

Message

We're observing the Easter season this year with a series called Church in the Wild. Hip hop fans will recognize that as a play on the song by Kanye West and Jay-Z, from their album Watch the Throne. On that song, they meditate

Human beings in a mob
What's a mob to a king?
What's a king to a god?

What's a god to a non-believer
Who don't believe in anything?

Will he make it out alive?
No church in the wild.

My friend and hip hop scholar Dr. Daniel White Hodge observes that there's a progression in this verse, from human to mob to king to god. But then they ask the game-breaking question: what's even a god to a non-believer?

Does any of this matter to the person who just refuses to play by the rules? Does any of this affect the unbeliever who refuses to try to climb the ladder of success?

Kanye and Jay-Z call that space "the wild". The place outside the status quo. What we might call "out of bounds". The opposite of "wild" is "civilization". Where the streets are paved and the streetlights stay on. Where fences keep out the bad.

They insist there's no church in the wild.

But we're insisting that there is a church in the wild... because Jesus himself is wild. Jesus is radical, revolutionary, wild, untamed. And so should his church be. Jesus calls us to follow him into the Wild, to be good news for those who don't fit in, who claim the Wild as their home.

Welcome to the Wild.

On Easter, we saw that Jesus is a man of the wild, a revolutionary who was executed because he was too dangerous to be left alive, and yet who God raised to life to prove his wild, revolutionary way is good and beautiful and true. Next, we looked at the story of Stephen, a man labelled profane by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, a man whose profane faith was used as justification to lynch him. A wild church renarrates reality to invite everyone to Jesus' wild new life.

Over the last couple of weeks, we witnessed the profound reorientation of Saul, who, despite his deep faith, found himself fighting against Jesus. First, we explored the courage both from Saul the oppressor and Ananias the oppressed to rescue and redeem Saul from his violence. A wild church has the courage to change and to be changed.

Last week, we sat with the long period of Saul's deconstruction. A wild church should welcome deconstructing faith as an important part of our larger faith journey.

Today, we're going to see what happens when we have the courage to follow Jesus into the wild: we meet all kinds of people who don't fit into the mold. Because that's what the safety of insider really is - call it 'civilization' or 'sacred' or 'good' or whatever label you want to slap on it. At the end of the day, it's a template we're all expected to emulate. It's the white picket fence and 2.5 kids.

That's the sneaky trick about the wild. It's not Black and White. It's not Good and Bad. Those who live in the Wild are a varied mosaic. While there's only one way to follow the template, there are thousands of ways to be wild.

A lot of us have been told that following Jesus is about conforming to a particular template. We have to believe certain things, vote a particular way, we've received dress codes and we learn to speak like church people (praying for hedges of protection and travelling mercies).

But throughout history, the Church has been used as a weapon against people. People all over the world were told that they were savage, barbarian, sub-human. That to be fully human, they had to become not just followers of Jesus, but completely different people. They had to change their clothes, their customs, even their names. They had to learn new languages.

They were told there's no Church in the Wild.

Turn with us to Acts 16.

Today, we're going to travel with Saul (who, for the rest of Acts is referred to by his Greek name 'Paul') on his second journey around Greece to announce the Good News of Jesus. Paul and his partner Silas have a series of encounters with persons who live in the Wild. They're not people who most of us would immediately assume would make "good church folks". But again and again, we see the Spirit working in the Wild - in one case even sort of without Paul realizing it!

So as we read these encounters today, I want you to locate yourself in these stories. Are you one of those folks in the Wild, one of those who isn't convinced Jesus loves you as you are, no strings attached?

Or maybe you're like the Christians back in Jerusalem, the ones who don't venture into the Wild, the ones content to remain where they are and hope the world comes to them.

Or, are you like Paul? Have you found Jesus and there's just something about him that compels you to follow him into the Wild, to share this new life you've found with... well, everyone?

Let's read on, and meet our first new friend, Lydia:

We boarded a boat at Troas and sailed straight across to the island of Samothrace, and the next day we landed at Neapolis. From there we reached Philippi, a major city of that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. And we stayed there several days.

On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we thought people would be meeting for prayer, and we sat down to speak with some women who had gathered there. One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth, who worshiped God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying. She and her household were baptized, and she asked us to be her guests. “If you agree that I am a true believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my home.” And she urged us until we agreed. -- Acts 16:11–15 NLT

We don't know Lydia's real name - Lydia was the name of the Roman Province where her home city of Thyatira was located. It's like meeting a guy today whose nickname is Tex (you know, because he's from Texas). Lydia was wealthy - she maintained a home in the Greek city of Philippi, and Acts tells us she sold the purple cloth exclusive to her home city.

So Lydia had a number of things working against her from the perspective of the early Church. First, she was a woman - the fact that no husband was named with her indicates she was either a widow or possibly simply never married. Either way, a single woman running a business was, in that time, highly unusual. Not unheard of, but certainly weird. For Paul and Silas - two single, Jewish men, to engage her in conversation broke several cultural taboos of the day. That just wasn't something good, upstanding Jewish citizens did.

Of course, disregarding gender norms wasn't unusual for the early church. Jesus regularly empowered women, and the first Christian preacher and apostle was Mary of Magdala. But Lydia's wealth presented another obstacle for the early church. Throughout Jesus' ministry, he was hard on those with much - when the rich young ruler wanted to follow him, Jesus told the man to sell everything he had and give the money to the poor. When the man left, Jesus lamented that it's harder for the rich to be part of his movement than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

But again, we see flashes of something else - we know the women who followed Jesus' ministry financed his work. And when Jesus met Zacchaeus (yes, the short guy who climbed the tree), Zacchaeus paid back everyone he'd ever swindled four times over.

