

Acts 16:16-34

Leading up to today's reading from Luke-Acts, Paul and Silas had crossed the border into Europe to get to Macedonia, a Roman colony. They had received an invitation from a man, who, in a night vision, pleaded for their help.

Paul receives a vision that orchestrates the encounters between him and two females (and later the jailer and his household); Lydia, the leader of a synagogue connected with her household, and the nameless slave girl who proclaims oracles inspired by a Pythian spirit. The power of this impure spirit is detected through the young woman's fortune-telling abilities. Her owners then exploit her for financial gain.

After Paul met with and spoke to the women who, under Lydia's leadership, worshipped at the synagogue by the river on the Sabbath, Paul baptized Lydia and her household. And because Paul agreed that Lydia was "faithful to the Lord," he continued to visit her and her house of prayer. In their daily walk to and from Lydia's place, Paul and Silas encountered the prophetic slave girl, as she offered an oracle or word to all who would listen. She is not the first *oracle* (slave girl) in the New Testament to unabashedly name the nature of the relationship between Jesus or God and the apostles, albeit with unfortunate consequences.

When Jesus had been arrested and taken to the High Priest Caiaphas' house, two different oracles or slave girls, who apparently served the

High Priest, accused Peter of being one of Jesus' companions. Peter, denying any affiliation with Jesus, implied that the *slave girl* was untruthful or mistaken.

In the New Testament, we see a pattern of truth-telling slave girls with oracles confronting and annoying certain apostles. Peter was irritated, denying the truthfulness of the second slave girl's statement. In Acts, the narrator informs us that Paul is greatly annoyed by this slave girl. This self-centred emotion that Paul feels is like Peter's, but coupled with a speech act.

In her own way, the slave girl is a prisoner. Most people in Philippi probably didn't think of her that way. After all, she was an oracle. A Pythoness, blessed with the spirit of Apollo. She wore white garments and gold jewellery. She was revered and set apart. People would come to her with offerings and, knowing her body was just a vessel for the sun god, they would tremble before her as they asked to know their fates. When she spoke in the marketplace, her air of authority commanded attention. People listened to what she said. What woman could possibly say that? And yet, as a slave, it was the masters' bed she slept on and their food she ate.

Yet, the best treated among slaves is still a slave. After all, when one of those two strange Jews, that her spirit told her had 'the way of salvation,' turned to her and said, "In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you

come out of her.” She fell to the ground shaking, and the voice that had accompanied her most of her life was gone. It wasn’t like she was suddenly free. She still had to go home and face her owners. And they beat her as if it had been her fault. She was now confined to the house doing labour and sharing a bed with the women who had resented her. Yesterday, she was the voice of the gods; today she is nobody. It doesn’t matter how free she felt. If someone could yank the chain whenever they wanted, she was always just a prisoner.

Whereas Lydia, while not necessarily wealthy, was at least a woman of some independence (as the head of her household), this second woman is doubly bound, a slave to a cartel of human masters, and a slave to the evil spirit that possesses her. She is a woman of no power, status, or freedom. Yet she speaks the truth about Paul and his partners, following them all around town and in her own way, providing free advertising for Paul's ministry.

In the end, Paul cannot tolerate it any more. Paul performs the speech act of an exorcism. Perhaps, even the truth, when proclaimed through abusive systems, ends up necessarily being distorted. This girl slave declares over and over that Paul and Silas: “have come to tell you how to be saved.” Evil’s attempts to manipulate and perhaps control the truth are not to be tolerated, but answered with the clarity of the gospel.

And so, in Jesus' name, Paul sets the woman free from the spirit that

had occupied her life. Paul's first inclination was not to command the spirit to leave the girl – his first inclination was to ignore it. But, when the annoyance was too much, *then* Paul acted and commanded the spirit to leave the slave girl.

We, too sometimes wait until we are personally annoyed with something before we work for justice, setting others free only when it will benefit us in some way.

Facing and speaking to “the spirit” in the girl, Paul commands the spirit to leave her.

The spirit that gave the slave girl her oracles or powers, left her within that hour. The proof that the speech act was effective, is in the loss of profits to the slave girl's owners. Who will pay for what does not come true? Who will pay for false prophecies? Historically, the Pythian spirit was connected with the oracle at Delphi, in Greece. Devotees of the Greek god Apollo – regarded the Pythia as genuine and god-inspired.

