incidentally called it *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*, rather than the Acts of the Apostles, labelled it the "double of guidance" of God; "on the one hand prohibition and restraint, on the other permission and constraint." And you will notice in my story about God's guidance about my future 17 years ago I got both God's restraint and constraint, God's no to Perth and God's yes to Dunedin. And we need to be open to both – because sometimes we can be fixated about some option that we miss the signs of God's no – and if I am really honest I think I missed those in my move to Auckland.

And on that if I can say one other thing about finding God's guidance – if you mess up and end up in the wrong place or work as I did, and end up giving up on what God has called you into – ministry in my case – it doesn't mean its all over - as I've had some people tell me. God is for us, on our side, and God is able to use our detours off track for God's greater purposes. And for those 3 years I spent back teaching God used to do some things in my personal life and faith that needed to happen, but also to learn some skills and experiences and knowledge, that laid so much of the foundation on which my ministry for the next 30 years was built. It certainly was not all over, and in addition in later life I have met people in whose lives God had used me while I was teaching in ways I was completely unaware of.

And there is one final and important point I want to make out of this story. When a door got closed and they were not able to go where they felt they were being led to, they didn't become fixated about that and spend all their time mopping over the fact that it hadn't worked out – sitting waiting hoping that the door would miraculously open. They simply moved on to the next place, then the next place until they ended

up in Troas – and there the door opened to something much greater and one of the most significant moves in the mission of the church. The gospel moved from Asia where they hoped to go to Europe. This was a significant geographical and ethnic crossing in the mission of the church and the spreading of the gospel. It was from Europe that in due course the gospel fanned out to Africa, what we now call Asia, S & N America's, and the Pacific and so reached the ends of the earth – which is NZ.

One of the risks is we can become so fixated and preoccupied with the opportunity that has been lost that we miss seeing the opportunity that has opened up elsewhere, and that happens when we carry on doing what God has currently led us to be doing. As is often said it is much easier to turn a ship that is already moving than one which has stopped still. That author from the 19th c. used some examples of missionaries in what is known as the great century of mission. William Carey, the founder of that movement planned to go to the Pacific but God guided him to India instead. David Livingstone had his heart set on China but God sent him to Africa. Adoniram Judson went to India but God led him on to Burma. That commentator concludes “we need to trust God for guidance and rejoice equally on God's restraints and constraints.”

I want to finish finally with a story from the 21st c. a couple who are among my closest friends. They were pretty high up in education circles but decided to take early retirement and do some self funded mission work. A young couple in the church, who I had some input in teaching and mentoring, were going to Tibet so Charles and Rosalie decided to go their and support them. Not long after they arrived the Chinese army invaded Tibet and that was the end of missionaries there. The young couple decided to return to NZ, what they felt God was leading them to had been shut off. They were pretty disappointed. Returned to building and family life, disappointed and still pretty negative about China and its government.

Charles and Rosalie felt they were called to mission among Tibetans. So they moved to Chengdhu where there were significant number of Tibetans. They got a shared position teaching in a government university for minority peoples. When I visited them they were in an apartment on the campus and put me up in a second apartment they were renting (\$100 NZ a month) they used for their house church and where they could put up guests. By that stage they had developed several house churches and had a Korean missionary as pastor. They had begun an English language school. When the big earthquake hit they went providing counselling for people impacted by it as well as helping them set up small businesses to provide economically for themselves. A major client for the counselling became the Chinese Army – this in a communist country you realise. They also developed another school for training counsellors based on biblical/Christian principles. A major client again was the Chinese army. They left a few years ago and all those things are still running led by local Christians. Now further on in their 70s than me they are voluntarily offering their time as NZ Directors of Pioneers Mission (who they went out under) but also travel to Chengdhu once each year for 3 weeks as guest Professors at the University.

So a story which tells us to be open to be guided by both God's no and God's yes, God's restraint and God's constraint. And also be aware that waiting on God in our life's direction, is as important for those of us over 65 or 70 as I am finding, as it for you who are 20 as I was 50 years ago when God stepped in a most unexpected way. And whatever you are waiting on God for that doesn't mean sitting here twiddling your thumbs and doing nothing waiting for a letter to drop down from the sky or appear on your phone from the God account. It means being involved where you are now, being faithful where God has placed you currently and it is in doing that you are most likely to find where to next in the exciting journey life with Jesus is.