

All Heaven Breaks Loose!

Scripture: Acts 16:5, 16-34 Easter 7C

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5So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

16One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.

17While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation."

18She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her."

And it came out that very hour.

19But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities.

20When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews

21and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe."

22The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods.

23After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely.

24Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

26Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

27When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped.

28But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

29The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.

30Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

31They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

32They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

33At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay.

34He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Proclamation of the Word

Speaking of we are going to see the King! That Spiritual is talking about Christ, the King, but in 1957 a new singer burst on the scene. His first movie, Jailhouse Rock was a hit. It was the debut of Elvis Presley...a gyrating man from Mississippi who combined the blues with the riffs of rock. He was the cause of much consternation among parents for the waywardness of their teens who were listening to Elvis. In the movie Jailhouse Rock, a man is sent to prison for manslaughter and incidentally, he discovers there his redemption and freedom in a jail. He discovers a future through Rock and Roll. Ironically, freedom is found through singing in a jail cell.

Our Scripture today takes us to a jail scene as well. It is a story of people being set free by God's Holy Spirit. Paul and Silas, those sent out on a mission, find themselves in a strange set of circumstances certainly more profound than a rock and roll King and a jailhouse. They, too, find themselves set free after singing and praying to God for deliverance.

The Apostle Paul and Silas have started out in this European town on the fringe of Asia as they continue the work of being sent to share the gospel and plant new communities of faith. In this new land, the laws and customs are much different than those of Paul's home in Jerusalem. In this town, on this day, a woman who is enslaved is set free from a spirit, Paul and Silas are beaten and thrown in jail, and then are set free because an earthquake shakes the doors open.

First, let me remind you of what put them in jail in the first place. Paul and Silas are hounded by a girl with a spirit. Because Paul is annoyed with her, he finally casts out the spirit. This starts the entire unfolding of events of the day. Because the girl is free from the spirit, her owners experience economic loss because her power had made them money as she behaved like a fortune teller of sorts. Paul is not at his best here. He casts out the spirit because he is annoyed and tired of her following them around! She has been following Paul and Silas

for days crying out, "They are slaves to the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation!" While what she says is true, Paul is annoyed, casts out the spirit, but she is still a slave of her owners. Her enslavement is never addressed by Paul. We do not know what happens to her as her value to her owners may have been diminished. In a world where today human trafficking is a very real problem, I get frustrated that this slave girl is left hanging. Paul, a hero in the faith, shows his very human side.

Casting out the spirit gets Paul and Silas in trouble. The owners trump up charges while appealing to the crowd's prejudice saying they are Jews. The kangaroo court and the magistrates convict them, flog them, and throw them in jail.

It is there that Paul and Silas who began their day looking for a place to pray in a pagan land where the Roman gods were revered, that they find themselves beaten and imprisoned without rights. At the end of a day, they begin to have evening prayers and sing hymns to God. Opposition and persecution cannot thwart their mission nor their worship of God.

As they sing their songs of faith in a God who is their refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble, they are overheard by the jailer and other inmates.

Opposition and persecution cannot thwart their sense of the gospel, cannot quiet the songs of faith that play in their hearts. In times of trouble many find comfort in the words of Scripture and the songs of faith. I remember being 15 and sitting in a dark auditorium at Purdue University. I was attending the Presbyterian Youth Triennium- an international youth conference with over 5000 attendees. I heard Benjamin Weir speak. Weir is the Presbyterian missionary educator who for sixteen months was held captive in Lebanon by Shiite Muslim extremists in 1984 and 1985 during the Iran Contra affair. The first night of his captivity, Ben said, he remembered the hymn, "Abide with me, fast falls the eventide." He prayed, and then quietly he began to do what he had done many times before, singing "All praise to thee, my God, this night for all the blessings of the light! Keep me, o keep me safe from harm within the shelter of thine arm" That is hymn #542 in our hymnal. Songs of praise in the night, in the dark remind us that God is our only refuge and strength in times of trouble. Weir has continued to work for peace and served as Moderator of the Presbyterian Church following his captivity.

