

## I

In the early morning hours of April 29, 1945, under the cover of darkness, a small group of American soldiers ventured silently across the Elbe River deep inside Nazi Germany. They were just 40 miles southwest of Berlin, and their mission was to link up the Allied lines, which were advancing from the West, with those of the Soviet Army advancing from the East. When the linkup of those lines was complete, Berlin would be surrounded and the war in Europe would be all but over.

As dawn turned to daylight, the Americans were approaching a small village when they were suddenly ambushed enemy infantry, supported by tanks and armored personnel carriers. The American commanding officer, recognizing that his soldiers were outnumbered, outgunned, and cut off from retreat, gave the order to surrender. For them, the war was over. They were no longer soldiers, but prisoners.

For the next several days they endured a hard forced march. There was little food and little shelter, and a great sense of anxiety among prisoner and guard alike, given that they were marching between two onrushing armies and in great danger of being caught in the middle. And then one morning in early May, the sound of a nearby battle came to their ears, and the guards suddenly abandoned their posts, leaving the prisoners completely unguarded. But the prisoners didn't have much time to ponder this development, as a few minutes later, an American truck with a white star came driving down the

road, and in that moment, the prisoners were soldiers again.

One of those soldiers was a 20-year-old kid from Dallas, Texas, who could have had no idea that someday the most handsome of his grandsons would have the privilege of serving the First Presbyterian Church of Athens, Georgia. I have a picture of him in his Army uniform on the wall in my home, and from time to time I look at it and I wonder what that must have been like for him – to be a prisoner, to not know when or if you'll ever see your loved ones again, to not know how long your captivity will last or if you will survive it.

What must have it been like to see that American truck coming down that road, to know that he had made it, that he was free? Were there shouts of joy? Were there tears? Were there prayers? Were there all of those things all at once at the same time?

## II

I think part of what makes us human is that somewhere deep inside of us, there is something that yearns and longs for freedom. And I think that deep human longing for freedom from captivity cuts across all boundaries of geography, culture, and time. And such is the case with the story before us this morning.

## III

Our story for this morning comes to us from the Book of Acts, which relates story of the birth and early years of the church following Christ's death and resurrection.

Last week, we read from Acts 9 and hear the story of Saul and Ananias and their encounter with God and each another in the city of Damascus. After that dramatic encounter, Saul became known henceforth by the name Paul, or as we sometimes call him, the Apostle Paul. From that day forward until his death, Paul became the first-century church's most important theologian, pastor, and church-planter. In fact, about half of the books that make up our New Testament today are letters that were either authored by or attributed to the Apostle Paul.

Paul was born and raised as a faithful first-century Jew, but he also held Roman citizenship, which allowed him to freely travel the Roman highway system and to enjoy unfettered passage aboard vessels that sailed the Mediterranean Sea.

In today's story, Paul, his companion Silas, and several other disciples have made their way across the sea to the European continent, to a Roman colony called Philippi.

By this point in history, the Roman empire was approaching the peak of its military, economic, and political power – a period of history that scholars call the Pax Romana – the Roman peace. But that peace was maintained at the point of a spear, and the Roman authorities dealt quickly and severely with anyone or anything that threatened to disturb the peace or disrupt the economy.

And in our story for today, Paul and Silas are charged with doing both.

So listen now for a Word from God from Acts 16:16-34.

*One day as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a female slave who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." 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.*

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

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 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 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. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 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.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

In many bibles, this story appears under the subhead, "Paul and Silas in Prison." But I wonder, who else in the story was held captive?

One figure that captured my imagination this week is the slave girl. She's clearly not the focus of attention in the story – we don't learn her name or age or anything other than that she was a slave, that is, a captive an economic asset more than a whole person made in the image of God. For his part, even the Apostle Paul treats her not as neighbor in need but rather as a nuisance, and after Paul casts the spirit out of her, it is left to the readers' imagination to decide what happens to female slaves who are no longer of value to

their masters. She had been freed, but not completely. The spirit of divination had been cast out of her, but her body was still not her own.

And then we come to the townspeople and the magistrates – the citizens and leaders of this Roman colony of Philippi. They were free physically – they were citizens and leaders of the most powerful nation on the face of the earth – but they were captive spiritually, bound up by their own fears and prejudices. They were captive to their own idolatry of law and order at the expense of justice and peace, and when the slave owners dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities, they knew just how to manipulate them. They didn't charge Paul and Silas with breaking any specific laws. They charged them with being different. They charged them with being one of "them" rather than one of "us." Listen again in their own words.

*"These men, these Jews, are disturbing our city and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe."*

It's an old trick– to single out a few vulnerable people, name the ways in which *those* people are not *our* people and insinuate they're somehow a threat to "law and order" or the bottom line or both, and then stand back and watch the fire burn.

And that's what happened in the story. Paul and Silas - both of whom were Roman citizens, by the way - were nevertheless denied due process, publicly stripped naked, savagely beaten, and incarcerated because the citizens and

magistrates of Philippi were spiritually bound by their fears and prejudices.

And then there is the jailer. He, too, appears to be physically free, but the culture in which he lives is so unforgiving of failure that when it appears that at least some of the prisoners in his charge have escaped, he believes that his only option is to take his sword and bind himself unto death, and he is only stopped by Paul's voice calling to him in the darkness.

When he discovers that Paul, Silas, and every other inmate are still present, the jailer comes face to face with his own captivity. He falls down trembling before Paul and Silas asking, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

And then by the grace of God, a remarkable transformation takes place as he hears the Word of God. By the grace of God, the jailer becomes the dinner host. By the grace of God, the oppressor becomes the servant.

