

The Music of the Night

Acts 16:16-34; John 17:20-26

Ascension Sunday, May 16, 2010

Whitefish UMC

- † Tomorrow morning, very early and before it gets light, Tom and I will leave for the airport to fly to Chicago. Most of you know that my mother lives there in a locked Alzheimer's unit of an assisted living facility. On Mother's Day, I had a good phone conversation with my mom (relatively speaking, that is).
- † Lately she has taken to asking me a series of questions to make sure I am who I say I am. She asks if I am still the mother of her grandson, Carey, still married to Tom, and still a preacher. "Yes," I say, "that's me." The fourth question is an interesting one—she asks: "And do you still have daily vacation bible school?" (which is what they called it at the church in which I grew up). "Yes," I say, "we do."
- † Apparently "daily vacation bible school" is important in my mother's very limited memory. And it's important to me, too. In fact it's so important that when I hear today's scripture story from the book of Acts about Paul and Silas in prison because of freeing a slave girl from her rantings, it's the version acted out by our children in the basement of the Presbyterian Church at VBS six or so years ago that I remember.
- † Of course it's a story that offers great dramatic possibilities and lots of action figures. Paul and Silas, singing their hearts out in the night; the jailer—about to fall on his sword; the slave girl with her unusual gifts of

fortune-telling; the mean owners of the girl, incensed at their loss of income and status; the unyielding judge; the crowds with proverbial pitchforks—all the drama anyone could want.

- † But it was a scary story, too—a bit over the top for some of the younger children. I even remember some of our now-cool-highschoolers (then perhaps in 7th grade) being a bit apprehensive about the earthquakes and the floggings—as they ought to have been. But amidst all the violence, noise, and drama, what is the real message of this text? What did it have to teach our children? To enlighten us?
- † Remember that last week’s reading from Acts told the story of Lydia, a woman of some means, who brought her whole household to faith in Jesus Christ with a group baptism in the midst of great joy—kind of like our Mother’s Day celebration last week. Paul and Silas must have been feeling pretty good about things after that. We know that they kept up their routine of going to the place of prayer down by the river—preaching and teaching the good news of Jesus.
- † On his regular trips to the place of prayer, Paul kept running into a woman who was very different, outwardly, from Lydia. While Lydia was a woman of some position and possessions, this other woman, really a young girl, was a street person, a slave girl, a possession herself, owned not only by other humans but captured by a spirit that seemed to give her special powers. Scholars describe such people as “diviners,” able to predict the future and see more deeply into the reality of the present than other folk. They would have been relatively common in the first century Roman world. Adherents to the god Apollo, they were also known as “mantics,” the snake, symbol of Apollo, was displayed on their person.

- † This girl, then, is a commodity for her owners, a source of amusement and profit. But all of a sudden she starts shouting strange things when Paul and Silas appear. “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” That can’t have been good for business.
- † But it’s Paul, not her owners, who silences her—why, we’re not told, except that he is “annoyed” by the continual commotion—perhaps it is a distraction, or perhaps he wants nothing to do with the serpent-wisdom of Apollo. At any rate, he turns and heals her of her possession by these spirits.
- † For their trouble, Paul and Silas are taken before a magistrate by the men who own the slave girl, outraged that they have lost **their** ability to make a profit from **her** abilities. They don’t seek to recover damages, though—they really want revenge. And they employ a standard anti-Jewish charge: the preachers are outside agitators and not ‘our kind of people’. So Paul and Silas are beaten and thrown into jail, shackled and just barely conscious.
- † What happens next? Paul and Silas start singing and praying, and other prisoners start listening. Some commentators think this is a stretch, but I don’t. In hearing stories of the civil rights movement, resistance to oppression throughout the ages, I can imagine a lot of hymn singing going on.
- † Don’t you wonder what songs they sang? What would you sing? The title of this message/sermon comes from a song sung by the Phantom of the Opera to the young Christine, in which he urges her to explore the depths of her darkest desires. But what music of the night would sustain you?
- † I can only imagine the whole range of emotions that Paul and Silas felt and explored as they lay in prison. Perhaps they sang songs in the night to keep their spirits up or sang the psalms of lament to remind them that they weren’t the first to struggle and wonder at God’s plan.