This was the case with the Pythian slave girl's oracle; it was true. Otherwise, she would not have been able to yield a profit for her owners through her gift. The gift was real. And the prophecy she spoke about Paul and Silas was not false. She described Paul and Silas as “slaves of the most high God who are proclaiming to you a way of salvation.” Paul refers to himself in his letters as a slave of Jesus Christ.

So, what happened to this woman, who remained a slave to her human

owners? The focus of this scene seems to be the power of Jesus over all the spirits of the world, but we might ask whether, and how, there could be a more complete freedom for this woman. The story simply leaves her behind, nameless, and disturbing.

The slave owners do not take this financial loss lying down. Paul and Silas are ultimately arrested. They too were prisoners, just like the slave girl. At least, most people in Philippi probably thought of them that way. When Paul and Silas were bound in ropes and led to the stocks, they certainly looked like prisoners. Hours ago, they had been beaten like prisoners. The jailer's orders were to guard them carefully. They were led to the inner cell and put in stocks. It was damp and smelled of defecation and rot. And because there were no windows, the ventilation was terrible. This is where people died awaiting trials that never came.

Yet Paul and Silas held their heads high. They seemed eager to meet their fellow prisoners. They spent the hours singing hymns and preaching. They seemed to be the only people who didn't think they were prisoners. They looked and acted like they expected to be sprung at any minute. But the truth was, they didn't know what would happen. They just knew that they were doing what God had called them to do. And when you're doing what God has called you to do, then you are exactly where you are supposed to be. So, when the earth shook and the doors flung open, when their chains fell off, Paul and Silas stayed put. Because it was God, not the ropes and chains, that had held them

there to begin with. 'You will soon be free!'

The first signs that the powers of this world are really not in charge comes with the surprising songs in that dark cell. Paul and Silas sing praises to God, not laments for the suffering, which would be understandable, appropriate and biblical, but praise for the privilege of being God's servants in the face of injustice. God had already sprung preachers from Roman prisons twice in earlier chapters of Acts, so we need not be surprised that the Philippian jail can't hold Paul and Silas. But the earthquake is certainly quite strange. Rather than trapping and crushing the prisoners, it sets them free. This earthquake is the visible manifestation of God shaking this world's powers to their foundations.

Given the story of Peter's rescue from prison in a previous chapter, we might expect Paul and Silas to go immediately to Lydia's house. But this is an escape story without an escape. Paul and Silas don't leave. Being God's servants does not mean escape from the dangerous places, but rather the opportunity to be the voice and the hands of Christ right there where they are needed. And so just as Paul and Silas shared the gospel in song with their fellow prisoners, perhaps inspiring them to remain in prison, they now save their jailer from the suicide that Roman honour expected with a failure of duty.

So the jailer, too, was a prisoner. Most people in Philippi probably didn't think of him that way. After all, he was the jailer. He held the keys to the

cells! But he spent almost as much time at the jail as the prisoners did. Yes, guards could mind things if he had to go to the marketplace, but when the guards went home, the jailer stayed. His own humble residence was attached to the jail so he could be awakened in the night if anything went wrong. However, he was a slave in another way. After they had thrown those two strange Jews in the jail, when the jailer was awakened in the middle of the night by a great boom, and ran out to find all the doors to the jail opened, he knew he was seeing the aftermath of a successful riot.

He also knew what he was honour-bound to do. If he didn't want to be publicly hung for his dereliction of duty, and his family to be shamed, he would have to do 'the honourable thing.' He would have to fall on his sword. All the people who were in chains were now running free but the jailer would die here in the jail. In such a moment it is clear that your life was never really your own.

That's what the jailer said to himself as he worked up the courage necessary to hurl himself against his blade. Then he heard a voice: "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" The jailer dropped his sword and ran to greet the strange Jews sitting contentedly in their cell along with the other prisoners. A few days ago, he had heard the oracle calling out about them in the market place before she had mysteriously disappeared: "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." At the time, he had scoffed. "Saved?"

What do I need to be saved from?”

