Once upon a time, there was a woman called Lydia. She was a merchant – a cloth merchant. She: not her father, her husband, her brother or her son. She ran the business alone. She ran it as she ran her household: with concentrated efficiency.

Lydia came from a town in what is now Turkey. Thyatira was a centre of industry: dye makers, linen weavers, wool spinners, tailors. That’s where Lydia had started her business: buying purple dye from the dye-makers, linen and wool from the weavers. Dying the cloth and selling it on.

She’d become successful – so successful that she had started to travel. She had moved from Thyatira to Philippi: from the industrial centre, dyers and fabric makers, to a trading centre full of merchants like her. Ships came into the harbour at Philippi from across the world. Roads from Philippi went north to Rome and south to Constantinople. The purple cloth that Lydia bought and sold went from Philippi by road to the imperial court and the senators. They would pay a premium for good Tyrian purple.

Lydia had done well. She had taken up space in the masculine world of commerce. Like her neighbours in Philippi, she had grown rich. She had servants and slaves and clients, whom she could send to negotiate on her behalf with her friends in Thyatira, the merchants at the harbour, the imperial civil servants.

But she still loved to travel, when she could – when her accounts and her staff and her stock-taking and all the other administration of running her business on her own would let her. Philippi didn’t satisfy her. Everyone was always so frantically busy – no time to stop, no
willingness to look beyond their own horizons. She was guilty of that, too; but she wanted something else.

And she found it, as she travelled, when she came across a synagogue on the Sabbath day.

There weren’t many Jews in Philippi, so it was mostly curiosity that led Lydia to slip in at the back. Some people frowned, but Lydia was used to that.

She listened.

Someone was reading from a scroll: the story of a temple, and an angel, and water flowing in great rivers until it was knee-deep, waist-deep, unwadeable. And wherever the river went came new life: trees, fish, salt water becoming fresh.

He finished reading, rolled up the scroll, sat down and started to talk.

He talked about God: God of the temple and God of the river. God, the Lord of all: who had created everything from nothing, who had drawn the earth out of chaos and surrounded the land with sea, who had made rivers and gardens and fish and people. God, who promised renewal. Whose temple was a place of rest and refreshment. Whose glory shone out from the temple to the whole world. Whose love flowed like a river from the temple, and wherever it went it brought new life.

Lydia came out from the synagogue in a daze. Her own gods, the gods she prayed to, were gods who might choose to send a wind to speed her ships across the sea, or – if they were in a bad mood – send the wrong kind of wind to sink them. The thought of a God who had MADE the winds, and the sea itself – the thought of a God who wanted to renew and refresh all people – was almost beyond what she could imagine.

After that, Lydia looked for a synagogue wherever she travelled. She learnt all she could about this God: the God of the river, of living water, reviving, refreshing and sustaining all life. She learnt about him and she learnt to worship him. She became a proselyte: a convert, a God-fearer, a worshipper of the Jewish God.

And at home in Philippi, where there were no Jews and certainly no synagogue, she found that some other women had also heard of the Jewish God. She gathered them together to meet, on the Sabbath – not in her house, but outside the city gates by the river. The flowing water reminded her of the prophecy of the river, where she had first heard about God who promised renewal to all people. They gathered on the Sabbath to pray together, to read the Scriptures, to share their hope in God. Sometimes Jewish traders or, even better, travelling
preachers stopped in Philippi, and Lydia would invite them to come and worship with her and her friends.

On the day when Paul came to Philippi, Lydia and her friends were worshipping by the river. She listened as Paul told them about the God that they knew – doing something different. Something new. God who had made all things – coming to meet people in a man, a man who taught and healed and explained God’s love. A man who had died and a man whom death could not hold. An empty tomb, a slaughtered Lamb alive again.

God of the temple had built a new temple, Paul told her: in the body of Jesus, dead and buried and risen to new life.

God of the reviving and life-giving river was offering revival and life in Jesus.

God of the Jews was offering revival and life to the Gentiles.

And Lydia felt everything fall into place.

Everything in her life had led her to that moment by the river.

God, who had begun to set her free when she had slipped into the back of the synagogue – had finally poured out the fulness of refreshing love upon her.

She felt the river surround her: the river of God’s grace, flowing out of the temple.

She went to her house. Gathered together her servants and clients. Brought them all to the river.

Lydia, her God-fearing friends, her household; one by one they went with Paul under the water.

And she saw a new heaven and a new earth.

A new hope and a new calling.

The river of God flowing into her, touching her heart, and flowing out from her to bring God’s love to all whom she knew.

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

This is not biblical exegesis, of course. I’m being completely and illegitimately anachronistic to put the vision of John the Divine – recorded in Revelation, written towards the end of the
first century AD – in the mind and mouth of Lydia at her baptism during Paul’s second missionary journey in about 52 AD.

This isn’t biblical scholarship.

Instead, it’s a story. It’s a story from “sanctified imagination,” using a phrase and a practice from African-American preaching. It’s a story that invites us to see Lydia in a new way; to see ourselves in Lydia: or in the others whose lives intersect with hers. It’s a story that invites us to make connections: between the story of Lydia we read in Acts and the story of faith that we know from ourselves, our friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So I invite you to see Lydia meeting in a new and astonishing way the God who guided her to the synagogue, whom she learnt to worship at the river, whose reviving and refreshing love has been revealed to all the world in Jesus.

And I invite us to join her at the river. The river of the water of life, bright as crystal. The river in which God pours out transforming, healing love. The river that shines with God’s glory.

And as we join, with Lydia, in the worship of heaven – may we become part of God’s healing and transforming love. May we be carried on the current of the river, revived and refreshed, to bring revival and refreshment to all the world.