

At Home Worship
May 29, 2022 7th Sunday of Easter
First Presbyterian Church-Sweetwater

Find a Sacred Space

Sit comfortably, perhaps with something warm to drink, where you can look out on the beauty Of God's creation today. Read aloud or quietly to yourself, or as a family share the various parts of the service.

Greeting - The Lord be with you. **And also, with you.**

Call to Worship and Prayer of Praise

Let the people of God gather this day in praise and thanksgiving!

For we were once lost and without hope, but in Christ we are saved.

Christ can change the darkest heart and heal wounds we cannot mend.

Christ is the first and the last, and in Christ is our salvation.

Let us celebrate and give praise to Almighty God who redeemed us all.

Blessed be the name of the Lord!

O God, our Redeemer and Savior, through Your mercy and grace You sent us the Christ and gave us hope, even against the powers of evil. Call us again to carry Your Gospel into all the world. In Christ we pray. Amen.

Sing, Listen, or Read Hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" #88 VSS.1,5,6,7

1. O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

5. O come, O Key of David, come and open wide our heavenly home; make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

6. O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

7. O come, Desire of nations, bind all people in one heart and mind; bid envy, strife and discord cease; fill the whole world with heaven's peace. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

A Time of Confession and Assurance

O God, when adversity comes upon us, we have often looked to blame someone for our plight. Help us to learn from Paul and Silas that we would better spend our time in prayer and singing hymns to you. Strengthen our faith in your presence through bad times as well as good. Forgive us, Lord, and call us anew to reach the lost.

(silent prayer of personal confession).....Amen

God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. The good news is that Christ calls us to new life and enables us to begin again and again and again and again. Friends, believe the good news of the gospel.

People: **In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!**

Sing, Listen, or Read Hymn

“We Have Heard the Joyful Sound”

1. We have heard the joyful sound: Jesus saves! Jesus saves! Spread the tidings all around:
Jesus saves! Jesus saves! Bear the news to every land, Climb the steeps and cross the waves;
Onward! 'tis our Lord's command; Jesus saves! Jesus saves!

2. Waft it on the rolling tide: Jesus saves! Jesus saves! Tell to sinners far and wide: Jesus saves!
Jesus saves! Sing, ye islands of the sea; Echo back, ye ocean caves; Earth shall keep her jubilee:
Jesus saves! Jesus saves!

3. Give the winds a mighty voice: Jesus saves! Jesus saves! Let the nations now rejoice:
Jesus saves! Jesus saves! Shout salvation full and free, Highest hills and deepest caves;
This our song of victory: Jesus saves! Jesus saves!

Moving Heaven and Earth

Acts 16:16-34

The story's told about a Chinese gentleman who was visiting the United States. His hosts took him to play golf. This was a new experience for him.

When he returned to China, a friend asked what he had done in the United States. He replied, “I played most interesting game. I hit a little white ball with a long stick in a large cow pasture.

“What's this game called?” asked his friend.

The Chinese gentleman thought for a minute and replied, “I think it's called, ‘Oh, no!’” Some of us may have played the game of “Oh, no!” on the golf course too.

It reminds me of a certain golfer who told his caddie that he would move Heaven and earth to be able to break one hundred on the golf course.

The caddie, who had gone eighteen agonizing holes with this poor guy, replied, “Well, you better start trying to move Heaven because you have been moving earth all afternoon and it isn't getting you anywhere.”

Today we're going to talk about a prayer that moved both Heaven *and* earth. It's found in Acts 16:16-34. Paul and Silas have been thrown into prison. Here is the reason for their incarceration. While visiting the city of Philippi, Paul and Silas were followed for days by a servant girl who, according to Luke, the writer of Acts, “had a spirit by which she predicted the future.”

Notice, this wasn't a spirit that came from God. This was a strictly commercial enterprise. This servant girl earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. And yet, for some reason, she followed Paul and Silas around, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. That sounds like a positive thing, but St. Paul didn't think so. We're not sure of her motive but finally, Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and spoke to the spirit in her, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

This presented a problem for the slave girl's owners. They made money off of her predictions. And they wanted to punish Paul and Silas for interfering with their source of income. So they dragged Paul and Silas to the marketplace and made false accusations against them before the local magistrates. The magistrates ordered that Paul and Silas be stripped and beaten with rods. After their beating, they were thrown into an interior cell, the darkest part of the prison.

