

**Prayer:** Lord, set us free to hear what your Spirit is saying to the church. Rattle off our chains so we may be set free to serve you and our neighbors in love. Amen.

Last week we heard about Paul meeting Lydia, the successful business woman and God-fearer. Paul tells her about God and that she can be saved through faith in Jesus. And so she is baptized, professing her faith, and her whole household with her is baptized. And she opens her home offering hospitality to Paul's mission team. We also presume that she is the spiritual leader of this new house church. The Holy Spirit is breaking down barriers and working in the lives of people.

But today's scripture takes a very dark turn. Paul and Silas go out to the place of prayer and then enter the city of Philippi. They confront evil, are beaten, thrown in prison, but at the same time the Lord brings salvation.

Philippi is the most Roman city outside of Rome. It is an outpost, a colony of the roman military. And today the mission turns dangerous as Paul confronts the powers that be.

Listen for a word from the Lord...

**Acts 16:16-34**

16:16 One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.

16:17 While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation."

16:18 She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

16:19 But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities.

16:20 When their accusers had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews

16:21 and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe."

16:22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods.

16:23 After they had given them a severe flogging, the authorities threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely.

16:24 Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

16:25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

16:26 Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

16:27 When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped.

16:28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "**Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.**"

16:29 The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.

16:30 Then he brought them outside and said, "**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**"

16:31 They answered, "**Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.**"

16:32 They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

16:33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay.

16:34 He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

### **Communion Meditation**

Philippi- the far flung town, the farthest the mission of the apostle Paul has reached yet.

The first church is planted there in Europe.

It was conquered by Octavius.

Philippi is the most Roman city outside of Rome.

It was a symbol of Rome's power and the famous *pax romana*.

But this peace is one that is kept through law and order, and military occupation.

The peace of Christ is altogether different, by contrast.

And here today the civil power is not willing to submit to the will of Christ.

We witness an all-out power struggle.

Paul moves from the sweet encounter with Lydia and her warm welcome into her home to this situation

The story that follows is full of the darkness of paganism, complete with slavery and spirits, exploitation and anti-Semitism, violence and imprisonment.

Yet even there, even in the land of darkness, the Gospel can save.

So for all who say salvation is only a spiritual experience,  
these witnesses tell us differently.

Here we see that God's salvation liberates the bodies, souls, and minds of those who encounter the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul and Silas are thrown into a prison after being beaten, but this liberating God will not be bound by their chains.

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* prisoners exercise by pacing the yard at the Shawshank Prison, making plans for what they will do once they are released, and even scheming about how to escape.

One of the older prisoners, Brooks, is released after spending much of his life behind bars.

You would think after a life of imprisonment he would look forward to freedom.

Instead there is a fear and anxiety about whether he can make it in such a different world outside the structure of jail.

After trying to make it on the outside, mostly alone, he carves his name into a beam in the boarding house where he has been staying, and then tragically hangs himself from that same beam.

The freedom of his new found independence is too much to bear.

I imagine he had grown accustom to his own captivity- somehow more comfortable there in Shawshank Prison.<sup>1</sup>

This portion of the encounter in Acts describes to us some of the same kinds of reversal.

Brooks felt freer inside the prison than he did outside.

In Philippi, the ones who appear free are the most enslaved- like the magistrate and the owners of the slave girl,

seem most shackled to their holding onto power and possession at all costs.

They are comfortable in their own captivity to the power of Rome.

They are comfortable maintaining the status quo.

On the other hand, Paul and Silas, though beaten and jailed, have an inner freedom.

They pray and sing hymns in the darkness of a basement jail cell.

They know that they will not avoid suffering,

But their faith changes how they face it.

This is not the last beating or imprisonment Paul will face.

In fact, he is beheaded by Rome, a martyr for the faith.

Yet, he is free.

Paul and Silas' accusers are captive, too.

They don't want to admit they are mad they are losing their profits so that trump up charges of disturbing the peace.

And they appeal to the crowd's anti-Semitism.

They are bound by their own greed and prejudice.

They are not free.

Perhaps the most tragic person is the slave girl.

She is doubly bound, by being possessed by a spirit of divination and by being the property of her slave masters.

In essence they exploit her misfortune and make money off of her.

Yet she is the one announces the truth, "These men are slaves of the Most High God! They are proclaiming the way of salvation to you!"

That is a truth that will set them all free!

The jailer *seems* to be a free man, but is probably someone who hates his job.

While technically free, he longs for a freedom that only Jesus can give him.

Paul and Silas save his mortal life, by stopping him from suicide.

They tell him of the saving love of Jesus the Messiah.

This baptized pagan convert washes their wounds and hosts them for dinner.

Sounds a lot like Jesus at the last supper.

This meal a reminder of the Lord's Supper where Jesus reconciles us to one another.

Sharing a meal is a sign of friendship and hospitality.

The barriers that divided them: Roman/Jew, Outsider/Insider, unite them in the Spirit.

The Jailer and his household become the second Christian family in Philippi.

They end the evening rejoicing!

Maybe Paul remembered that night when he later wrote in the letter to the church at Philippi, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all."

In this text there are so many people in the need of saving...some who do not even know it.

This story gives witness that God is a God of reversals.

Everyone we assume to be free (the jailer, the magistrates, the owners of the slave girl) is really in bondage,

and everyone we assume to be enslaved like Paul and Silas, slaves of the One true God, and the slave girl herself) are freed.

Having the key to lock someone up or the power to put him there, does not necessarily make one free.

Being on the inside of prison bars doesn't necessarily mean you are not free.

God desires that the free folk are set free from their use of power over others, and enslavement to greed just as much as God desires a slave girl, Paul and Silas to be set free.

Where do you find yourself in God's story today?

I wonder what binds us and holds us captive.

Are we slaves to our jobs?

Does our way of life exist because of the exploitation of others?

Like Paul we confront the powers that keep people enslaved- to prejudice and poverty, human trafficking and unjust treatment.

Do we long for a freedom that the world cannot give?

The One who sets us free is so near, so available, so ready to save,

we do not have to wait for a key to unlock the cell

or an earthquake to rattle the chains off.

Jesus said, "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" John 8:36.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you are the One who leads to true freedom, the peace the world cannot give. Fill us with faith so we may know such freedom. Guide us to be liberators who help others experience freedom in mind, body, and spirit. We make this prayer in the strong name of Jesus, who came to set captives free. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Kelley, Jessica Miller, ed. *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series; Thematic Plans for Years A, B, C* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2016). Thanks for this example and insights!