

## *Lydia the Unlikely*

In Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, a woman named Shug tells her friend Celie, "I think it makes God angry when you walk by the color purple in a field and don't notice it."

I don't know if you like the color purple or not. I don't think I'd like a purple house or a purple car. A purple shirt, maybe. But a field dotted with purple flowers is something to notice and remember and be thankful for.

There's another character in literature who's not known as a religious person or a lover of nature, but who has something very interesting to say about flowers.

The great 19th century English detective Sherlock Holmes, in "The Adventure of the Naval Treaty," told his friend Dr. Watson, "Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers.

All other things, our powers, our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its color are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it.

It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers."

If the beautiful colors of flowers are compelling enough evidence for Sherlock Holmes to believe in the goodness and lavish grace of God, maybe flowers and the color purple ought to be sufficient evidence for us as well.

In today's Scripture, Lydia is a seller of purple cloth. You've probably noticed that in the Bible purple is an extravagant or royal color.

In the *Book of Proverbs*, in a passage called *Ode to a Virtuous Wife*, the woman dresses in fine linen and purple gowns.

In the *Book of Daniel*, when Daniel is able to interpret the writing that appears on the wall during a feast, King Belshazzar puts a chain of gold around Daniel's neck, promotes him to the third highest position in the kingdom, and clothes him in the color purple.

In Luke's gospel, he tells a story about a rich man, who habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day.

And, of course, in Mark's gospel, when the Roman soldiers mock Jesus by placing a crown of thorns on his head and hailing him as "the King of the Jews," they dress him in a purple cloak.

They dress him like a king, in purple. They don't know or even consider the possibility that Jesus really is a king, but they dress him in purple, the royal color, to make fun of him.

Lydia is a seller of purple cloth. Around the Mediterranean in the first century, a shrewd, skillful person could make a very good living in the purple-cloth business.

Only wealthy people could afford the color purple, and they were willing to pay a lot of money for the best-quality purple cloth.

Purple was very expensive because the finest purple dye had to be gathered drop by drop from only one kind of sea snail, and you need 240,000 snails to make one ounce of purple dye.

A pound of wool dyed with a high-quality purple dye could be sold for 1,000 *denarii*, an amount that would take an ordinary laborer three years to earn. Three years of labor for one pound of dyed wool!

And a fine cloak of such material would cost three times that amount—the equivalent of about nine years' labor for a common person.

Lydia sells purple cloth. She must be good at it because her business has enabled her to establish a prosperous household of her own.

Scripture doesn't mention a husband of Lydia's, but it tells us that she is the head of her household. She probably maintains this household on her own—and it might be an amazing story.

You see, Lydia was not a common name for a person in her time and place.

Lydia is the name of a geographic region in Asia Minor. The people most likely to be given a geographic name as their own were slaves, called by the name of the place from which they came.

For example, if I were a slave, they might have called me *Shelbyville* instead of *Tom*. Of course, they'd probably say *Shevil*, not *Shelbyville*. "Shevil," they'd say, "Get a shovel and shovel out the stables and be quick about it."

When we meet Lydia in today's Scripture, she is far from her native land of Asia Minor. She's now living in the city of Philippi in the area of Greece called Macedonia.

If Lydia was a slave—and we don't for sure that she ever was—how could she have risen to the position of a trader in purple cloth and the head of a prosperous household?

In the first century it was possible for a clever slave with marketable skills to make money and buy her freedom.

Interestingly, Lydia was from the region of Lydia, a territory renowned for its fine purple-dyeing industry. We don't know for sure, but Lydia may have been taken from her home in Lydia and brought as a slave to the city of Philippi.

She may have used her skill and determination to earn enough money to buy her way out of slavery into freedom and to establish a household of her own.

We don't know for sure, but it makes a good story, doesn't it? Somebody should write a novel about Lydia or make a movie about her.

