

“Foundations Shaken”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 11, 2021

7th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 99

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 16:16-34

Acts tells the story of the birth of the early church. Or, to be more accurate, it tells the story of God’s salvation coming to many different towns and cities, to a multitude of different households and individuals. As is true today, there is one church – the body of the risen Christ re-born, re-created, re-formed – comprised of faith communities of various types; and in all different places.

Last Sunday, we heard about the conversion of Lydia, who Paul and Silas encountered at a place of prayer, down by the river, outside the city gates of Philippi: a Roman city located in Macedonia, which is in modern-day Greece. After hearing the good news of the gospel, Lydia invited the traveling missionaries to her home, where she and her household were baptized. A new congregation had been born.

This Sunday, we hear about another resident of Philippi, a jailer, who also welcomes Paul and Silas into his home, where he and his family are also baptized. Another community of faith is being birthed; but only after Luke – the author of the book of Acts – narrates a harrowing tale where God shakes the foundations of injustice.

In the same place of prayer where Lydia had been found, Paul meets a woman who is enslaved both to her human masters and to an evil spirit that possesses her. Her owners exploit the fact that she is doubly bound for their own profit. She is a woman of no power or freedom; yet she speaks the truth about Paul and his partners, following them around town, proclaiming that they “are slaves to the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”

Paul exorcises her of her spirit possession; not simply to silence her voice and alleviate the annoyance, but also to cripple the profitability of her masters’ manipulative business. Still, we hear nothing of how this changed the life of this unnamed slave. She is made free of that which makes her owners money, but we

are left to wonder whether she ever really gains her freedom. She drops from the narrative as quickly as she arrived to it. Ultimately, she is not a fully-formed character in the story, but a mere narrative hinge to what happens next.¹

While the no-longer-possessed girl is free of her demon, Paul and Silas' freedom is taken away. The masters of the enslaved girl complain to the authorities not about the damage done to their property; it's an uglier charge: accusing them of disturbing the city, saying: "they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." Paul and Silas are stripped of their clothing, beaten with rods, and thrown into prison where the jailor was instructed to "keep them securely." Following these instructions, the jailor places them in the innermost cell and fastens their feet in chains.

The first sign that the powers of this world are not really in charge arrives through the hymns and prayers coming from that dark cell. Paul and Silas are singing praises to God – not laments for the suffering (which would have been understandable and biblically appropriate) – but praise for the privilege of being God's servants in the face of injustice.²

There is something powerful in this act of defiance; and each time that we pray and sing as a community of faith, we join ourselves to the God who saves and delivers and invites us into divine power. Even when there are chains that bind, and walls that enclose, and guards who are standing watch, Christians can be assured that God and God's people are working for freedom, dreaming of liberation, and seeking salvation. We sing in praise not only in thanksgiving for what God has already done, but in anticipation for the release from bondage yet to come.

Twice before in Acts – in chapters 5 and 12 – God has sprung Christians from Roman prisons; so we shouldn't be surprised that the Philippian jail couldn't hold Paul and Silas. Still, the quake in this text is certainly an odd one as it sets people free instead of trapping or crushing them. It is the visible manifestation of God shaking this world's powers to their foundations.

The jailer's question, "what must I do to be saved?" carries a double meaning. He wants to know how he can survive every prison guard's worst nightmare – a mass inmate escape – with his life intact, but Paul and Silas will

¹ Brian Peterson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*.

introduce him to a different kind of salvation. The one who locked up the missionaries in a cell will host them in his house.

When Paul informs the jailer that all the prisoners are still there and accounted for, the jailor drops whatever weapon he intended to use to take his own life. The Spirit of God has both broken open the prison doors and saved the jailor; the very man who will treat the wounds of the men who had been tortured by his colleagues. Thus, the deliverance and healing of the captives is linked to the redemption of the jailor; if, indeed, they are all to be truly set free.³

With their prayers answered by the shaken foundations, Paul and Silas are able to walk out of prison without perpetuating the violence that had been inflicted on them. And though the Romans persecuted them because of their identity as Jewish Christians, they did not show the same bias against their Roman occupier. Instead, as Jesus prayed for mercy to come upon those who did not know what they were doing, Paul and Silas likewise see the jailor not as an enemy, but someone who was bound by a system that demanded absolute loyalty – even to the point of death. In the message of the gospel, they offered him the true freedom of the gospel: offering allegiance to a God who desires for us – and all people – to experience liberation.

Thus, in the jailor's home, another faith community is formed. Like with the slave girl, we are not told everything about their future: whether he continued in his job or moved to a different vocation; whether his household might have joined with Lydia's to create an expanded church community in Philippi. What we are told is this: he offered hospitality to Paul and Silas, his former captives; he treated their wounds and provided them food and shelter. Together, they experienced the gift of baptism and gave praise to God.

Paul and Silas would only stay with the jailer and his family that one night. Their calling as missionaries would lead them into encounters with new people and the subsequent birth of new faith communities. In these various places, they will face other impediments and persecutions. But, the book of Acts implies that their ministry – because God directs and endorses it – cannot ultimately be thwarted by the obstacles put in their way by individuals, governments, or societal forces. When those things position themselves in the path of God's designs, God reserves the right to overturn them.

³ Willie James Jennings, *Acts from Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*

The people of this faith community may never be thrown into a literal prison, but we have certainly found ourselves – individually or collectively – in different kinds of bondage. Some of us are trapped by various illnesses or infirmities; others of us have been a part of systems or even churches that were not healthy. Each of us, over the past 16 months, has experienced some degree of isolation and uncertainty: we have lost and missed out on much.

The body of Christ – and the many particular faith communities of which it is comprised – should, at its best, offer hope and create opportunities for greater freedom. When we pray and offer praise, we participate with Christ in overcoming the tomb. When we help to bind up each other's wounds, we build a community that is more whole. When we work and serve together, we point the world in a direction of more abundant grace, greater justice, and deeper kindness.

I am proud of this faith community – and many others – for the ways that we invite and join God in shaking the foundations of a world where too many people are bound and not fully free. I see – among the folks here – an ethos of learning and generosity, of open hospitality and deepening relationships.

Still, as these stories from Acts remind us, there remain many unmet needs both within and beyond the church's walls. All around us, there are people isolated and afraid, looking for food or shelter or compassion, longing to be healed or heard. There are foundations that need to be shaken. For, until all have experienced liberation, none of us is fully free.

May we continue to pray for God to awaken and inspire us work for a world where more and more are free from that many things that can hold us captive; for the doors to open and the chains to fall away. Amen.