One pastor reflects, “Among God’s great gifts to us in times of turmoil are the remembered tunes and texts of faith, and the prayers of the church. They are not for our own comfort only, however; for Ben Weir, as for Paul and Silas, such memories helped forge concern and compassion for their **keepers** as well and thus afforded opportunities for authentic and powerful witness to the Gospel.” (Robert Dunham in *Lectionary Homiletics Preaching the Lesson I - Acts 16:16-34*)

As Paul and Silas sing their hymns in the dark, it happens!
All Heaven Breaks loose!

When an earthquake rumbles.

They probably thought “soon and very soon we are going to see the king!”

The doors of the jail open, but no one escapes.

The jailer who is so distraught over losing face and his job, takes his sword in hand to harm himself.

But the crazy thing is no one leaves, not even the other prisoners.

Paul yells to the jailer to stop!

In the dark of night, the jailer cannot see that the prisoners have not escaped. Paul has compassion on his keepers, too.

Paul yells, “Do not harm yourself, we are all here!” Paul knows even his jailer, the keeper of the keys, did not know the freedom of God’s grace and shares the gospel with him. As the events unfold, not only are Paul and Silas set free, but the jailer is too.

They understand the freedom found in God.

The jailer and his household are baptized.

Truly the slave girl was right.

These men are slaves of the Most High God and know the way to salvation.

For all of Paul’s shortcomings or lack of compassion on the slave girl herself, God still uses him. He is not only a disciple he is an apostle, SENT to proclaim and live the gospel, too. Disciples are students, learners, but apostles are sent out. We are both. We gather around God’s word each week for a couple of hours so that we can be strengthened to go out and serve the other 166 hours of the week.

We are called to be apostles joining in the mission God has laid out before us.

As one writer states,

Apostleship is the fundamental posture of allowing God to use me as I am, in order that God might use me—imperfect, awkward me—to do the work of love in the world. In the Acts story, Paul lands himself and his friends in jail, but God

uses this turn of events to manifest the divine glory. To state it differently, God transforms Paul's mindlessness to God's own greater purpose. It is enormously liberating to understand that God can transform even our idiocy for God's greater glory! What we consider our worst faults may, in the end, be the vehicles for God's achieving a greater end. God does not call us to be perfect people; God calls us to be perfect in faith, so that our apostleship may be used for God's own perfect end. (Timothy P. Muldoon in Lectionary Homiletics Journal)

Apostles allow God to use me as I am in order that God might use- imperfect and awkward me- to do the work of love in the world.

What God does is bring redemption and transformation through us when we are willing vessels and even in spite of us. And the good news is as stated in Acts 16: 5, "The churches strengthened in faith and grew in numbers daily."

This week I attended a gathering with a few of our members called Acts 16:5 Initiative with other churches from our Presbytery. Acts 16:5 is a process by which we embark on a mission of strengthening faith in our churches and sharing faith with our neighbors.

We do so because as John Calvin wrote faith is always personal but never private.

We do so because we are the called people of God who have been set free for service.

We do so because there are many who suffer in personal bondage whether it is addiction, hopelessness, or other difficulties while others are victims of corporate circumstances: economic troubles, unjust systems, or violence.

We do so because faith is not a gift to be possessed but to be shared.

As those to whom God has shown blessing and grace, we have good news to share. Salvation or good news or redemption is not ours to hold onto and lock up enjoying for ourselves. We are sent out to burst forth following worship through these doors each week to carry and live the good news.

Hopefully it won't take an earthquake to get us going.

Can you hear the singing- even in the darkness?

Wouldn't it be great if all heaven would break loose,

and we might be a part of sharing good news with the world
so others may discover a song and rejoice?

You go nowhere by accident.

Wherever you go, God is sending you,

Wherever you are, God has put you there;

God has a purpose in your being there.

***Christ who dwells in you has something He wants to do through you where
you are.***

Believe this and go in His grace and love and power.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

(adapted from Richard C. Halverson)