Imagine visiting a foreign city in which you are falsely accused of a crime, attacked by a violent mob, stripped naked and beaten, and thrown into a dark prison cell. Few of us will ever endure that kind of violence and injustice. But many of us know what it's like to lose everything that is important to us. Everything that is secure. Many of us know what it is like to feel trapped and alone and beyond all help. **And that brings us to the first question for this morning: How do you respond to life in your weakest and worst moments?** I'm not asking this to shame anyone this morning. I'm asking because our weakest and worst moments expose what we really believe in and what we really value.

So how did Paul and Silas respond to being treated so unjustly? Verse 25 tells us. We read, "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them." Think of that! In their weakest and worst moment, in a prison cell, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. Is that the way you respond when you are placed in a really bad situation?

In 1972, Colonel Robert Certain's plane was shot down over Hanoi, Vietnam. Certain and two other members of his crew were the only survivors. They were taken prisoner and held in the infamous "Hanoi Zoo" for 101 days before being liberated. Col. Certain tells of a time when he and his fellow prisoners were holding a morning worship service in the Hanoi prison camp. One of the guards approached the group and asked why they would bother worshipping a God who wasn't going to rescue them.

How would you answer that question? Do you think Paul and Silas only worshipped God because they expected that God would rescue them? Were they praying for rescue? Were they praying for strength? Or were they praising God for His goodness? I suspect it was the latter. Whatever the content of that prayer, it was powerful enough to break open prison doors and yank shackles off of hands and feet.

Think of it. In their weakest and worst moment, when everything had been stripped away from them, Paul and Silas proved Who they truly believed in and what they truly valued. I don't believe they prayed for God to save their lives; I believe they prayed and praised God because in Him they found the true purpose of life. What could be more freeing than that?

But let's get back to Colonel Certain's story. He and the other captives had just been asked why they would worship a God who wasn't going to rescue them. The men replied, in essence, "What makes you think we are in prison? God has taken us out of this place and set us free. And there is nothing you can do to imprison us. You can hold our bodies for a time, but you will never, never imprison our hearts and our minds."

Can you imagine a prisoner of war looking into the eyes of his guard and declaring that even behind bars he was free? The prisoners' faith in God gave them hope, and hope in God is the ultimate freedom from the circumstances of our lives.

By the way, after coming home from Vietnam, Col. Certain became an Air Force Chaplain. After retiring from the military, he served as an Episcopal priest at several churches across the United States.

And that brings me to our second question from this scripture lesson: "Who is listening to you?" Let's look at our focus verse, verse 25, again: "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them." That's important. The other prisoners were listening to them.

You and I are sometimes contagious. Other people notice our mood, our attitude, our words, our actions, our inaction. Now, don't misunderstand. I am not encouraging you to act happy when you are devastated. I am not suggesting that you fake faithfulness and gratitude when your world is coming apart. I am saying that in our weakest and worst moments people will see the tiny flicker of faith in God, the tiny glimmer of hope that comes from knowing that your life is not consumed by your present circumstances, but by your trust in God. And someone will be listening to you. Will they hear the hope of God in your life?

Author Colleen Townsend Evans tells of a time when she felt the urge to take a copy of the book *A Man Called Peter* to her friends, Neal and Connie. Some of you may remember *A Man Called Peter*. It is the true story of a poor Scottish immigrant named Peter Marshall who became chaplain of the United States Senate and subsequently one of the most revered men in America. The book became the number one best-seller when it was published in 1951. Later it was released as a popular motion picture. For some reason Ms. Evans felt that Neal and Connie would profit from reading this book.

The next evening after she made this gift to them, the husband, Neal, called Colleen and demanded to know why she had brought them this book. Colleen could only say that she felt God had sent her to deliver it. Neal insisted that Colleen come over right away.

Colleen found Neal and Connie in the middle of a crisis. The previous night, Neal came home from a business trip to discover Connie with another man. He asked Connie for a divorce. The next day, they began discussing the affair and the end of their marriage, when Neal picked up the book Colleen had dropped off and began flipping through the pages. As fate would have it, or better yet, as God would have it, he came across Peter Marshall's sermon on the woman caught in adultery. You can find the story in John 8:1-11.

