

Acts 16:16 One 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. 17 While 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.” 18 She 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.

Acts 16:19 But 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. 20 When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews 21 and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” 22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23 After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24 Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Acts 16:25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

26 Suddenly 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. 27 When 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. 28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.

30 Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

32 They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34 He 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.

MINISTRY INTERRUPTED

Paul was on a mission. He had important things to do and influential people to convince.

What Paul didn't count on was the interruption of a slave girl. Paul didn't really see the slave girl or her healing as a part of his mission. She was a pain in the neck.

And yet she continued to follow him around shouting, "These men are the slaves of the most high God and proclaim to you the way of salvation." This went on for a several days and became very irritating.

So. Paul, not out of compassion but out of frustration told the spirit that possessed this girl, "In the name of Jesus Christ I order you to come out of her." And, the Bible tells us that she was healed right away.

Last week we talked about the fact that the Holy Spirit redirected the mission of Paul and Silas. They were blocked from going to places they were planning to go and were instead led by a vision to come to Macedonia.

But, now that they are in Macedonia in the town of Philippi, they are in a different world. There is no synagogue, just a group that meets for prayer by the river. Very few people understand or even care about the one true God. They worship many gods, and worship is big business. Fortunetellers are in great demand

We might compare Philippi to Cassadega, that little town to the north of us where you can learn your future ... for a price.

Fortune telling was a real moneymaker in those days, and Paul in his frustrated healing of this slave girl had inadvertently created a financial reversal for this slave's masters. They could no longer make money from this girl's fortune telling.

What do you do when someone injures you financially? You take them to court. And that's exactly what happened to Paul and Silas.

KANGAROO COURT

The slave owners took them to court ... what turns out to be a kangaroo court.

Actually, the Bible says that their accusers drag Paul and Silas into the market place and then bring out the magistrates. And this is the accusation that they make,

“These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.”

Wait a minute. I’m confused. I thought these guys are angry because their moneymaking slave no longer has the gift of divination. But, notice their charge.

“These guys are outside agitators. They’re not one of us. They’re Jews, and you know how tricky those Jews can be. I bet they’re up to something no good. They’re probably going to break the law in some way.”

There’s no need for a trial if people are accused of being outside agitators, terrorists from some foreign land. The crowd insists that Paul and Silas be punished.

They are beaten severely with rods and handed over to the jailer. He is given orders by the authorities. “Put these guys under the jail. They are dangerous.”

And so Paul and Silas are placed in “innermost cell” and their feet are fastened in the stocks.

REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

Notice how quickly the fortunes of Paul and Silas have changed. Just a few days ago they thought they knew where God wanted them to go. Some women down by the riverside readily accepted what they had to say, and one woman, Lydia even gave them a place to stay.

But, their trip back to that place of prayer down by the riverside was rudely interrupted by the cries of a slave girl. She wasn't a person worthy of notice. She was a nuisance.

But, Paul not out of compassion but out of frustration had healed her.

And that changed everything. It set into motion a chain of events that got Paul and Silas severely beaten and chained in the darkest hellhole anyone could imagine. What was going on? Why did this happen to Paul and Silas? Had God abandoned them?

I wouldn't have blamed Paul and Silas if they had thought that this was the case.

Sometimes life just falls apart. One innocent encounter leads to chain of events that places us into the darkest hellhole of our life, and we quite naturally wonder what is going on. We ask, "Where is God in all of this? Why did this happen to me?"

A MODERN STORY AND AN OLD, OLD STORY

This is an old story, but we can recognize it as a modern story as well. The same forces that bring about Paul and Silas' reversal in fortune are the same forces that bring about suffering even today. It is a story about greed, xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

It's not just a story about what happened long ago. It's a story about what is happening today.

People are still enslaved by those whose sole concern is profit. People are still persecuted, thrown into jail, and even killed for no other reason than the fact that they are different, that they are not one of us.

And into this world of slavery and injustice God chooses to send his messenger of hope. Into this

world of superstition and despair God chooses to send a word of salvation.

Paul thought that the slave girl was a nuisance. She was in fact the messenger of God. She was just the latest example of how God brings hope to the hopeless and freedom to those who are enslaved.

We know where this story started. It started in the darkest corner of hell. This story started on the cross of Calvary.

The world turned dark, and the Savior cried out in despair as he died, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

But, at that moment of despair the ground trembled, and the bond of death was broken. The stone was rolled away. And from the dark depths of hell arose a salvation that could not be stifled even by the devil.

