

A Prison by Any Other Name
By Rev. Michael Blackwood
The United Church of Broomfield
June 2, 2019

Acts 16:16-40 King James Version (KJV)

16 And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying: 17 The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation. 18 And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour.

19 And when her masters saw that the hope of their gains was gone, they caught Paul and Silas, and drew them into the marketplace unto the rulers, 20 And brought them to the magistrates, saying, These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city, 21 And teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans.

22 And the multitude rose up together against them: and the magistrates rent off their clothes and commanded to beat them. 23 And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely: 24 Who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks.

25 And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. 26 And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed. 27 And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled. 28 But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here. 29 Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, 30 And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

31 And they said, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. 32 And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway. 34 And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house.

35 And when it was day, the magistrates sent the serjeants, saying, Let those men go. 36 And the keeper of the prison told this saying to Paul, The magistrates have sent to let you go: now therefore depart, and go in peace. 37 But Paul said unto them, They have beaten us openly uncondemned, being Romans, and have cast us into prison; and now do they thrust us out privily? nay verily; but let them come themselves and fetch us out. 38 And the serjeants told these

words unto the magistrates: and they feared, when they heard that they were Romans. 39 And they came and besought them, and brought them out, and desired them to depart out of the city. 40 And they went out of the prison and entered into the house of Lydia: and when they had seen the brethren, they comforted them, and departed.

In last week's scripture reading, Paul and Silas had gone to Macedonia after Paul saw a vision of a man beckoning them to come share the gospel. Once there, they went to Philippi. They ventured beyond the city gate, down by the riverside and met Lydia and her group of worships. It was a good day – Lydia was so moved by the gospel that she and her entire household were baptized immediately.

In today's scripture, we continue where we left off last week and so much happens. It's like something out of the movies: demon-possession; healings; angry mobs; earthquakes; prison breaks; conversions; all framed within the political, economic and religious hostility and uncertainty of a Roman-occupied Greek city.

It's the next day (or possibly a few days later) and Paul and Silas are going back to that place of prayer by the riverside. They saw great success there once, perhaps they'll be able to share the good news again with more people.

On their way, they encounter a slave-girl. You know – I have a lot of questions about this slave-girl. I wonder how old she was. Perhaps as young as 7 or 8? Possibly as old as 16? Anything older in those times and she'd be considered more of a woman, than a girl.

How did she become a slave? Was she born into slavery? Was she sold into slavery by financially desperate parents who needed the money? Was she an orphan and had no other choice for survival?

She was a possessed girl. Her demon allowed her to see the truth and predict the future. Perhaps that's why she was sold into slavery. Her parents were afraid of her. Or they cashed in on her abilities – we know her skills brought a good profit for her slave-owners. Beyond her divination abilities, were there other ways she was used as a slave? Likely, yes.

From scripture, we know for sure that she had a spirit of divination. That makes it sound so nonchalant, doesn't it? A spirit of divination. When stated in that way, it doesn't seem so bad. But is this a gift of the spirit..... or demon spirit? Specifically, the Greek says, "[she had] a spirit of Python." Pythia were priestesses believed to channel prophecies directly from the Greek God Apollo. Supposedly, they were highly regarded because of their abilities. Such abilities should have given her great freedom, but instead they imprisoned her in a life of slavery. Today we'd likely classify her "abilities" as some form of mental illness.

What was she doing? She was following Paul and Silas around, strangers to her, crying out, “these men are slaves of the Most-High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” So, it would seem that her divination abilities were good. She was correct, was she not? She called out Paul and Silas for exactly who they were and for what they were doing. It says that she followed them around for many days doing this. It caused Paul to become frustrated and annoyed. Why was Paul so bothered by her? I admit that I’d probably be annoyed also if someone followed me around saying, “he’s a pastor. He’s going to preach the gospel to you.”

But Paul’s intention was to spread the good news. Might we assume that as she cried out, it was beneficial to Paul because it would allow potential God-seekers to know of their presence and go to them to learn of this good news? Did Paul think that she was drawing *too much* attention to them. We don’t know exactly why Paul was annoyed, but we know that he was SO annoyed that he turned on her and in the name of Jesus Christ, commanded the spirit to come out of her. And it did. She was instantly freed from the burden of that spirit.

