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First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange Texas
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Acts 16:16-34

Singing in the Dark

We pick up this week, as Paul and Silas, accompanied by Luke, continue to share the gospel in the Roman city of Philippi. We once again see Paul's habit of going to the Jewish place of prayer. Last week, they met Lydia. This morning, they bump into a young woman on their way to the river.

In these two women, Luke has done a study in opposites: Lydia is a powerful, prosperous businesswoman who believes in Yahweh and has come to believe in Jesus; the slave-girl is nameless, owned by others, a commodity in the marketplace. Luke describes her as having a "pythona" spirit—the spirit of divination linked to the Roman god Apollo and to Pythia the oracle at Delphi.

Something in Paul and Silas captures the girl's attention, so she follows them around the city, telling everyone the plain truth—"these men are slaves of the Most High God who proclaim to you a way of salvation."

This girl is in the business of proclaiming the future—helping those who come to her navigate the problems of life. Biblical scholar Paul Walaskay says, "her petitioners have asked about a way out of a difficult situation, a way of rescue, a way of salvation..."¹ People come to her with their questions and she delivers answers. I think she must see in Paul and Silas something of herself, persons in service to the truth.

And, is there anything so relentless as a child in possession of a new truth?

Day after day, the girl is still at it—calling after Paul and Silas—until finally, Paul has had enough. He turns and speaks to the spirit inside her—"I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her."

Each time I read this story, I want it to be a redemption story for this girl, but that is not the story Luke tells us.

This encounter set in motion a chain of events that are Luke's true focus, but I always wonder...
What happens to this slave-girl after she is touched by the Most High God?

Evidently having a pythian spirit is big business in the Roman world. Her ability to tell truths and see the future has been very profitable. When the spirit leaves her, her owners—understanding that their cash cow is gone—seize Paul and Silas and drag them to the local authorities.

For a story filled with pythian spirits and Roman gods, what happens next seems very familiar. The owners don't charge Paul and Silas with disrupting their business, which might net them restitution for their slave-girl. In their anger, they cook up a different set of charges.

They accuse Paul and Silas being agitators and not just agitators but foreign agitators and not just foreign agitators but foreign Jewish agitators, "advocating customs that are not lawful for Romans to adopt or observe."

The owners and the crowd have made something "other" out of Paul and Silas. They have turned their anger into an accusation that will certainly see Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in jail; will likely see them tossed out of the city; and has at least some potential to get Paul and Silas killed.

It seems oddly modern—this effort to punish or destroy those with whom we disagree.

The magistrates hand Paul and Silas over to the jailer who—like our 19-century Fayette County sheriffs—lived in the jail. The jailer has his orders: keep Paul and Silas secure. So, they get an inner-cell and are shackled to the floor.

What do you do when you are in a spot like this?

I've had at least one opportunity to pick up a soldier from the Killeen jail way in the wee hours of the morning. It was about what you'd expect. There were apologies, contrition, expressions of remorse, and even a few tears as the bars snicked open. We could not get out of there fast enough—just ask my PFC.

But in this ancient Philippian jail, in the deep of the night, Paul and Silas are praying and singing—SINGING—hymns of praise to God. Beatings and imprisonment won't make them forget whose they are, and so they give thanks to God even while shackled in darkness.

They sing and the whole jail is listening.

When is it time to pray, when is it time to sing praise, when is it time to bear witness to God?

Paul and Silas show us that it is *always* time.

In an area that experiences tremblers, a large earthquake shakes the jail and its chains open.

Snick.

The jailer—awakened to the sight of opened doors—plans to fall on his sword thinking he has failed in his duty to secure the prisoners. As if given a vision from his inner cell, Paul calls out for the jailer to stop. Not only are Paul and Silas still there, but so are ALL the rest.

I can only imagine that the other prisoners have stayed because they have found a different kind of freedom; a salvation found, not in running away, but by abiding in Jesus.

Paul and Silas have used their imprisonment to reach and to preach what it means to sing in the darkness. They have used their imprisonment as a witness to reach the jailer and his household.

Stunned by their presence—the jailer calls for lights, rushes in, brings Paul and Silas out of their cell and asks them “what must I do to be saved?” The question—the kind once asked of an oracle girl—now finds its proper place.

Paul and Silas speak God’s word to their jailer, to the prisoners, to the whole household. The jailer will wash and bind their wounds; then Paul and Silas will wash the whole family with the waters of baptism.

Rejoicing, they will share table fellowship, a meal that—for the apostles—holds all the sacredness of a communion feast.

I think perhaps our most powerful witness comes when we accept our call to sing praise in the darkness.

We can bear witness to the things—the spirits loose in this world—that try to hold us captive.

We are accultured to express power in violence, to oppose and oppress difference, to wage war with our enemies, to secure our present at the expense of our future. We are accultured to find ourselves diminished by illness, by age, by addiction, by loss, by joblessness, by the powers of the marketplace, by all the lesser gods that hold the stories of our enslavement.

There is no Pollyanna wistfulness in Paul and Silas, they remain in darkness so that they can witness to the light of God. They bring a word of salvation, of reconciliation, of community, and of love to all those they meet.

I can only ask them...

How do we sing praise in the wake of another mass shooting?

How do we sing praise during another contested election?

How do we sing praise in the face of rampant hatred and racism?

How do we sing praise in the midnight of our own fear?

I still remember reading the small wooden plaque, although I don't remember where. It read:
Courage is fear that has said its prayers.

Like Paul and Silas, we pray and sing praise as an en-couragement. We rehearse and remember the glory of God and the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit and we are en-couraged to speak truth in love to a broken world.

The way of salvation, of reconciliation, of community, and of love begins with our essential belonging to God. As we sing praise in the dark, we come to realize that not only do we belong to God—but that all things belong to God.

You are God's own, and he is God's own, and she is God's own, and we are all God's own—belonging body and soul to the Most High God, called to proclaim the way of salvation in Jesus Christ.

I think that we all need songs to sing in the darkness.

So I will end with this prayer from St. Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Friends, in the darkness, may we continue to sing the song of Jesus;
the song that our broken world longs to hear. Amen.

¹ Walaskay, Paul W. "Exegetical Perspective on Acts 16:16-34." *Feasting on the Word*. YR C. Vol 2. Louisville: WJK, 2009. 523.