But now he had been awakened to his own hopelessness. The moment he knew he had no choice but to fall on his sword — to fulfill an obligation to — what? honour? He knew his supposed freedom had just been an illusion. The only truly free man in this prison was Paul, who was going to do what he wanted, chains or no. Now the jailer wanted to be free like that. Free in the heart and in the mind. Free indeed. He fell trembling before the two prisoners. “Lords, what must I do to be saved?”

The jailer and his whole household were baptized. Then they began going to Lydia’s house to learn about the new Way along with the others in the city who had become disciples: people of all walks of life, men and women, Jews and Greeks, slave and free. They all had one thing in common. They had once been prisoners but now they were free, whether or not, most people in Philippi saw them that way.

Just as Lydia’s life was changed by the gospel, so too is the life of this jailer. The call to faith: “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household.” The jailer and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God.

The Word of God was being spoken: “And Lydia and the other disciples of “The Way,” shared the word of the Lord with the jailer and with all who lived in his household” – followed by service to others: “Even at that hour

of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds” and then – baptism: “He and everyone in his household were immediately baptized” – and finally – the sharing of a meal: “He brought them into his house and set a meal before them.” This is a picture of the church’s life, which the jailer has now entered through faith.

To his credit, Paul, a Roman citizen, does not play the citizenship card until after he is incarcerated, and after the jailer and his household have been converted. With the declaration of Roman citizenship, the magistrates’ sense of power and control is taken away. Like those Gerasenes in Luke’s Gospel who could not tolerate Jesus’ exorcism or perhaps the losing of all those pigs, so now the leaders of Philippi beg Paul to simply leave them alone. Paul does go; after all, God is calling him to an expanding mission.

Before he goes, we hear a reminder that the church is still there in Philippi in the house of Lydia – and now in the house of the jailer. “When Paul and Silas left the prison, they returned to the home of Lydia. There they met with the believers and encouraged them once more. Then they left town.”

If the magistrates felt any relief at Paul’s departure, it was premature. The church remains, serving and proclaiming the risen Jesus as Lord, and the world will never go back to the way it was.

We were born into a complicated network of relationships in a broken world, and by action and inaction we continue on as if anything of importance was a zero-sum game: The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Good survives and thrives only when evildoers are punished or killed. The news that the oppressed will be liberated can only be bad news for the oppressors; the actors switch roles, but the script stays the same.

In that world, a slave girl's freedom from the powers that enslaved her is bad news for those who benefitted from her enslavement. They demand that Paul and Silas be jailed for "disturbing our city," as the two missionaries were doing. What God did through Paul and Silas upended the relationships of slave and master, socially as well as spiritually.

But what if the slave-owners had received this change as a gift? What Good News might they have experienced had they received this disruption of the old relationship, of slave and master as an opportunity and an invitation to experience a new kind of relationship, a new kind of freedom? Paul's and Silas' jailer did, and the night of an earthquake and a prison break became the night that he and his family became sisters and brothers with the former prisoners, breaking bread and rejoicing.

Acts provides us with a powerful set of stories, in which injustice and imprisonment give way to healing, reconciliation, and joy. These came as God's gifts, given freely, as all God's gifts are. Paul and Silas

responded to grace by extending grace, spiritually freeing the slave girl from evil powers, even though that may not have made her physical life better, singing and preaching in their cell. And, when their jailer appeared to be ready to respond to grace as well, they received him as a brother. Along the way, we witness powerful signs: miraculous liberation from spiritual and physical imprisonment – baptism – the breaking of bread.

It's a pattern that repeats itself around the world as the Spirit moves among communities: God's grace in healing and reconciling moves a grateful receiver of God's gift to extend that grace to others in turn. We celebrate that grace, remembering God's work among God's people and embracing the identity that is ours in Baptism: one Body of Christ, called to Christ's ministry. God's mission of reconciliation, of making visible and tangible the unity God has given Christ's Body and is giving the world God created – is not something we engage as reluctant employees who grimace when we get the memo; it is the natural, joyful, response of those already made sisters and brothers by God's amazing work in Christ.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of resurrection, Your son, Jesus, awed his followers by appearing among them. With awe we also celebrate his resurrection and rejoice in eternal life. **Amen.**