And the story of the Acts of the Apostles (a story that continues even today, by the way) is the story of how the power of the resurrection continues. The power of the resurrection continues to shout out hope in the darkest places, and earthquakes still shake the foundations of the powers that be.

THE EARTHSHAKING POWER OF HYMNS

Today's lesson is a good example of what I'm talking about. Paul and Silas are convicted by a lie, beaten to within an inch of their life and thrown into the darkest corner of the local jail. And how do they respond?

They pray and sing hymns! They hold choir practice. Their voices echo off the walls of stone. Their melody fills the jail, and the other prisoners wonder what is making these jailbirds sing.

Would you do that? Would you sing under those circumstances?

Paul and Silas sing because they live by a story that can be set to music. Their hymns are a love song that tells of God's love. It is a love that can reach into the darkest place of our life. It can even reach condemned prisoners who are chained to the wall of a jail cell.

This is a good test of the message we preach. Can I take this story to prison with me? Does this story sustain me when the one I love most in life is gone? There are other stories that are adequate when life is

gentle and bright. But, what stories hold up when life is hard and rough?

When a member of our fellowship is in a dark place, (when a loved one dies, for example), what do we do? We pray and sing hymns.

We have a worship service that is called a “Witness to the Resurrection.” In our darkest hour we remember who we are and whose we are. We remember that no hellhole is deep enough to overcome the power of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HYMNS AND SONGS

In order to prepare us for the time of testing it’s important for us to learn hymns. There’s a difference between hymns and songs, and that difference is most apparent in the time of testing. Do you know the difference between hymns and songs?

Well, hymns are about God and not about us.

Can you imagine singing a hymn entitled, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Ourselves”? There are indeed many who sing that song (or a song like it), but that

song is not a hymn. And it does not bring comfort during the dark times.

In fact even the best songs can add to our pain during the dark times. Let me give you an example.

A pastor told of spending his anniversary with his wife at the newly renovated Rainbow Room, atop Rockefeller Center in Manhattan. The Rainbow Room is a fantastic club in the Art Deco style. The tables are set in tiers around a circular dance floor. A big band plays, and the lights of Manhattan provide the backdrop for the whole scene.

The pastor and his wife were enjoying an evening of dining and dancing to the fine music of Gershwin, Cole Porter and the other big band greats. He said that everything seemed to fit ... the setting, the music, and the words of love filling the air.

But, then the band played a song that transported him to a very different time and place. It was a funeral service that he had attended years before. The person who died loved the old standards and requested that a few of his favorites be sung at her funeral.

And he said that one of the songs that was sung was the one to which people were now twirling around

the dance floor to in the Rainbow Room. It was a beautiful romantic ballad by George and Ira Gershwin, “Our Love is Here to Stay.”

The words go, “The Rockies may crumble, Gibraltar may tumble, they’re only made of clay, but our love is here to stay.”

The pastor said that this song was beautiful when it was played in the Rainbow Room. But, when it was played at a funeral, it was painful. It just didn’t hold up to the occasion.

He wrote, “In the Rainbow Room, where life is sparkling and bright, such romantic sentiments are sufficient.” But at the memorial service in the middle of harsher realities he needed something more. A ballad about romantic love “just seemed to blow away like a frail flower in a stiff, cold wind.”

What we need and what the world needs is a different kind of love song. We need a love song that can be sung in the prison cell, the nursing home and at the funeral service. Those songs are called hymns, and they’re not about us. They’re not about what we can do.

They are about God and what God has already done in Christ Jesus. They are songs of resurrection that can even be sung in the darkest corners of life.

A CRUISE TO DISASTER

Several years ago a Greek cruise ship sank off the coast of South Africa. The ship ran aground in a severe storm, and the crew deserted the ship with few passengers making it into lifeboats.

The remaining passengers were brought into the main dining room to await the rescue helicopters. While they were there the ship's entertainers tried to lighten the mood. They tried magic tricks, jokes and sing-alongs, but none of those things that seemed so much fun just a few hours ago did any good. In fact it made things worse.

One passenger recalled, "There we were sitting in the dark, singing songs to keep our minds off the cold and fright. We began with 'We are Sailing' but decided it wasn't true. We got into 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean' and 'Goodbye Love, Goodbye Happiness,' but this did nothing for morale."