- † But what happened next overshadows all of that speculation. For suddenly an earthquake so violent that it dislodges the shackles from the wall and knocks the doors off their hinges rocks the jail. When the warden hurries to check the damage, he finds his worst nightmare—prisoners all free and running away.
- † As an employee of the Roman government, he will be executed for this catastrophe. He is so distraught and dismayed that he begins to fall on his sword—clearly a quicker and less painful death than what he can expect from the Romans. But from the dark comes Paul’s voice, shouting: “Hold on. Don’t do it. We’re still here. We haven’t run away.”
- † The jailer, dumbfounded, asks why they haven’t run away, what keeps them in place? Paul tells him, not just with words, but with his compassion, and so the jailer asks, “What must I do to be saved?” “Believe on the Lord Jesus,” is his answer, and then they tell him all about the kingdom of God that Jesus lived and proclaimed.
- † So the jailer and his household, like Lydia and hers, are welcomed into the household of God. And the jailer takes those “outside agitators” home, offering hospitality, also as Lydia did, and washes their wounds and feeds them, and they tell stories, (and perhaps sing hymns) long into the night.
- † And so this story tells of liberation, of salvation, of freedom. The slave girl is freed from her possession to spirits not of God; Paul and Silas are freed from prison; the jailer is saved from a horrible death and from bondage to his Roman bosses. And what about us?
- † What must we do to be saved from what threatens to destroy us? What must we do to be saved from our particular bondage, our oppressive addiction, emptiness, or boredom? There are powerful captivities of our age that threaten to imprison us, things like expectations, a desire for more stuff, and

fear. Fear can make us less open to God's invitation to transformation and new life.

- † Did you know that many people fear Christians more than anyone else? In a psychology class in Atlanta a few years ago, students were asked to identify the kind of person they most feared. 40% of the students in the class chose Christians for that category.
- † Marcus Borg, noted biblical scholar and professor of New Testament at Oregon State University, writes in a footnote to his book The Heart of Christianity, that when he asks his unchurched university students to write a short essay about their impressions of Christianity, “they consistently use five adjectives: they think Christians are literalistic, anti-intellectual, self-righteous, judgmental, and bigoted.”
- † Another pastor says that Christians have a “branding problem.” We haven't done enough to encapsulate our core message with something catchy and memorable. “What do you think the average person on the street, in the grocery store, at the gas station would come up with if we went around and asked them to sum up in just a few words what the Christian church was all about?”
- † “In many cases, our branding tag line would be something like, ‘We're right, you're wrong. Let us correct your behavior. Give us your money for something irrelevant for your life. Withdraw from normalcy and join our weird little subculture. Welcome to worship, and let us tell you how to vote.’ Whether we like it or not, we have been branded in these ways by a culture that for the most part sees the church primarily outside the mainstream of current life.”
- † What brand of Christianity did the slave girl see? The jailer? Lydia? What brand of Christianity do our neighbors here in Whitefish see?

- † Was it the earthquake—a mighty demonstration of God’s power—that compelled the jailer to seek more fully the good news of Jesus? Or was it Paul’s compassion?
- † Today is the last Sunday of the great 50 days of Easter. It’s Ascension Sunday, the day we commemorate Jesus’ return to his heavenly Father. In John’s and the other gospels, there’s a lot of talk about the “Glory of God” in the texts for this day.
- † When we think of glory, what comes to mind? Is it blazing light, clashing cymbals and loud trumpets, heavenly choirs? Of course those are some aspects of the glory of God. But what if we look more closely at where the real glory lies? John gives clues in the prologue to his gospel: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, the glory of God’s one and only, full of grace and truth.”
- † There is in the gospel a wonderful paradox when it comes to glory: Yes, glory can be and is everything we usually associate with the glory of God: God can be luminous and splendid and mind-boggling and majestic in ways that unmake us and send us falling down upon our faces in adoration.
- † But the glory of God can also come through the grace and truth of the very humble incarnate Lord Jesus. For the glory of Jesus emerged in the course of his ministry when he gave hope to the poor, when he forgave the sins of the downtrodden and marginalized people, when he reached out in love, when he displayed grace to the least deserving.
- † Or as Debbie Blue, a truly provocative preacher puts it, “Glory doesn’t shine, it bleeds.”
- † I think of the newly baptized jailer and his family bathing the wounds of Paul and Silas that night of the great earthquake that could have ended the jailer’s life. Isn’t that when the true glory of God shines? In the sharing of

the meal, in the telling of the stories, in the singing of the music of the night and bright day, in the welcoming the stranger—all in the way the truth, and the light of Jesus Christ?

† Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

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