

The Church in Action sermon series
Jailhouse Rocked - Acts 16:16-34
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Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

Every place has a soundtrack that tells you where you are. If you hear “Dirty chai latte Americano expresso cold brew for Duncan,” you know you’re at a coffee shop. If you hear a referee’s whistle followed by 30 seconds of parents explaining the rules to that ref, you’re at a youth soccer game. If you hear, “Gladys, you’re still on mute,” you’re on a church Zoom meeting. Every place has its soundtrack.

Hospitals have monitors beeping. Schools have bells ringing. Church pews have people snoring. And prisons? Prisons have metal doors clanging shut, guards shouting, and, in Paul’s time, chains rattling. What isn’t a part of a prison soundtrack is singing, and yet, but the end of our story today, this Phillipi prison turns into a gospel revival.

It doesn’t start that way. In fact, it starts very innocently, as Paul and Silas are walking to a prayer meeting. They had just shared the gospel and converted Lydia, an affluent lady in the area, and as they were heading to the synagogue, they meet someone on the other end of the social scale: a slave girl with a supernatural gift, who earned money for her masters by telling people’s future...for a price.

The girl starts following Paul and his group, bouncing around them like an eager puppy, announcing, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved!” Now at first, you might think this was a good thing. It was like having your power personal billboard following you around. Who needs an agent or a marketing person when you’ve got this kind of publicity?

But there are two problems with this scenario. First, the phrase “most high God” was often used to describe the Greek god Zeus, so the girl may not have been accurately representing Paul’s mission. And second, the text tells us she followed them around for many days. Now, I’m sure for the first hour of this Paul was appreciative. I’m sure in the second hour, he was cordial. And I bet in the third hour, he was even tolerant. But after two days of this, the passage tells us that Paul was “very much annoyed.” That actually gives me hope. If Paul, the super-apostle who wrote a bunch of books in the Bible, occasionally has someone get on his last nerve, maybe there’s hope for us when someone is getting on our nerves or when we’re the nerve-getter-oner.

Paul gets fed up and exorcises the spirit from the slave girl, freeing her from the demon’s bondage. Time to celebrate and throw a party, right? Not for her owners. They realize that their cash cow has been milked for the last time. No evil spirit possessing the slave girl, no fortune-telling, no money.

This certainly isn’t the first time religion has been exploited for money – remember Jesus going on a rampage about flipping the tables of the moneychangers? He was upset at people exploiting religion for profit. I wonder how he would feel about the company Burnt Impressions, which makes a toaster that will imprint the face of Jesus on your bread. They promise to deliver a “crispy, golden-brown miracle right to your countertop.” Would you like butter and jam on your slice of idolatry?

The Jesus Toaster is billed as a gag gift, but that’s not true for the anointing oils and prayer beads sold by TV evangelists or proponents of the prosperity gospel promising miracles in exchange for your generous offering. Religion can be a lucrative

business, as it was for the slave girl's owners. I'm sure they had nothing against Paul's preaching, as long as it doesn't interfere with their business venture. But if saving someone's life hurts profits, then watch out! So, Paul and his gang are arrested and brought before the public court. The Philippi Chamber of Commerce knows where its Jesus Toast is buttered, so instead of rejoicing at this girl's healing, they have Paul and Silas stripped, beaten, and thrown into jail.

This was nothing new for Paul. He was used to such treatment. For us today, we can't imagine being jailed for our beliefs. But for Paul, it was commonplace, a necessary job hazard. So, what does he do while he whittles away the hours in his cell? Does he pump iron or make license plates? No. While sitting in the deepest part of the prison, with his feet locked in shackles, he sings hymns. Even in the darkest of hours, he found solace in sacred song.

Did you catch when he was doing this? The passage says, "About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God." About midnight. That's more than a time of day. That's the time that our worries get louder, when the house is too quiet, when you start overthink that thing you said or cook up worst-case scenarios of how something might play out. One commentator said, "Midnight is not measured by the clock. It's measured by the weight you are carrying."

And yet, Paul and Silas, who have been beaten and bloodied and thrown in prison, are praying and singing. Not because they're in a good mood, but because they know the truth about who Jesus is and what faith in him means for their life. As Jesus says in John's gospel, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Even while lying in a prison cell, Paul and Silas know they are free. And, the story tells us, the other prisoners are listening.

So, Paul and Silas are harmonizing together on "How Great Thou Art" when there's a great earthquake. Now, this was no ordinary tremor; notice that the earthquake causes the doors of the jail to open and the chains to come loose, but no walls fall down. This was a purpose-driven earthquake. This was an earthquake with a mission statement.

It was thought in ancient times that earthquakes were divine interventions into the human realm, which may explain the jailer's reaction. We haven't heard much about him to this point. We know he's the one who threw Paul and Silas in their cell and fastened their chains. We know he works for Rome. But I wonder, while Paul and Silas were singing their hymns, if he was listening in, too. You never know who's paying attention when act in faith.

When the jailer sees all the cell doors open, he concludes the worst: all the prisoners are gone. His decision to take his own life was the only noble thing to do for dereliction of duty, because if he didn't kill himself, his bosses would certainly take care of it for him. So, you see the humor when, just as the jailer is about to throw himself on his sword, he hears a voice coming from inside the cell: "Wait! Hold on! We're all still here!"

Imagine that. The man who locked them up, the many who ignored their wounds, the man responsible for guarding them is about to die, and it's the prisoners who save him. Grace shows up at the most surprising times, doesn't it? So, the jailer asks them to do what the Roman gods couldn't do: he asks them to save him. They preach to him, and immediately he takes them home, washing their wounds that he probably helped inflict, and the Roman jailer and his family are baptized as followers of Jesus.

There is an amazing interplay taking place in this story between freedom and captivity. When you read this story through for the first time, who is captive and who is free? Well, the slave girl is a captive, and certainly Paul and Silas become captives. The girl's owners and the decision-makers of Philippi are free, as is the jailer who watches over and is eventually converted by Paul and Silas. It's pretty clear-cut who is captive and who is free, right?

But freedom can be deceiving. Is anything really free? You could argue that we are, here in America. We live in a great country that has fought blood-stained battles to ensure that we are free, and we have claimed an unprecedented amount of freedom. But are we really free? Surrounded by burglar alarms and overflowing medicine cabinets and our own fears spurred on by the nightly news. Our kids can't play outside without supervision, we can't fly on a plane without passing through multiple levels of security – usually in our socks – and we are vulnerable to overcrowded schedules and unending bills. Are we really free?

What this story tells us is that real freedom comes from knowing the truth, and that truth is that Jesus Christ died on the cross so that we might be free. The jailer thought he knew freedom, but it wasn't until he heard the gospel that he was truly free. And that truth can penetrate even the darkest of cells. No prison – not grief, not addiction, not anxiety – is too dark for God's liberating power. God's truth cannot be shackled, and its power is at our disposal if we trust in it.

I'm not going to ask you what holds you captive or what keeps you up at midnight, because we all have something. I'm going to ask you this: What song are you singing? Anybody can sing when life is easy, when the bills are all paid, when the MRI is clear, when your Jesus Toast is perfectly browned. But when life isn't going the way you want, and let's be honest, that's most of the time, what song are you singing? How are you witnessing to the goodness of God in the midst of the hardships?

Maybe you're not. Maybe the weight is too heavy and your midnight is too dark. Then I hope you'll invite Jesus into your prison cell. Because when you do, the shackles loosen and the prison doors open and you find that you are free. So, keep singing. Keep praying. Keep trusting that Christ is there, right there with you, because it's the truth. And the truth will set you free.