But Lydia is more than a successful businesswoman. There's more to her story than a tale of rags to riches.

Lydia is a deeply spiritual person. She's a Gentile, not a Jew, but she believes in the One God of Israel and in the noble ethics of Judaism.

In the New Testament, Gentiles who practiced the Jewish religion were called "worshippers of God."

As a worshipper of the God of Israel, Lydia would go to a place of prayer on the Sabbath. Her place of prayer was about a mile outside Philippi's city gate, by the river, probably a synagogue for women in someone's house.

On one memorable Sabbath, Lydia met Paul and his companions at her house of prayer. The women invited Paul to teach them, and they heard the gospel for the first time.

God opened Lydia's heart, and she listened eagerly to Paul's message. Lydia believed the good news of the gospel, and she and her entire household were baptized—probably right there in the river near her place of prayer.

Lydia may well have been the first Christian—the first convert to Christ—on the continent of Europe.

As soon as she and her household were baptized, Lydia invited Paul and his companions to stay at her home.

It was dangerous for Lydia to open her home to Paul and his companions—missionaries for the new religion of Christianity—but Lydia did it anyway.

And it wasn't just a one-time offer of hospitality.

In Philippi, Paul was arrested and jailed for preaching the gospel. Upon his release, he returned to Lydia's home to see and encourage the new Christians there, and Lydia again welcomed him with open arms.

One of the scholars I studied this past week to learn more about Lydia referred to her as *Lydia the Unlikely*.

She was an unlikely heroine—a Gentile, not a Jew, in what was at the beginning a religion composed entirely of Jews. Jesus and his 12 disciples and the Apostle Paul were, of course, all Jewish, but Lydia was a Gentile.

And Lydia was a woman in what was then a man's world.

*Lydia the Unlikely*. A Gentile woman, perhaps a former slave who became a successful businesswoman, the head of her own household, maybe the first Christian convert on the continent of Europe.

You go, girl!

What happened next to *Lydia the Unlikely*?

We don't know. After Paul visits her home when he gets out of prison, we never hear of Lydia again.

But let's remember *Lydia the Unlikely* today—Mother's Day.

We don't know for sure whether Lydia was a mother or not, but she was an exceptional woman.

Lydia embodies the inquiring mind and open heart of someone who senses there is more to life than they presently experience.

More than money, more than success, more than the unusual measure of power and influence she enjoyed.

Lydia was a woman who dealt with the most powerful and wealthy people in her society, the ones who wore purple when the common folk couldn't, a woman who was

so skillful and determined that she may have earned enough money to buy herself out of slavery.

A woman who was willing to go beyond the boundaries set for her in a time when women were seen by many as *property* rather than as people who earned and owned property.

A woman who created and maintained her own Christian household.

Lydia is like two other fine Christian women in one: the sisters of Jesus' friend Lazarus—the contemplative Mary and the active Martha.

Lydia's heart is set on God even while she runs her business and her household.

When Lydia joins the other women down there by the river at their place of prayer, this wealthy, powerful woman leaves her privileged circle and goes out to the margins of society.

She joins those who have far less wealth and power than she does, but who share her faith in the God of Israel and her desire to come nearer to God.

Lydia is like the contemplative Mary in this respect.

When she hears Paul preaching the gospel, she realizes right away that this is the good news she's been waiting for all her life. Lydia responds immediately, inviting Paul and his companions to be guests in her home, and arranging the baptisms of herself and her entire household.

Lydia is a woman of action, like Martha, in this respect.

Lydia the seller of purple cloth, Lydia the Unlikely.

We remember her today, Mother's Day, because she was an extraordinary Christian woman.

Today let's thank God for all Christian women and especially for our mothers.

Ladies, we should dress you all in the finest purple cloth, even if we have to collect 240,000 snails to make one ounce of the color purple.

We should dress you all in the finest purple cloth, even if such a garment would cost us nine years' labor. You deserve it.

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