

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 97

Acts 16:16-34

THE NEED TO BE FREED

“Hey, Silas and Paul. I haven’t seen you since yesterday. What’s been going on?” “Oh, not that much. There was an exorcism we conducted which led to a mob scene and a kangaroo court, after which we got flogged and imprisoned. Then we had a midnight worship service right there in our cell. There was an earthquake that broke up the jail, but it didn’t lead to a jail break. We kept someone from committing suicide, someone who then had an altar call experience without the altar. We stayed up talking about Jesus with the man’s whole household. They tended to our wounds from being flogged and then everyone got baptized right there in the middle of the night. After that we had a celebratory feast. With there having been so little going on, I can’t figure out why we’re feeling a little bit tired.”

Do you think the author of the Book of Acts wanted to make it clear that the Holy Spirit was not just sitting back and taking it easy? This account from which we read shows deep contrasts between those who are free and those who are not. It would seem that the epitome of the lack of freedom is being locked in stocks inside a jail cell after having been flogged, all for doing a good deed. That’s the condition in which Paul and Silas found themselves. And yet, their external situation showing a total lack of freedom does not shape their internal situation. In spite of what could be characterized as a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, there they are in stocks in their jail cell at midnight – a situation where it couldn’t get any darker - and what are they doing? They are praying and singing hymns to God. Externally, they lacked freedom, but their spirits were in no way bound. They had not given up on God and they had confidence that God hadn’t given up on them. So they are praying and singing hymns in the middle of the night.

I wonder what they were praying for. Had it been me, I would have been praying for deliverance and for relief from the injuries from being beaten. And there would be nothing wrong with that. However, it might have been that Paul and Silas were praying for the slave girl they had encountered earlier in the day. She could not get free from a spirit that enabled her to tell the unknown. She was held in slavery because of that ability. But Paul, appealing to the power of Christ, called that spirit out of her. We would join with Silas and Paul in the hope that the girl would no longer be held as a slave since she had lost the ability to make money for her owners. Perhaps the prison prayers were lifting up the people who had owned the girl, asking that they be delivered from their great greed that valued money over the wellbeing of people. This group had used the power of intolerance of geographical and religious ‘outsiders’ to rile up everyone else against them, so they might also have prayed for them to be freed from the captivity of prejudice and a conniving willingness to use hate as a tool to get what they wanted. Paul and Silas could have also been praying for the magistrates who were willing to beat and imprison innocent people. Perhaps it was fear of the slave holders from which the magistrates needed to be delivered, so that they could rightly carry out their judicial duties. I wouldn’t doubt that they also prayed for the jailer who had locked them up, recognizing that he was not free to do what was right, being required to lock up people who had done nothing wrong. Paul and Silas are locked in stocks inside a prison cell. And yet their prayers and hymns indicate that they were freer than anyone else in the entire account.

The God who had delivered the Hebrew slaves from Egypt wasn’t going to have much problem with a jail cell in Philippi. An earthquake shook open the doors and split the chains. The jailer was so bound by fear of what

would happen to him for a situation beyond his control that he was ready to kill himself. But Silas and Paul assured him that they and the others had not taken the opportunity to escape. I don't know if it was the wonder of the liberating earthquake or the compassion that the jailer saw from his liberated captives that made him desire the freedom they knew in their relationship with God. But it was something that he and his whole household recognized that brought new freedom to their lives that night, a night that was transformed into one of compassion, hospitality, and new-found faith.

Now I have to imagine that it is unlikely that you or I are going to run into a slave girl later today, or that we will be beaten in response for liberating a girl from an oppressive situation, or that we will get put in jail for doing what was right, or that we will get freed from jail by an earthquake, or that we will save the life of someone about to kill himself and instead end up baptizing him and his family. So is this just an adventure story to entertain us this day?

It is a story that can help us recognize that the lack of freedom can take many forms and those who have not yet been liberated can wreak havoc on the lives of others. On Friday, multiple warnings were going out in the middle of the day about the shooting rampage that took place at Montgomery Mall and in Aspen Hill. If only the shooter had been delivered from the rage and disdain for human life before his murderous acts! In our world, we hear of the huge slave trade in human trafficking. There are places in the world where child soldiers are forced to fight and kill at a very young age. A great liberation is needed. Each week, there are literally hundreds of people who come to this church to attend twelve step groups. All of them are fighting some kind of addiction that could have devastating effects on them and their loved ones. Liberation is needed. In our society, there are all kinds of power players who disregard the wellbeing of vulnerable people, building systems of economic oppression out of a love for money. We see the power of stoking the fear of outsiders or of people of a particular religion that has a capacity to invite mob rule. Some kind of freedom from the grip of hateful fear is needed. We ourselves may know how deep seated our own fears of those who are different from us may have a grip on our own lives that doesn't want to let go. There is a need to be freed.

Thankfully, the Spirit of God has the capacity to bring internal and external liberation. It can shake the foundations of a place to break literal and figurative chains. It can challenge economic oppression. It can turn lives around. It can bring peace to those who aren't in peaceful settings. It can bring healing to violent societies. It can bring purpose to those who have lost their way. It's not just freedom that is coming – it is God's freeing Spirit that is coming. From what do you need to be freed? Pray at midnight or pray in the middle of the day. God's freeing Spirit is coming.

While we long for that freeing Spirit, let me remind you of another liberating story we don't often think of this time of year. There is a play that was written by William Gibson called "The Butterfingers Angel," which brings the story of Gabriel, Mary and Joseph into modern terms. It offers a glimpse of frightening changes that faced a young pregnant girl and her confused fiancé. None of the characters can see where the surprises of life will lead. The play concludes just after Baby Jesus' birth, with a line from the carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," reflecting what had happened and what that meant looking forward. In what becomes a defining line of the play and what that means for all who hear the story, a voice says, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee; the hopes and fears of all the years are met; the hopes and fears of all; the hopes and fears; the hopes."¹ God's freeing Spirit is coming – we have good reason for the hopes.

¹ William Gibson, The Butterfingers Angel, Dramatists Play Service, 1975.