When I worked at Nashotah House, we had a student who would come into my office on occasion to talk and talk and then talk some more. His bloviating usually concerned the great ideas he had to fix every problem at the seminary. I will not go into whether or not any of them were any good (they weren’t) but rather point out that at no point in conversation did he offer any practical advice on how his ideas would become reality. He saw his role as the highest level of management. He had ideas and it was up to me and whoever else to make his perfect vision a reality. In some ways you can’t blame the guy; it’s kind of the way of the world. People like to lean back on their sofa and opine about all the problems with the world and then offer their perfect fixes. Their contribution is their advice loudly pronounced – people of earth instead of doing bad things you should instead be doing good things. It’s a nice way to live because when people continue to do bad things you can rest east knowing that you’ve done your part. And because of this tendency to sit around and talk about grand visions and strategies it is refreshing to read this rather ordinary and mundane account from the Acts of the Apostles this morning.

A little background before we get into the text. These verses are part of an account of St. Paul’s missionary journeys. Here, a vision calls him to Macedonia, a region in northern Greece. The geographical location is important because it lies outside of what would be considered Jewish hotspots, meaning most of the inhabitants would be gentiles, like us. His group ends up in the city of Philippi. A city named after Philip II, who was the king of Macedonia from 359 to 336 BC. Philip II is famous not for just having an awesome first name but also for being the father of Alexander the Great. And finally there is one last thing to know and that is the Acts of the Apostle was written by Luke (as in the Gospel of Luke) who was also a sometime companion of Paul. So, in this text when we hear “we” as in “we remained in the city”, the reference is to Luke, Paul and whoever else might have been there. But now to the text.

It starts with this call to Macedonia, then goes into a little bit of a travelogue and then we hear, “We remained in this city for some days. On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.’ And she prevailed upon us.”

I love just how personal it is. They were in the city and then they decided they needed to go to church and while there they met Lydia. They told Lydia the Gospel message, then she and her whole household were converted and baptized. So, who is Lydia? Outside of being told that she is a dealer in purple cloth we are not told much. But we can do a little educated guessing to fill in the rest. The place where they meet her is referred to as “a place of prayer” outside the city gates. As the Jewish population was quite small there was probably not a synagogue so this “place of prayer” served as a gathering place for Jews. Lydia is most likely what the Jewish people referred to as a God-Fearer, which is a non-Jewish person who believes the Jewish message. And so, what we are seeing in this scene is the beginning of a switch in the way evangelism happened in the early church. The original model of evangelism often occurred in the synagogues and was Jews convincing other Jews that Jesus was the long-awaited messiah. But by showing up in a town that had little or no Jewish population, Christianity was now going to a new field. It is going to those that may or may not have had any understanding of the God of Abraham and Isaac. And while it is a shift, in the way scene plays out today, it does not seem terribly dramatic – some people talk to some other people. And that is what I love so much about it. There was not a meeting called to look at demographic trends or a survey conducted to find likely converts. It was just some guys who were faithful to God, who showed up to say their prayers and did not hold back when the opportunity presented itself to share the Gospel message. It makes you thank God that those in the early church did not take a class on evangelism, read a book on how to bring millennials to church or spend a month at a retreat devoted to self-care. They just shared the Gospel message where they could share it.

There is a term from the world of finance known as elephant hunters. It is basically the practice of going after very large companies with the intent of selling them your product or service. So rather than trying to sell something to a number of smaller companies you instead just sell a lot of stuff to one big company. So if, for example, you sold napkins to restaurants, rather than selling your napkins to a number of smaller restaurants you try and get the contract for McDonalds. All your sales needs are solved at one place. In the church I think we can also get caught up in such a mentality. We want to do the one thing that will land us lots and lots of new people rather than just plugging along and doing what we can where we can. That is why there are thousands of books on how to grow your church and very few books and how to ask your friend to church. Churches are looking for the elephant, they are looking for the one thing that they can do which will have the place overflowing. But what we see this morning, and why I love this little snippet so much is just how simple and humble Paul and his companions were. They didn’t book three nights at the Acropolis in Philippi to put on a multi-media extravaganza, rather it appears that they did not have much of a plan at all. They just kind of showed up. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians he explains his strategy saying, “When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” That is the strategy – show up and share the Gospel to whomever he came in contact.

I don’t know what the future of the church holds. We read frightening stories about shrinking congregations and the younger generations not caring. But the church has been here before. In fact, it started in much worse circumstances and what did Paul do? He didn’t look out at the landscape and lament how many people showed up to the Circus Maximus on Sundays or how many people were really into Dionysian festivals. Rather he just showed up where he could and did what he could. And it really seems a much better way. It certainly takes the pressure off. We are not called to make it 1955 all over again, but rather are called to, like Paul, do what we can where we can. As we hear in First Peter, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” It won’t solve everything in one fell swoop but it will make a difference and this difference will allow us and others to be God’s own this day and forevermore.