This was good, right? He healed her. Being freed from her prison of mental illness, she was now free to.... Free to what? Hmm.... That’s a good question. What was she now free to do?

Did he cast out the Pythian Spirit to heal her of her possession or did he do it because it caused him to be annoyed?

We can see it both ways. It’s highly unlikely that she had complete control over the spirit. She might have been able to “summon it” when needed, but it probably also used her as it wanted. Imagine not being able to control your thoughts and speech? You see and hear things that are foreign to you, you don’t understand them and they’re frightening. And without any control, you just start screaming out words. Sounds pretty terrifying. Maybe it was schizophrenia? Turret’s Syndrome? A mental prison of sorts.

So yes, Paul healed her. Life without schizophrenia or Turret’s would be a good thing.

But without the spirit, what’s to become of her? Scripture tells us that without her abilities, her owners no longer saw her as able to make them money. Would they now keep her as a slave? What good was she without her divination abilities? Would they sell her off?

Paul’s healing, while a good thing - in a twisted reality could also have been extremely detrimental to her existence. Frightening huh? Without her “demonic abilities,” was she truly free?

Did Paul take any of this into consideration before healing her? It doesn’t seem so. It appears that Paul was more concerned with his mission than with having compassion for the slave-girl. He reacted quickly, without thinking and out of frustration. Unfortunately, we never know what happened to her.

So, Paul's actions adversely affected the economic livelihood of the slave girl's owners. They're upset, understandably. If anyone caused you to lose your financial means you'd be upset as well. I think we all know well enough that hitting someone hard in their pocketbook, will bring about very strong emotions and quite likely intense actions. So, what do the owners do? They seized Paul and Silas, took them before the authorities and magistrates and said, "these two guys healed our slave girl of her demon which has cost us money?"

No, that's not what they said. They're not stupid. Imagine acknowledging to the authorities that you were profiting off of the misfortunates of someone's demonic possession. No, instead they turn their personal, economic misfortune into a public attack on values of the masses.

These owners are smart. They capitalize on nationalistic fervor and anti-Semitic bigotry in order to get Paul and Silas punished. "These Jews come into our country and start disturbing it by advocating their unlawful customs upon us good Roman people. They're trying to convert our fine and upstanding citizens into their cult. We can't allow this!" Before you know it, a mob mentality ensues. "Yeah, they're right! If we let these foreigners come into our country, spouting off their anti-Caesar sentiments and breaking our laws, who knows what could happen next?" They're probably murderers and drug dealers. They'll steal our jobs or demand to be supported by our government.

The magistrates and crowd strip Paul and Silas of their clothing, beat them with rods and throw them into prison, shackled. Well, isn't this a fine mess they're in. You know what? None of this would have happened had Paul kept his mouth shut. The possessed slave girl would probably have stopped following them around after a while and gone away. Had he been a little patient, he might have avoided these beatings and prison.

So, Paul and Silas are shackled and sitting in the inner most cell of the prison. What little freedoms they had are gone. You can imagine prisons at that time – it was probably dank and dreary and dark - especially dark at midnight, which is the time it is according to our scripture. In the middle of the night, Paul and Silas are praying aloud and singing. And imagine, the other prisoners were awake and listening to them. What must they have been saying? When all of a sudden there is a violent earthquake. Clearly, the earthquake is miraculous - God's doing - because how else can you explain an earthquake not only opening every prison cell door, but also causing every prisoner's chains and shackles to become unfastened? How divine. How wonderful that such a tremendous earthquake happened.

Hmmm. That sounds a little odd doesn't it? If you've ever been through an earthquake, and I'm originally from California so I've been through a few, no one talks about earthquakes as being wonderful or divine. Earthquakes are frightening and completely unsettling. If buildings all around you falling down isn't scary enough, the simple fact that the solid earth beneath you is actually moving will do it. Talk about an out of control feeling.

I wonder how many people died in that earthquake. How many innocent lives? And what about destruction? With such violent rumbling, I wonder how many domiciles fell? Businesses, temples, stables and homes. In the middle of the night, homes crashing down upon innocent sleeping children, mothers and fathers. How costly might it have been?