Neal read the sermon through, and his anger was transformed by its message of forgiveness. He and Connie had the most heartfelt and healing conversation they'd ever experienced that night. Neal

ended his story by saying, “I don’t know how to say this, because this has never happened to us before . . . but God came into our lives last night.”

Listen to me closely: our faithfulness, our obedience doesn’t have to involve big and impressive efforts. It could be something as simple as listening to someone who needs to talk . . . or praying a simple prayer . . . or sharing with a friend a book that touched our life. It’s not our ability that God uses to mend broken lives—it’s our faithfulness.

As Norwegian theologian Ole Hallesby puts it, “Only he who is helpless can truly pray.” Only when we are helpless do we lay down our ego and rely entirely on the mercy of God.

Don’t be intimidated by the fact that others are listening to you. People don’t get comfort and hope from your adequacy. In fact, the opposite is usually true. Your inadequacy, your helplessness, offered up in faith and love, still have the power to bring hope and light and life to others who are in the same prison you are in.

And that brings us to the final question from our lesson today: Who needs to be set free by your example? When Paul and Silas were faithful to God in their weakest and worst moment, when they prayed and sang praises to God from inside a prison cell, they proved that freedom is found in knowing God. And their prayers and praise didn’t just free them. It broke open the doors and loosed the shackles of all the prisoners. But that’s just the start of the freedom tsunami they unleashed.

In verse 27 we read that the jailer awoke and, assuming the prisoners would all escape, he pulled out his sword and prepared to kill himself. But Paul stopped him. He and Silas could have walked out to physical freedom, but they stayed behind because God had a greater plan to use their suffering to bring many more people to faith in Jesus Christ. And the jailer, overwhelmed by their faith and sacrifice, asked them what he could do to be saved. There’s another person set free!

Paul and Silas told him to believe in the Lord Jesus to be saved. Then they taught him about Jesus’ life. The grateful jailer took the men to his house and washed and bandaged their wounds. The final verse in our Bible story reads, “The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.” He and his whole household came to faith in Jesus Christ and were set free by the example of Paul and Silas.

In the novel *The Shawshank Redemption*, a wrongfully accused prisoner named Andy keeps talking about finding hope in prison. His buddy, Red, doesn’t want to hear it. He thinks it’s foolish to look for hope in their circumstances.

One day, Andy barricades himself in the prison warden’s office and plays a Mozart opera over the prison PA system. The music is so beautiful that the prisoners—even the hardened, angry, violent ones—pause their daily activities to listen. And as Red listens to the opera, he understands a little bit of the hope that Andy feels. He says, “I tell you, those voices soared, higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away. For the briefest of moments,” says Red, “every last man at Shawshank was free.”

The prayers of Paul and Silas didn't just give the prisoners a brief moment of freedom. They set all the prisoners free. Which led to the jailer and all the members of his household coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Which set all of them free. Which led Luke to write his story in the book of Acts—a book which has led countless people to find freedom in Jesus Christ over the past 2,000 years. And it's my hope and prayer that you will remember this story and will trust God in your weakest and worst moments. I pray that you will be able to pray and praise God, not to receive anything from God, but simply because you know that your life and hope are found only in Him. And I know that through your example, you will show others the truth of Jesus Christ. And the story of freedom through Christ will continue, to the glory of God.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Sing, Listen, or Read Hymn “Soon and Very Soon” #384

1. Soon and very soon we are goin' to see the King, Soon and very soon we are goin' to see the King, Soon and very soon we are goin' to see the King, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, we're goin' to see the King!
2. No more cryin' there we are goin' to see the King. No more cryin' there we are goin' to see the King. No more cryin' there we are goin' to see the King, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, we're goin' to see the King!
3. No more dying there we are goin' to see the King. No more dying there we are goin' to see the King. No more dying there we are goin' to see the King, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, we're goin' to see the King!
4. Soon and very soon we are goin' to see the King, Soon and very soon we are goin' to see the King, Soon and very soon we are goin' to see the King, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, we're are goin' to see the King!

Blessing

May the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and will do this. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, 28