

Hymn Power
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Acts 16:16-34

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.

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.

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.

PRAYER INTERRUPTED

Paul was going down to the river to pray.
But, there was a problem.

His prayer time was being interrupted by a slave girl who was also a fortune teller.

Paul did not feel compassion for this slave girl.
He felt irritation.
She wouldn't leave him alone.

Wherever he went she shouted,
“These men are slaves of the most high God and proclaim to you the way of salvation.”

This went on for several days.
As you might imagine, this was very irritating.
It is not possible to preach while someone else is shouting.

Finally, Paul had had enough.
He told the spirit possessing this slave girl,
“In the name of Jesus Christ, I order you to come out of her.”

She was healed on the spot.
Good for Paul.
Good for the slave girl. Right?

Not exactly.
This fortune teller made her masters a lot of money.

And her healing ended their fortune telling business.

Fortunes-R-Us was dependent upon the spirit of slavery.

MONEY AND RELIGION

Remember. The apostles had crossed the border.
They were in Gentile country.
And in Gentile country fortune telling was big business.

You can talk about Jesus all you want when you go down by the river to pray where no one of importance will be threatened.

But, talking about Jesus in the market place is a much more dangerous.

When you challenge those who make their money on the backs of the poor and the helpless, then you have quit preaching and gone to meddling.

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

But, notice where the court is located.
The court is not located in a building where justice is blind.

No, the accusers drag Paul and Silas into the market place. The market place does not have a conscience.
It is guided solely by self-interest.

Paul and Silas will not be judged by a jury of their peers. They will be judged by people who also stand to lose a lot of money if the gospel is preached.

OUTSIDER AGITATORS

So they drag them into the market place and make this accusation,

“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.”

When some newcomer throws a monkey wrench into your financial system, even in the market place, you can't just say, "This is bad for business."

If you say that, some might say,
 "That's okay with me.
 Wall Street has been ripping us off for years.
 I'm with these new guys."

Paul healed a slave girl in an economy built on slavery. She was free of the spirit that kept her captive.
 And freedom is a dangerous word in a society built on captivity.

Others might see hope in the freeing of this slave girl.

So, how do you take the focus off of freedom?
 You play to the people's fears.
 You say,

"These guys are outside agitators.
 They're not one of us.

They're Jews.
 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.
 Maybe we need to ban all those Jews from coming into our country.

You can't be too careful when it comes to Jews."

You see, there's no need for a trial if people are accused of being outside agitators.
 If people are accused of being terrorists from some foreign land, then people will act out of emotion instead of reason.

PUNISHED AND IMPRISONED

That's what happened in this case.
 The crowd insists that Paul and Silas be punished.
 "We need to teach these outside agitators a lesson."

And they are punished.

Paul and Silas are beaten severely with rods, not only by the authorities but *also by the crowds*.

You see, when you preach hate and fear, the crowds tend to get rowdy, and things happen that you can't control.

Finally, the authorities regain control of the situation.
It's amazing that Paul and Silas lived through that beating.

But, a beating is not enough for the authorities.
They tell the jailor,

"These guys are foreign terrorists.

Put them in the innermost cell where the sun doesn't shine.
And make sure that their feet are securely fastened in the stocks."

So they take them to jail.

SINGING HYMNS IN THE DARK

What do you do when you are beaten down by life, and you suddenly find yourself chained in a dark hole?

Paul and Silas sing hymns.
And the other prisoners who share their darkness are listening.

When we who are Christians struggle and are beaten down by life, there are others who share our prison.
And they are watching and listening.

And they want to know.
Does our faith change the way we approach these difficult times?

For Paul and Silas their faith in Jesus does make a difference in how they approach this prison.

They pray and sing hymns.

How can they do that?

What do Paul and Silas know that allows them to act in this way?

They know the story of Calvary.

They know the story of the crucifixion.

The world turned dark on Calvary's hill, 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.

That's why they sang.

No place was too dark, no injustice was too great to overcome the power of God's salvation in Christ Jesus.

Let the world do its worst.

God's people will keep praying and singing in the darkness.

STILL EASTER

Resurrection power will not be stopped by anything.

Paul will put it this way in his letter to the Romans.

He asked, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?"

The answer? Nothing.

Not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (See Romans 8:31-39)

People who believe that can sing in the darkness.

Paul and Silas live by a story that can be set to music. Their hymns tell of God's love, a love that is eternal.

And that love song can reach into the darkest place of our life too.

The story of the Acts of the Apostles is the story of how the power of the resurrection continues.

Look at our paraments.

They're still Easter paraments.

Why?

We're still celebrating Easter.

For us the resurrection continues to sing a song of hope in the darkest places. And earthquakes still shake the foundations of those prisons that would keep us captive.

The hymn singing of Paul and Silas shook the foundations of the prison. That's hymn power.

The word of God proclaimed is powerful.
The word of God sung is earth shattering.

GRACE FOR THE PRISONERS AND THE JAILER

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.

Paul wrote 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.

A HOUSEHOLD SAVED

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.
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 to 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.

He 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?

Like most stories in the Bible we aren't told the rest of the story.

I wonder.

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 and his family?

I suspect that they became part of a new and joyful 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 the power of a hymn.

They were singing a new song.

They were singing a hymn of faith that could bring light to the darkest hours of life.

THE REST OF OUR STORY

I wonder.

Are there some captives in our congregation today?

Are some of you worried about the future?

Are some of you 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.

I suggest you sing a song that shakes the foundations of the prison that you’re in.

It won’t seem like a very effective thing to do in the face of such great difficulties.

But, we have seen that appearances can be deceiving. The power of God in Christ can still transform hearts and minds.

It is an awesome power.

It still shakes the foundations.

It still sets the captives free.

You know, 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.

When you are beaten down and in prison, singing the right song is the best thing that you can do.

THE CRUISE SHIP

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-a-longs, 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 we decided it wasn't true.

We got into 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean' and 'Goodbye Love, Good-bye Happiness.'

But those songs certainly did nothing for morale."

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

But, I wonder if those passengers were changed by the experience.

I wonder if this close encounter with tragedy made them think more deeply about the songs they sung and the way they spent their time.

HYMN POWER

The songs that we sing tells us a lot about what we really believe.

Do our songs stand up to the big moments of life?
Can we sing those songs when we are beaten down by life and the darkness encroaches?

We mourn the passing of great musicians, but quite often the words to their songs are vapid and profane. They offer no hope.

What we need ... and what the world needs is a different kind of song.

We need a song that can be sung in the prison cell.
We need a song that can be sung in the nursing home.
We need a song that can be sung 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.

With the prophet Isaiah I would challenge you to sing a new song.

Sing a song that is inspired by the Lord.
Sing a song of a hope that is eternal.

Hymn power.
Nothing ... is greater.

Amen.