When this scripture passage is read, these things probably aren't really considered. It's not mentioned in scripture. But there must have been other people outside the framework of Acts 16:26-34. This earthquake didn't happen in a vacuum. It's just like the slave-girl - what happens *after* she's relieved of her demon is not mentioned, but we know there's more to her story. There's always more to the story.

God's earthquake has freed Paul and Silas from their prison doors and shackles. It has freed all the prisoners – murders? Thieves? Government rebels? Seditious? All prisoners' chains were unfastened. Then the jailer awoke. He looked around, saw all the prison doors open and naturally assumed all of the prisoners had escaped. So, what did he do? He immediately told his superiors so that they could begin looking for the escapees and attempt to recapture them.

No. No, that's not what he did. His immediate thought was to commit suicide. Why? Why would his first reaction be, "all of the prisoners have escaped because of this massive earthquake, therefore I must kill myself." He didn't cause the earthquake. He did allow the prisoners to escape. None of this is his fault.

But that's not the reality in which he lives. Think about it. The only reason he might resort to such a dramatic solution to his problem, is that living would be a fate worse than death. What kind of oppressive, prison-like, community must Philippi be like under Roman domination? What kind of freedom is that?

Before the jailed can harm himself, Paul shouts to him, "don't hurt yourself, we're all still here." The scripture isn't specific, but we can infer that it's not just Paul and Silas who are still there, but ALL the other prisoners, as well. None of them escaped. They all chose to stay. Why?

Well, I think we know why Paul and Silas stayed, but what about the other prisoners. Why didn't they run? I'm sure it's for the same reason that Paul and Silas stayed. Freedom. After hearing the gospel and witnessing God's divine intervention, they understood that their freedom wasn't dictated by prison walls. The gospel set them free. Free from fear.

The jailer, witnessing the divine intervention of God's earthquake and the prisoners' resolve to stay, feels God's power and can do nothing other than fall trembling before Paul and Silas. "Clearly, this is the work of God. I am not worthy. What must I do to be saved?"

Believe on the Lord Jesus.

The Holy Spirit and the fear of God moved the jailer. This pagan believed in Jesus Christ and the gospel and went into action. Like Lydia had said, "if you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home," the jailer took Paul and Silas to his home. He washed their wounds and cared for them. He and his entire household were then baptized – like Lydia. The jailer then fed Paul and Silas – he showed them hospitality. Then they all rejoiced.

So, whatever happened to all the other prisoners while the jailer was caring for Paul and Silas and getting baptized? We don't know – we can only guess. Since we know that the next morning the magistrates are focused on Paul and Silas and not punishing the jailer, it's safe to assume that the prisoners stayed at the jail. And Paul, Silas and the jailer returned there as well. Because that's where they are when the magistrates say that Paul and Silas can be released. They're free to go.

And what does Paul do? He says, thanks and he and Silas hightail it out of there.

No. Paul just can't keep his mouth shut can he? But it's a good thing.

He says, "We're already free. But in light of everything that you did to us, illegally I might remind you as we are un-condemned Roman citizens, you're not getting off that easy." Paul had his freedom, now he wants justice. He's going to tear down some of that systematic, oppressive prison called a Roman government. Maybe not by much, but it's a start.

Paul and Silas receive their apology....and a request to "please leave our city." So Paul and Silas take their leave and return to Lydia's, for they judged her to be faithful to the Lord.

Freedom is subjective, as is prison. One man's prison is another slave-girl's freedom. Like Paul, we get frustrated and anxious and despite all of our loving, Christian intent, we sometimes say and do things that perhaps aren't ideal. Things that get us or others into trouble. But then God steps in. God shows mercy to God-fearers like Lydia as well as pagans like the jailer, who choose to believe in the good news. God takes both the good things and the bad things that we create and uses them in ways that produce love, peace and community. And in those moments when we're in trouble, sometimes because our mouths got us there, we wait for God to act. And while we wait, we pray, and we sing hymns glorifying God. It's called faith. We trust that God will ultimately make all things right. We don't know what happened to that slave girl. We don't know all of the consequences of that earthquake. We don't know what happened to the rest of the prisoners in that Philippians jail. We do know that God is in control and as such, all will be well.