

Have you ever played the “what-if” game? I don't know how common this is for other people, but for whatever reason, I've done it for my entire life. The what-if game is when you look at some event in your past and say, “What if that had never happened?”

What would be different? How much did that one event impact my life and the lives of others? It's especially interesting to do with events that we might otherwise consider to be bad. Events that, on the surface, we might wish had never happened.

For example, almost 30 years ago, my sister got married. That marriage ended several years ago in a rather painful divorce. It's easy to think it never should have happened. But what if it hadn't?

If it hadn't, I never would have found out about Ohio Northern University, where my former brother-in-law worked and where I eventually went to college. I never would have changed my major to English Lit. I never would have considered going to seminary. I never would have met my wife. I wouldn't be standing up here as your pastor and my daughter wouldn't exist.

My life was a grand chain reaction, in which my former brother-in-law was a key piece. So while it's easy to say, “I wish she had never met him.” That's not really true. Because when I ask “what-if,” I don't really like how my life would have turned out.

When we look at the history of the world through God's eyes, it can be helpful to look at this chain reaction effect. Because it's not always obvious to us. When God works it's easy to think of him working through big, impressive events. Events that don't need a long chain reaction to see their impact.

The Exodus, with its plagues and miracles. The ministry of Jesus, with His very public crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. Even the conversion of Paul, with the light from heaven and the voice of Jesus and his sudden blindness. The effects of these events are self-evident. They were God taking a wrecking ball to the course of human history and saying, “This is the way things are going to be.” No “what-if” about it.

But then we get to a passage like the one we have today in our First Lesson. And we find God working far less obviously. And yet, with just as profound an effect on human history.

It begins with Paul on a missionary journey. It's one of several journeys he will go on. Traveling for miles, by land and sea. Preaching the gospel. Making disciples. Planting churches. And then moving on down the road to the next town.

He's in the area of what today is modern day Turkey. And he tries to go north into Asia. But God tells him, “No, keep going west.” So he goes a little further west and then tries to turn north again. But again God tells him, “No, keep going west.” Finally, he reaches the very western coast of Turkey. A port city called Troas. And he stops there. Paul, apparently, doesn't want to go any further west.

Why? Well, we can only guess. But it could be that going west meant going into Macedonia. It meant going into the very heart of Greco-Roman religion and culture. All this time, Paul has kinda been relying on his Jewish roots as an aid to evangelism. The first place he would always go in a town is the synagogue. He would go there, talk to them about the prophecies of the Messiah, and then say, “Guess what? He's already come. His name is Jesus.”

It was effective. But he won't really be able to do that much in Macedonia. And it might have been a little intimidating. So he avoids going any further west.

But God comes to him a third time. He gives him a dream of a man in Macedonia begging Paul to come over and preach there. Finally, Paul is convinced. He, as well as Luke and Timothy, his traveling companions, pack up their things and cross the Aegean Sea into Greece and, for the first time, into what we call Europe.

They don't really know where they're going. They bounce around from Samothrace to Neapolis and finally to Philippi. Philippi is a good sized city, so they decide to stay there for a few days.

The Sabbath day comes. And they have no where to go. There's no church there to worship in. No Christians to break bread with. No synagogue to evangelize in. They are in completely unfamiliar waters. Saying to themselves, "It's the Sabbath and we're alone. What do we do?"

So they decide to pray. They go outside the city and follow the river, looking for a nice, quiet spot for their little three person church service.

But when they get there, they find a group of women. They're probably washing clothes in the river. And they begin talking to them. One of them, a woman named Lydia, knows something about what they're talking about. She's not really a Jew. She's a Greek from a Greek city. But she knows something about the Scriptures. She's read them before. She's even begun to worship the God she's learned about in the Old Testament.

And when they talk to her, the Lord opens her heart to what they're saying. She invites them back to her house. She and her family are baptized. And suddenly, in just a matter of days, Paul has planted his first church in Europe.

They stay there for a while, then travel down the road to Thessalonica. And they plant another church. And they go further down to the road to Athens. And they plant another church. And they go to Corinth. And they plant another church. And suddenly Greece, that they had so avoided going towards, has become amazingly fertile ground for the Gospel.

And it spreads like wildfire. It spreads to Italy. To Spain. To France. To Germany. To Britain. In just a few years, the entire Roman world is filled with churches. Filled with Christians.

And those Christians send out more missionaries. To Africa. To Asia. And eventually... to America. Where they spread God's Word to a New World. To where we live today.

In a town called Troas, 6000 miles away, 2000 years ago, God set in motion a chain reaction. God came to Paul and gave him a nudge. Don't go north. Go west. And because of that one little nudge, we are now worshipping God in Boonville, Missouri.

Just as the Bible is full of examples where God intervened powerfully and gloriously, it's also full of times where God intervened in the smallest ways. God goes to Abraham and gives him a nudge. "Take a look at Canaan. I think you'll like it there." God goes to Samuel and gives him a nudge. "Take a look at that boy named David. I think he'd make a good king." God goes to Peter and gives him a nudge. "Take a look at that man named Jesus. I think you'll like what he has to say."

Small men given a small nudge to do small things. And yet, changing the world in the process. All because of... what? God spoke. And they listened. Nothing more.

Truth be told, that's how God works most of the time. Yes, the Bible is full of big acts of God. But they're spread out over thousands of years of history. And what happened during the hundreds of years between each of those miracles? Small men given small nudges to do seemingly small things. But all part of God's very big master plan of salvation.

And we're a part of that plan. I know it's hard to feel like it sometimes. We feel very small. I'm just one, small, ordinary man in a world of billions. We're just one, small, ordinary church in one small, ordinary town. What can I possibly do? What can we possibly do?

Well, what could three bewildered travelers wandering through Macedonia do? If they're obeying God's Word and following God's plan, they could change the entire course of human history. And so can you.

For Paul, it started by chatting with a woman named Lydia while she washed her clothes. They weren't intending to convert all of Europe to Christianity. They weren't even intending to evangelize. They went out looking for a place to be alone in prayer. And yet, God gave them an opportunity. They took it. And the rest is history. Our history.

For you, it could be chatting with a coworker over lunch. Or with a family member at a picnic. Or a parent at your kid's baseball game. Or a stranger you just happen to meet by a river while you're looking for a quiet place to spend some time with God. It could be anyone at anytime.

And that's the really amazing thing about being a part of God's plan of salvation. You're a part of it. But it's God's plan. God will work with you. He will work through you. Or he will work around you. But no matter what, the Gospel will be preached. The Good News of God's salvation through Jesus Christ will go out to the very ends of the earth. And many will come to know the love of the Lord.

God has made you a part of his plan. You have died with Christ. You have been born again through the waters of Holy Baptism, just like little Axton this morning. So live knowing that with the smallest words and the smallest action, you are doing great things. And God is changing the world through you. Amen.