

The Bag Lady Nightmare
Acts 16:9-15

Nearly half of women fear life as a bag lady.

No kidding: 46 percent of women suffer from what is now called “Bag Lady Syndrome.”

They might have good salaries, money in their purses, decent savings and investments — but still they are afraid that they will wind up broke, forgotten and destitute.

According to a survey by *The Washington Times*, 90 percent of the women surveyed feel financially insecure. Forty-six percent are troubled by a “tremendous fear of becoming a bag lady,” and this anxiety actually increases as incomes rise. Among those with annual incomes of more than \$100,000, 48 percent of women fear a life of destitution.

Lily Tomlin. Gloria Steinem. Shirley MacLaine. Katie Couric. They all suffer from the bag lady nightmare.

What’s going on here?

Women have complicated fears about money. Research and surveys reveal they fear failure, or making mistakes. They fear they are expendable. Because of this, women are twice as likely as men to set aside a secret stash of money. Two-thirds of the women surveyed said that the best thing about having money is the sense of security it brings.

Men might crave the power or status that comes with money. But women like the security.

This is interesting stuff because our text for today introduces us to an apparently successful woman, Lydia. It’s clear that she’s a financially secure resident of the city of Philippi. She owns a business and a home. She’s a “dealer in purple cloth,” having come from the well-known textile city of Thyatira.

The color purple is significant because purple clothing is the mark of wealth and royalty in the Roman world — to be dressed in purple is to boast of influence and power. So Lydia has a close connection to the lifestyles of the rich and famous, and there is very little chance that she will wind up broke, forgotten, and destitute.

Does Lydia fall victim to the bag lady nightmare? Acts doesn’t say. What today’s passage does describe is how she responds to the preaching of the gospel. And based on her response, we can come to a critically important conclusion:

She is motivated by faith, not by fear.

In today's passage, Paul and Silas arrive in the city of Philippi, a Roman colony in the district of Macedonia. While in Troas, a port city on the Aegean Sea, Paul sees a vision of a man of Macedonia, and this vision convinces him that God wants him to preach the good news of Jesus Christ to the Macedonians.

So Paul and Silas go to Philippi. On the Sabbath day, they go outside the gate of Philippi by the river, looking for a place of prayer, and they sit down with a group of women who have gathered there. They begin to talk, and one of the women listening to them is Lydia — Acts tells us that the Lord opens her heart to listen eagerly to what is said by Paul.

If Lydia was suffering from what we now call “The Bag Lady Syndrome,” we would expect to see it now. She has a ton of good reasons to exercise restraint at this point. Distrust of strangers would be a good reason for her to keep to herself. The bag lady nightmare could cause her to clutch her possessions tightly. Fear of loss might inspire her to run home and protect her secret stash of money.

But she doesn't take any of these fear-based actions. Instead, she responds with faith, generosity, and hospitality.

Lydia asks for baptism for herself and her household, and then insists, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” Lydia prevails upon Paul and Silas, and they follow her home. In time, Lydia's house becomes a center of Christian worship and outreach in Philippi, and Paul develops a close and loving bond with the church members there.

Later, when he writes his letter to the Philippians, he expresses his gratitude in this way, “You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone” (Philippians 4:15).

No church shared with him and supported him ... except the Philippians.

They were the generous ones. The hospitable ones. The faithful ones.

And it all started with Lydia, a woman who chose faith over fear.

It is tempting for us men to think that this is a message for the women in the church and not for us. But that would be a mistake, for the bag lady nightmare afflicts more than just women. Each of us can wake up in a cold sweat, terrified that we are broke, forgotten, and destitute. Each of us can have our own frightening vision of being wiped out financially, robbed of stability and security, and condemned to a life on the streets.

If it's not financial fear, it very well could be another kind of fear. Fear that we'll lose our good health, fear of catastrophe, fear of failure, fear of discovery, fear of dependency and so on.

It's a nightmare, no doubt about it.

The antidote, however, is not a tighter grip on our possessions or our lifestyle however it is presently constituted. It's not a better vault for our secret stash of money that we need. It's not a fear-driven attitude that causes us to hold back, play it safe, distrust strangers, and thereby close ourselves off to the surprising good news that God is putting before us.

No, the way to awaken from the bag lady nightmare is to choose faith over fear. The way to find real peace and security is to practice generosity and hospitality.

This can mean:

- opening our wallets when we are asked to support a summer youth mission trip.
- opening our homes to international students from the Middle East.
- opening our car doors to programs that deliver hot dinners to homeless families in the community.
- providing support for a child in a Christian school in Central America.
- giving of ourselves in ways that have absolutely nothing to do with money.

Vicki McGaw is the director of Christian education at a church in Cleveland. One day, she was attending a church meeting and struck up a conversation with a woman. Vicki learned that the woman's husband, Bob Fortney, was in dire need of a kidney transplant. As they talked, both became teary-eyed.

And then Vicki asked the woman, "What do I need to do to be tested?"

Vicki had a clear sense that this was what she needed to do. Although she had never met Bob Fortney, she immediately made the decision to donate one of her kidneys to him.

She was tested for compatibility, and ended up being more of a perfect match than any of Fortney's family members. The surgery took five hours, and was a complete success. Vicki returned home in two days, and resumed her job in five. The following Sunday, her pastor told the congregation about Vicki's generosity. It was an "ultimate act of hospitality," he said.

Bob Fortney has also recovered well, and he is enormously grateful to Vicki. His family calls her a "miracle from God." The entire experience has had an impact on Fortney's congregation, and the pastor of the church has observed, "I've witnessed something unexpected. People are asking, where is God in their lives? They know it was no coincidence Vicki was a match for Bob and the generosity and compassion she displayed were extraordinary. They know God was involved."

Vicki McGaw is not a victim of the bag lady nightmare. She has chosen faith over fear, and practiced extraordinary hospitality instead of ordinary self-concern. "I really felt this is what God put me here to do," she says. "A person can find 20 million reasons not to do something, but there is usually one reason that sticks with you as to why you should."

So, what is it that God has put you here to do?

Where is God at work in your life ... right here, right now?

What is the one thing that you should be doing as a disciple of Jesus Christ, as you put your faith into action?

Each of us is being given an opportunity to trade a nightmare for a dream. If we follow the examples of Lydia and Vicki, along with countless other people of faith, we will find ourselves moving from anxiety to serenity, and from a life ruled by fear to a life shaped by faith.

The particular path we follow will be different for each of us. It might mean opening our homes, as Lydia did. Or opening our wallets, or our car doors, or our calendars. It might even mean opening our God-given bodies, as Vicki McGaw did.

Whatever you open, the point is to practice hospitality and generosity, in line with what God is doing in your life.

Only then does the nightmare end, and the dream of discipleship begin. Amen