

Envisioned to Act – Acts 16:9-15

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May 25, 2025

One day back in 1995, I met a woman with whom I fell in love. We met while we were both working for the same employer. She was smart, funny, and beautiful. She was also a person of faith.

She knew I had dabbled in leading worship at local churches as a lay person. And as she experienced me in this role, she became adamant that God was calling me to be a pastor.

Since the time I had been in high school, I had had others say to me that they thought I would be a good pastor. But I never really took them seriously. I got my degree in business and started on my way into the non-profit world.

But this person—Denise was her name—really had my attention with her claim that I had to go to seminary. It's what God was calling me to. She was certain.

I was in love with her, so I listened. I began the formal process of exploring seminaries. And in doing so, it was confirmed upon me that professional ministry was indeed in my future.

It's crazy how things work out. As soon as I made that decision about where to go to seminary, she decided she wasn't in love with me. Our relationship ended.

I was heartbroken. Everything seemed to be going great. We had even gotten engaged. And then, just like that, things fell apart.

With the passage of time, I came to view that encounter with Denise as far more than the breaking apart of two hearts I initially

thought were meant for a lifetime of togetherness. I came to believe that God, through the Holy Spirit, was envisioned to me through her.

Her presence in my life was merely God calling me in a direction I never would've gone otherwise. She reflected Christ. And I was so struck by her that I couldn't ignore what God was doing through her.

Without her coming into my life, I wouldn't have done what I've been doing the last quarter century. I wouldn't be standing here today, I wouldn't have become a father to Jacob and Joey, and I wouldn't soon be marrying the true love of my life.

In that episode all those years ago, I was envisioned. Jaclyn Williams, a professor at Fuller Seminary, says "being 'envisioned' is embracing the capacity to be overcome by the sight of God. Once overcome, we are moved, propelled even, toward enacting our discipleship in Christ."

I was propelled, in that episode of my life 30 years ago, toward enacting my discipleship. Over time, I firmly believe that I saw God in Denise; and that envisioning changed my life and led me to this moment today.

Here in Acts 16, we find two people who were envisioned in this way. The first is the apostle Paul, who we are told, "had a vision." Verse 9 opens on the scene of his being overtaken by the sight of the Spirit. Imagine Paul, tired from his missionary travels, in the stillness of the night, when God opens his eyes to see a vision—a man from Macedonia pleading for help.

That envisioning leads him to the city of Philippi in Macedonia, where he had his group stay for a few days and where they then met a woman named Lydia. And through Paul, God was envisioned to Lydia who was baptized along with her

household. And in the profound act of having her heart opened to Paul's message in that moment, she was so propelled in acting out her discipleship that she invited Paul and the others to stay at her home.

Lydia found communion with God through Paul and Paul's message, which prompted her to act with profound graciousness and hospitality.

Such envisioning leads us to act, to do something in the name of discipleship.

I sense God is envisioning Godself to us here at FPC. And let me explain why I think this.

Last fall one day, John Sharp and I met for coffee over there at Summer Moon just to get to know each other better. John and Whitney were pretty much brand new to us in their joining the FPC family. And John shared his own experiences in ministry, leading churches as a pastor and leading a successful non-profit. And I was telling him more about our congregation—our great strengths as a church family but also the challenges we face.

And as we continued to talk, it was clear to me that he had experiences and gifts that could help us envision our future as a congregation. There was a good rapport and chemistry between us as we shared our experiences and opened ourselves up, perhaps, to him using his gifts in some way to lead us forward.

I asked John if he might talk to our Session in January to do an assessment of where we are as a church and to get feedback from our leaders about their thoughts regarding our identity and future.

And that led to conversations the Session asked him to have with all of you back in February and March—again, him sharing

information about the church and the culture we live in. And John listening to your feedback.

And after all that, John authored a readiness action plan that he presented to the Session for its consideration and that the Session embraced and endorsed, a plan called Horizon 2035 that includes an emphasis on providing more opportunities for us all to experience community and to grow in our faith. And that plan is what you've had placed before you, which you can access on our website.

And in this sense of God envisioning Godself to us, we discovered that God had put in front of us a person of great skill and experience to lead this plan. He was right in front of our noses. It hired John to lead this effort, and he's been brought on staff as director of spiritual formation, to lead and work alongside a small team of our folks charged with forging more opportunities for us to love God, love our neighbor, and provide more opportunities for learning.

This has all happened pretty quickly — maybe too quickly for some, I realize. Yet, the implementation of the plan will happen with a sense of urgency, which was the Session's mandate. That's because the Session realizes we have a window of opportunity to steer our ministry in a way that provides for our viability far into the future, an opportunity to continue living into the calling God had for Farragut Presbyterian Church forty years ago.

I believe we've been envisioned over the last several months. We've embraced the capacity to be overcome by the sight of God. And it's led us to take this action. It's an opportunity I don't know we've had in the last decade. For some reason, now is the time that God has presented for this opportunity. And now is the time for us to act on it.

I couldn't have said no to Denise when she mandated that I look at seminaries thirty years ago. God wouldn't have allowed me to say no. And God has presented himself in a way now that I don't think allows us to say no to what he has presented to us.

When given a vision, we can't help but act on it.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, a day when we honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country. There are so many worthy motives among those who choose to serve in the military: a family connection, a path to a meaningful career, a chance to see the world maybe. For many, though, they are propelled to act after being envisioned. And their motivating vision is some sort of act against the country they love that stirs their patriotism.

How many joined the armed forces or became first responders following the horrible events of September 11, 2001? When those attacks occurred, young men and women, out of love for their country and community, signed up in droves to serve. They felt they had no choice, their motivation so compelling. That was the time for them.

A vision was cast, and they acted. And this weekend, for those of them who would go on to give their lives, we remember and salute them.

When we open our hearts to God, God invites us to step into the greater, divine vision of life, leading us to places and people we never imagined. The visions Paul and Lydia received here in Acts were not just future promises—they were invitations to action. Just as they saw God's plans unfold, we are called to be spiritually awake, to see the world not just as it is but as God sees it. The Holy Spirit gives us the clarity to see beyond our limited vision into God's limitless imagination. Paul and Lydia, in their

distinct ways, acted swiftly and confidently, and we, too, are invited to trust God's leading and take action.