Fortunately this story did have a happy ending. The passengers were saved before the ocean took the ship.

But, I wonder if those passengers were changed by the experience. I wonder if they thought more deeply about the songs they sung and the way they spent their time.

And I wonder about us as well. What songs do we sing? What occupies our time? Can we sing those songs when the storms of life rage? Paul and Silas had a song, a hymn of praise to God that could stand up even in prison. They had a song, a hymn of praise that could stand up even in death's waiting room.

We talk about learning songs "by heart." That's a wonderful phrase. It's about more than just memorizing the words and the music. It's about taking a message to heart. It's about having a heavenly hope deep down inside. It's about a joy that is not dependent upon circumstances.

SHAKING THE FOUNDATIONS

That kind of hope and joy changes things. In our story for today the hymn singing of Paul and Silas shook the foundations of the prison. All the doors were opened. All the chains dropped off.

Surely the prisoners would run away. That's what the Philippian jailer assumed. When we have too

many jailbreaks, we fire the warden, and sometimes we even fire the jailers. But, in those days if the prisoners escaped the jailer would face more than the loss of his job. He would face the loss of his life.

And so this foundation-shaking event was not such good news for him. It was the worst news possible. He decided to do the honorable thing and kill himself.

And it's at this point that we see the breath taking scope of God's salvation. God's salvation is not only for those who are (in some cases) unjustly imprisoned. It is also for those who are responsible for the jail.

A commentator said that this passage tells in story form what Paul wrote in prose in his letter to the Galatians:

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

We can certainly see the truth of this when we look at last week's lesson and our lesson for today. Women and men are saved. Slaves are freed. And even jailers are transformed by the power of the gospel.

When (in last week's lesson) Lydia became a believer, she and her whole household were baptized into the faith. And Lydia responded by welcoming Paul and his other missionary friends into her house.

The same thing happens with the Philippian jailer.

WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?

You may have noticed that there are two miracles in our story for today. The first miracle occurs when the earthquake strikes just the jail and all the prisoners are set free. But, the second miracle occurs when Paul shouts the sleeping jailer who is about to commit suicide, "Don't kill yourself. We are all here. No one has run away."

The jailer brings a light and goes into the tomb like prison and finds that it is true. And he asks Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" I'm not so sure the Philippian jailer was thinking about eternal salvation when he asked this question. I think he was asking about temporal salvation. He was asking, "How can I get out of this mess? The doors to the jail have been opened, and I'm responsible."

But, Paul answers his question on an eternal, spiritual level. Paul says, “Believe on the Lord, Jesus Christ, and you will be saved ... you and your household.” Paul and Silas explained what this meant. They preached the gospel to the jailer, and to his family. The whole family believed and was baptized that very night.

And then the Philippian jailer, like Lydia before him takes Paul home and shows him hospitality. He feeds them and binds up their wounds. And instead of being filled with the fear that leads to death, the jailer and his family are now filled with joy.

That’s quite a transformation. One moment the jailer is about to kill himself, and the next moment the jailer and his family are a part of a celebration. God’s song, God’s hymn of love once again transforms the darkest night into the blinding light of salvation. When all hope is lost God surprises us with a resurrection.

THE REST OF THE STORY

There are a lot of loose ends in this story. What happened to the slave girl who was freed from her demonic spirit? What happened to the prisoners who heard Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns and who

didn't run away when the doors to their prison were opened? What happened to the Philippian jailer?

I can't prove this, but I think that they became part of a new church at Philippi. They became a part of a body of believers that never stopped rejoicing or believing even when they were imprisoned or persecuted for the gospel. The Spirit of God through the ministry of Paul and Silas had taught them a new song, a hymn of faith that stood up to the darkest hours of life.

I wonder. Are there some captives in our congregation today? Are some of you worried about the future?

Do some of you find yourself in a dark place from which there seems to be no escape? Perhaps some of you have even begun to wonder if life is worth it. You cry out with the Philippian jailer, "What must I do to be saved?"

I suggest you sing a hymn, a song that shakes the foundations of the prison.

It won't seem like a very effective thing to do in the light of great difficulty. But, we have seen that appearances can be deceiving. The power of God in

Jesus Christ to transform the hearts and minds of people is an awesome power indeed.

We sing that hymn today with the sure and certain hope that everything will be changed by His power tomorrow. Listen and sing along to this hymn of salvation.

Amen.