This is precisely the sort of response Paul and Silas receive from Lydia. They share the good news of Jesus with her, and she immediately extended hospitality to them, taking them into her home. According to church tradition, Lydia became one of the first leaders of the Church in Philippi, likely hosting one of the house churches!

The conversion of Lydia was only slightly more likely than Saul's own conversion. But Acts tells us that Lydia was one who worshipped God, as Saul did. The Spirit had been preparing her spirit to receive Jesus' good news from Paul and Silas. Once she hears of Jesus, she happily shifts her resources to serve God's Kingdom - an echo of Zacchaeus and the women who followed Jesus.

Before we move on, I want to sit with Lydia for a moment and allow her to teach us. As citizens of the wealthiest country in the world, we struggle to imagine it could be hard for wealthy folks to follow Jesus. Lydia shows us what that looks like: when we follow Jesus, we put our resources

at his disposal. We ask the question, “How can I use what God has granted me to bring about Jesus’ kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven?”

[pause]

Now, we might struggle to see how it’s hard for the wealthy to follow Jesus, but what about the demon-possessed? Surely if there’s anyone who would be considered ‘off-limits’, it would be them, right?

But let’s read on, and see Paul’s encounter with a demon-possessed woman:

One day as we were going down to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit that enabled her to tell the future. She earned a lot of money for her masters by telling fortunes. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved.”

This went on day after day until Paul got so exasperated that he turned and said to the demon within her, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And instantly it left her. -- Acts 16:16–18 NLT

This one is pretty strange. A girl possessed by a demon - and possessed by powerful men - followed Paul and Silas around advertising for them.

This is a weird bit demons often did in the presence of the Spirit. On a couple of occasions, Jesus silenced and exorcised demons who proclaimed him the son of God. And here, too, Paul is “exasperated” by this young mystic who follows him around.

I have to be honest: Paul’s attitude here bothers me a lot. Here’s a slave girl who’s possessed by a spirit and by powerful men in Philippian society. She is the lowest of the low.

But Paul doesn’t spare time for her. Compare how he acted toward Lydia, the wealthy woman. It’s not a good look for Paul, who only acts toward this girl because he’s so annoyed by her.

And yet how often do we ignore these people, people like this girl? The dirty, the weird, the unlovable. How often do we cater to the Lydias in our world, preferring the wealthy and clean to the outcast?

I can’t help when I read this hear the description of the man who shot Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO - that Michael looked like a demon.

We too often make monsters out of those we don’t think belong.

What gives me hope is that even in Paul’s ignorance, the Spirit still moves. The Spirit sees the suffering of the girl and works despite Paul’s exasperation here, freeing her from at least one possession.

Can we imagine that this is the lowest bar, church? That God calls us to be a people who goes out to the unloved and unwanted? A people who, as Jesus did, proclaims good news to the poor and release to the captives?

Speaking of release to the captives, because they helped this girl, Paul and Silas end up in prison. But even in prison, the Spirit isn't finished with them. Because when we do that, it turns out that Jesus' good news is good for those inside the status quo, too. Paul and Silas get arrested and imprisoned. A guard was set to ensure they didn't escape. And surely if there's anyone less likely to embrace Jesus' good news, it's an officer of the very empire who killed him.

Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors immediately flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. But Paul shouted to him, "Stop! Don't kill yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household." And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. He brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God. -- Acts 16:25–34 NLT

I'm captivated by this guard. He was an officer of a violent empire. He used violence and the threat of violence to impose the empire's Way on the world. Then an earthquake hit - not an uncommon event in that part of the world. A natural disaster struck, and all the cells opened up and the guard awoke. He naturally assumed all the prisoners had fled. And look at what his first reaction was: he assumed that he, too, was now an outsider. His failure (which wasn't actually failure on his part, but the empire doesn't care) put him on the other end of the sword, so he set about visiting that violence on himself.

Which is when Paul calls out to him. And friends, is there a way Jesus is better news to this guard? Jesus literally saved his life, through the actions of his followers. Paul and Silas called out to him, and because of their peace-making actions, he lived. More than that, he believed in this God whose followers cared more for his life than their own.

Now take a deep breath with me, friends. Soar back up to 30,000 ft with me and look at these three stories: a wealthy merchant, a demon-possessed slave and an officer of the evil empire. Three candidates for least-likely to love Jesus.

Our children's minister Vanessa suggested we might see a progression here: Lydia is in the wild, but still respectable. And she worshipped God, so following Jesus wasn't a huge jump. Then the girl - she was a nuisance, but not harmful. She too was freed by Jesus. And then this guard: the least likely of them all. And yet the Spirit has been preparing Paul and Silas to see him. After all, what kind of lunatic stays in prison after the cells have been opened?

But they were listening. They saw. They responded.

I hope we can take this as an encouragement. At the beginning today, I asked you to consider what persons were least-likely to be open to Jesus' good news revolution.

Who did you think of? Who are the folks who live in 'the wild' in your eyes? The ones that are definitely not open to receiving God's grace?

Acts 16 asks us to remember that God is working in them. The Holy Spirit is already present, in the wild, working in their spirits.

What the Spirit asks of us is courage - the courage to love them more than we care about sounding silly or looking dumb or any of the other ways we try to protect ourselves when we choose not to share Jesus' good news.

Communion + Examen

Jesus makes space for all of us at his table.

When have I shared Jesus' good news in the last week?

When have I shrunk back from sharing? What kept me from sharing?

How is Jesus good news for those in my life?

What does it look like for me to share Jesus with them this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Jesus was good news differently to each person (new economy, liberation, freedom from violence). How is Jesus good news to those in my life?