

“On a Day Like This...!”
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1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Acts 16:16-26

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. 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.” 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.

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. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

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

When I was studying preaching in seminary, I was working on a sermon using the text in Genesis where the brothers Cain and Abel offer sacrifices to God. And God likes Abel’s better. Cain then gets angry and kills Abel. As we were brainstorming in small groups, helping each other with ideas for our sermons, the instructor came over and spoke with each of us about our ideas. She listened as I explained my ideas – I don’t remember what I was going to do – but then asked, “Why did God like Abel’s offering best?” I explained my thoughts a little further, and then she asked again, “But why didn’t God like Cain’s offering?” We repeated this back and forth a couple more times before she went off to another group. And I was left wondering “why.” I chose another text for that sermon project.

I felt that same sense of “Why?” again this week. Not why were Paul and Silas in Phillipi. Paul and Silas were there to preach God’s good news through Jesus Christ. Those early Christians were quite committed to spreading the gospel.

I didn’t wonder why they didn’t leave the jail after the quake. It’s a similar answer really. They accepted that God had a purpose for them and being in that cell was at least possibly part of that purpose.

The story continues:

When the jailer awoke and saw the open doors of the prison, he thought the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul shouted loudly, “Don’t harm yourself! We’re all here!”

The jailer called for some lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He led them outside and asked, “Honorable masters, what must I do to be rescued?”

Paul didn’t mind spending the night in jail. Being a Roman citizen, he knew no one dared do more to him without a hearing. So he practices what our first text reminds us – rejoicing, praying and giving thanks. What songs would you sing if you were in that jail cell?

I didn’t wonder why the jailer tried to kill himself. Although he wasn’t responsible for escapes resulting from "acts of God," maybe he felt shame at this seeming dereliction of duty.

No, the question I couldn’t answer – that none of us can answer – is what became of the oracle-speaking slave whose life Paul so radically changed?

I’m not surprised Paul found her irritating. I’ve long felt Paul was wound a little tightly. Maybe he felt that while the woman’s words were true, the ambiguities – her role as fortuneteller-for-profit – tarnished God’s message as he hoped to proclaim it. We really can’t know, yet suddenly, seemingly without thought, Paul ends this unnamed woman’s oracle, crippling her usefulness, her profitability, for her owners.

We hear nothing of how this changed her life. Could there have been a more complete freedom for her? What happened to this woman? Do her owners find another use for her? Was she returned to the slave auction to be sold again? At this moment she disappears, having been of no more importance to the story – or to Paul – than she was to her owners. She’s simply left behind, nameless, disturbing – a reminder of the continuing need of liberation for so many.

As we continue with what else God would have us notice in today’s tale, I encourage you to remember that there’s more to any bible text than what we notice on first reading.

Imagine for a moment that you’re the guard at the Philippi jail. Probably a retired Roman soldier, maybe you’ve taken a local wife, have a child. You work there to supplement your retirement income. Awakened by the sudden tremors, you assume the worst. Perhaps it’s to make up for the disgrace of having failed in your duty, but you take your short sword and are about to plunge it into your neck when Paul calls out.

Or, imagine yourself as forced to prostitute yourself by speaking oracles for someone else’s profit. Do you even know that Roman society frowns severely on what your owners are doing? Still, you’re a slave; you have no choice in the matter. Your day is not your own. Your life is not your own. As a slave you’re insignificant, as a woman, even less so. What does this do to your sense of self?

In your mind’s eye, imagine you see Paul and Silas walking down the street, probably on their way to or from Lydia’s home where they’re staying. Maybe it’s that God is resting so powerfully on these men that draws you toward them. What you say is spot on. “These people are servants of the Most High God! They are proclaiming a way of salvation to you!”

A crowd gathers which seems good for everyone. The disciples talk about Christ. You collect coin for your cup. Your masters will be happy so maybe you’ll get enough food tonight. This is such a good setup that you come back the next day and for days after, until eventually Paul has had enough. “In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to leave her!”

Imagine one more time, you who had felt hopeful, maybe for the first time in years. This had been going so well. Now, your one marketable skill is gone. Are you beaten? Are you freed to starve on your own? As you disappear from the story, we're left wondering.

Ever have one of those days? Now, Paul and Silas have a bad day too. Yet too often we focus only on the main characters and, in this case, it's a bad day all 'round.

Paul and Silas had been staying with Lydia, an independent woman who led the local synagogue, recently baptized in Christ. Each day the men walked around Philippi sharing Christ's gospel message. Things were going well. Until today. They've been arrested. The charges were fabricated since the woman's owners knew they wouldn't get far saying they're now deprived of the income the girl's oracle bought them. They choose instead to play on the crowd's racism. It's not difficult to find similarly targeted groups among us: immigrants, members of other religious traditions, those whose sexual orientation or gender identity doesn't fit the majority.

The two disciples are beaten then thrown in jail where they later meet the guard.

This story reminds us that the most powerful witness we can give is not by our words but by our example. The ways we act – what we do and don't do, how we respond to people even when we're annoyed with them – proclaim God's power to bring healing.

It's tempting to give in to our annoyance or anger. But how much more powerful if – instead of entering into a debate with someone who can't, or won't, hear us – we simply invoke Christ's power to bring healing to our broken world. We don't have to tell folks we're doing this; we just quietly witness to our faith by our example, by continuing to live as best we can by Christ's example.

Then after the quake, we're ready when someone asks the question. In Luke's day, the pressing religious question was, "What must I do to be saved?" Today it's, "What must I do to put it all together? How can I gain control of my life? How do I cope with the seemingly uncontrollable forces around and within me?" Different words, but the same need.

The earthquake and the prisoners' willingness to stay put have shaken loose the key spiritual question of the jailer's time. The sense that life has spun out of control often characterizes the questions we ask. Our world is shaken up by some life change – the onset of life-threatening disease, a death, divorce, retirement, occupational or financial reversal. Only then do we consider the truly important questions.

Notwithstanding the difficulties in the slave's story, she and the jailer are each released from forms of imprisonment. We may not have been in a physical prison, but we each have our chains. God's grace penetrates our confinement. God's love seeks people out no matter who we are, our position in society or circumstances. And God sets us free.

Disciples are persons who, in the presence of hurt, guilt, and powerlessness, accept that love and then embody it.

How do you turn around a bad day? When trouble comes, pray. God will help you reframe the experience. Circumstances won't have changed but through eyes of faith you can find comfort in knowing that God is with you and that God can create good out of any situation. It takes faith to praise God when your day's been bad. It takes faith to sing praises, yet when we leave our challenges with God, what else is there to do but sing?

Amen.