

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 25, 2025

Still Showing Up

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Purple cloth was expensive and difficult to make in the 1st Century Mediterranean world. Given the cost it was a symbol of wealth and status to wear it, meaning that anyone who sold it would have had contacts among the elite and powerful in any community. And yet Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, with much to potentially gain from turning this itinerant preacher into the local authorities, comes to the banks of the river looking for more than her comfortable life could give her.

Lydia showed up at the banks of that river looking for more than wealth could give her. She showed up at that place of prayer because she knew that she was not whole; her status and influence in the community meant nothing in the face of what was missing. Something...no, not something, the Spirit prompted her to show up where Paul would be. The Spirit “opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”¹ The Spirit moved her to have her entire household baptized and to invite Paul to stay with her.

Let's take a moment to look at who else has been showing up here in Acts. Back in the 1st chapter we learn of the core group of disciples: “Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together

¹ Acts 16:14c (NRSVUE)

with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.”²

This group moves outwards from Jerusalem, though the first to show up to join them were from the crowds of “devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem.”³ The first converts to the Way came from a mixture of ethnicities and cultures,⁴ all gathered in Jerusalem for festival. New converts came primarily out of Jerusalem and Judea in the first few chapters of Acts. People showing up to follow the Way who had some background with Jewish law and customs. Scripture also points out to us that those early apostles encountered a great deal of need as they shared the gospel. The poor and needy of Jerusalem, in particular, were showing up to hear the good news.

The next few chapters have some more unlikely figures showing up. Stephen shows up with a heart for service that heads off nascent conflict between the Hellenists (Greek speaking Jewish Christians) and the Hebrews (Hebrew speaking Jewish Christians). Philip will show up (at the Spirit’s insistence) for the Ethiopian eunuch, a very surprising convert to the Way. Then Saul will eventually show up, though the prompting of the Spirit will have to be more bludgeon than invitation to get through to him.

The early church grows, despite some early leader’s attempts to hinder the spread of the gospel; seeming to think that it was to be hoarded and doled out only sparingly. And it grows as Jesus said it would. It starts in Jerusalem and spirals outwards; out towards Judea, then Samaria, then Paul will take it across the sea and onwards to the ends of the earth. Lydia, this dealer in

² Acts 1:13b-14 (NRSVUE)

³ Acts 2:5b (NRSVUE)

⁴ Acts 2:9-11 (NRSVUE), “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

purple cloth, is celebrated as the first European convert to the Way of Jesus Christ in Scripture.

The gospel seemingly spread like wildfire in those early years. The Spirit prompted people to show up, and they did. People like Lydia and Cornelius (the centurion of the Italian Cohort)⁵ felt compelled to hear this good news of Jesus Christ. And once they heard it, they kept showing up, extending gifts of grace and hospitality to the apostles. And, given how the church continued long after the apostles left these places, they kept showing up as leaders in their communities as well.

What is it about the Gospel that is so compelling? What is it about the news of liberation and love that draws people from so many different walks of life? What keeps you coming back here Sunday after Sunday? Why do you keep showing up?

The message of Christ, the Way of the Cross, is a powerful one. It lays bare the lies we tend to surround ourselves with. It shows us just how empty power and wealth are. How meaningless possessions and status really are. The Gospel makes clear the power and necessity of love and grace. The Gospels shows us how to live in glorious, loving, albeit sometimes messy, community.

Lydia is willing to listen to a view on God and life radically different from what she had known before. She shows up to hear this powerful message and the Spirit opens her heart to the Word of God, Jesus Christ, and her showing up will only increase from here. There's an old adage regarding Christian evangelism that's variously attributed, it goes like this: "Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

⁵ Acts 10:1b (NRSVUE)

We have bread of the most incredible sort...we have the very bread of life to offer. Who here wants to show up for the Gospel? Who here wants to show up for their neighbor? Who here wants to show up community and inclusion? Who here wants to show up for the poor and oppressed? Who here wants to show up for the Way?

Lydia, Philip, Peter, Paul, and thousands of millions of unnamed witnesses have shown up before us. They, along with the Holy Spirit, are why we can show up right here, right now. Who will show up after us because of our witness and ministry? Let's find out. Let's show up. Amen.