At that very hour, in the middle of the night, the jailer takes Paul and Silas into his own home and washes and binds up their physical wounds.

And then Paul and Silas return the favor. They baptize the jailer and his entire household, washing and binding up their spiritual wounds. And then all of them sit together at the table and break bread, no longer jailer and inmates, oppressor and oppressed, no longer us and them, but siblings in the Lord, free in body *and* in spirit.

And right there, in the wee hours of the morning, right there in the jailer's home in Philippi, the empire begins to give way to the kingdom of God.

#### IV

So I wonder, my friend, about you. Do you find yourself longing for freedom this morning? Is something holding you captive?

Are you like the slave girl, held captive by the notion that the only worth you have in the grand scheme of things is tied to what you can produce, by the value you can create for someone else, and if you should stop producing, you will be pushed aside and all but forgotten?

Are you like the people of Philippi, held captive by fear of the rapid demographic and cultural changes that are unfolding all around you, fearful that there might come a day when you feel like a stranger in your own land?

Are you like the jailer, held captive by the fear that if you make one single mistake, if you fail just once, your life, for all intents and purposes, will be over?

Or is it something else? Are you held captive and bewildered by your own sin? I identify with the Apostle Paul, who once wrote, "I do not understand my own actions. The good I would do I do not, and the evil I would not do I do. Who will rescue me from this body of death?"<sup>1</sup>

By what or by whom are you being held captive this day?

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 7:15-24

As you contemplate that question, my friend, remember this. God is in the liberation business. And God desires that God's children would be free in body and in spirit.

The Book of Exodus tells us that our ancestors were enslaved in the land of Egypt for 400 years, but God led them out of Egypt, through the waters of the sea, and into the desert. And in the desert, God provided for their every physical need. And then God gave our ancestors the law, the means by which we would be transformed into a royal priesthood and a holy nation, the means by which we would be freed spiritually.<sup>2</sup>

In the gospels, we read that Jesus spent all day on a mountainside, teaching the people and freeing them spiritually. But as the day was growing late, the disciples pointed out to Jesus that they needed to wrap it up, because they were in a deserted place and the dinner hour was approaching. Jesus said, "You give them something to eat," and the disciples looked and all they had among them was a couple of loaves of bread and a couple of scrawny fish. But Jesus took what they offered him, gave thanks for it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples, who then distributed it to the crowd, and 5,000 hungry men were fed, and at least as many women and children, too.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus frees both spiritually *and* physically, and that is God's deep desire, that all of God's children would be free in body and in soul.

Like the slave girl, you can be free in spirit but still captive in body, and therefore, still captive.

And like the citizens and leaders of Philippi, you can be free in body but captive in spirit, and therefore, still captive.

God's desire is that our world would look something like the jailer's home – a place where the word of the Lord is spoken, a place where, in response to the word, we wash and bind each other's wounds, both the physical ones and the spiritual ones – a place where we break bread together, a place where there is rejoicing when there is a new believer in God.

My friend, God is crazy about you. There's nothing God wouldn't do for you, and nothing that God wouldn't give for you, including God's one and only Son. God's deep desire for your life is that you would believe in the Lord Jesus and be unshackled from all that binds you.

## V

One final detail in this story is worth contemplating. Did you notice that after the earthquake, it wasn't just Paul and Silas' cell door that was opened? It wasn't just Paul and Silas whose chains were unfastened. *Every* door was thrown open and *every* chain was unfastened.

And I think that little detail illustrates a larger truth about our human condition. We are all in this thing

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 12-20

<sup>3</sup> Mark 6:30-44, c.f. Matthew 14:13-21, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-13

together. I am only as free as you are, and vice versa.

There is much in the news and our public discourse these days that has to do with issues of freedom: from debates about when precisely a human life begins and questions about what the government says about what a woman does with her body, to whether and how our nation should intervene in a conflict between other nations, to what is taught in our schools about our nation's past, to when and how and where citizens may cast a ballot – the list goes on and on.

And it's easy and understandable for us to be tempted to take a position that says, "Well, that issue doesn't really affect me or people like me. I don't know anybody who's been personally affected by that issue so it doesn't really matter."

And if it had just been Paul and Silas whose shackles had been unfastened, that might be a reasonable position to take.

But it wasn't just Paul and Silas shackles that had been undone. It wasn't just the saints to whom God granted release – it was the sinners, too! *Every* cell door was open! *Every* shackle was broken!

God, as it turns out, is in the liberation business, and freedom is as much a group enterprise as it is an individual one. A Georgia preacher, writing to some of his fellow pastors in Alabama, described it this way:

I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.<sup>4</sup>

That preacher's friend, who later became a Georgia Congressman, once observed, our ancestors may have come to this country on different boats, but we are all in the same boat now.<sup>5</sup>

So may we remember who and whose we are. May we remember that we were created to be free, in body and spirit, by a God who is in the business of liberation. May we remember we serve a God who breaks open every cell door, unshackles every chain, a God who liberates the oppressed and the oppressor.

In these troubled times, may we have the courage to be the church:

to speak the Word of the Lord with boldness.

to wash and bind up wounds.

to break bread.

to rejoice in the Lord.

And as we do, may the empire continue to give way to the kingdom of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Letter from Birmingham Jail," 14 Apr 1963, [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html), accessed May 5, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> John Lewis, from a video clip on display at Atlanta's Hartsfield Jackson International Airport, observed May 4, 2022.