

Easter 7C: Acts 16:16-31, Psalm 97, Revelation 22, John 17:20-26 David Schlafer
June 2, 2019 Church of the Redeemer, Bethesda, Maryland

- 1) *No good deed goes unpunished.* That's our wry way of venting frustration when our best, well-meaning efforts to be helpful bring down consequences unintended, unwelcome, and undeserved upon our heads. It's not that we want to be rewarded, or even recognized for the good we try to do. But something in us protests that we shouldn't have to get dinged for doing it. Poor Paul and Silas—they've been more than dinged for their good-doing. They've been kangaroo court-convicted on charges racially biased and flatly false. They've been publicly humiliated, badly beaten, and not just dumped in a dank prison cell, but rendered immobile—chained to the dirt floor. Why have these men been confined? Just because they set a woman free. She may be grateful; but those who were profiting from her—not so much. Their economic abundance and their social standing give them political clout; and they do a good job of playing on cultural prejudice to generate mob support. *No good deed goes unpunished*—Paul and Silas can say AMEN to that.
- 2) If I were they, my frustration wouldn't focus primarily on these slaveowners, the magistrates, the mob, or the jailor; my biggest beef would be with the God who got me into this situation to begin with. Paul and Silas have followed a clear call from God to carry the gospel to Europe; and what it's got them is bleeding backs and bound feet. I'd be bitterly lodging the same complaint that St. Teresa of Avila will voice centuries later: *If this is the way you treat your friends, God; it's no wonder you have so few of them.* But what are Paul and Silas doing? Praying (not surprisingly), but something else as well: They are SINGING. And not in a quiet, keening sob. They are singing so robustly that the music resonates to all the corners of the prison; and it gets the attention of the other inmates. Storyteller Luke doesn't tell us WHAT they are singing. I'm guessing, however, that, as faithful Jews, they are singing from the psalter—the songbook of their sacred tradition. Why would they do this? Not just, I think, to keep their minds occupied or their spirits up. They sing, not to distract themselves, but, just the opposite, to focus their attention. Stuck in what is so very wrong and what seems so very real; Paul and Silas sing forth the fact of a reality far deeper still.

3) Can you hear what they are singing? With their fellow prisoners, let's listen in:

The LORD is king, let the earth rejoice.

The heavens declare his righteousness, and all the people see his glory.

Confounded be all who worship carved images and delight in false gods.

Light has sprung up for the righteous, and joyful gladness for those who are truehearted.

They sing a song of celebration—a song of affirmation and defiance.

- In defiance of an economic system that treats vulnerable members as commodities to be exploited for feeding the greed of the powerful.
- In defiance of a political system that renders inequality and injustice institutional.
- In defiance of a social system that fosters fear and harbors hate.

Imprisoned, as they are, by ALL of these, Paul and Silas are captive to NONE of them.

They are, literally, in no position to argue their case against these systems.

But those systems just can't keep these men from singing—

singing out the falsehood, the idolatry of these freedom-squelching forces:

Confounded be all who delight in false gods.

And doing that by singing forth a far deeper truth—

the truth of a God who creates in love, redeems in love, liberates in love:

The Lord preserves the lives of his saints, and delivers them from the hand of the wicked.

4) It's worth standing back from this prison scene for a moment—

a prison where, in the depths of which, Paul and Silas are really free—

it's worth standing back to look over the shoulder of the one who writes this story.

Luke, the author of the Gospel that bears his name, and also of the book of Acts—

Luke has this THING about singing.

In the very first two chapters of his earlier volume, Luke has folks singing four times over.

- When the angel Gabriel comes with surprising news to Mary, she SINGS:
God has put down the mighty from their seats, and has lifted up the lowly.
- When John the Baptist is born, Zechariah, his father, breaks into song:
Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he has come to his people and set them free.
- A long, dark night for lowly shepherds is brilliantly illuminated by the sound of singing angels:
Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.
- When he lays eyes on the Christ child, old Simeon sings:
My eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all people

Note the similarities in these songs:

- They all erupt in social settings that seem anything but free.
- They all are songs sung to or by those who seem to be captives, one way or another, and who are yet swept into songs of liberation.

5) While we're standing back to listen in, let's take a farther step back for even fuller listening:

- *Surely, I am coming soon*, sings the Risen and Ascended Christ.

AMEN! Come, Lord Jesus, sings back the island-exiled author of the Revelation to John.

And he beckons his oppressed and fearful listeners

to join in the chorus of angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

- *I in them, and you in me, that they and we may become completely one—*
that is the song-prayer, on the night before He's crucified—
the song-prayer Jesus prays to His father as his traumatized disciples listen in.
A song that names what death can't sever—freedom found in communion with God.

None of these songs is a solo operatic aria—each is an invitation to share in a singalong.
They sing a reality that is promised, into reality here and now.

It is possible with these lyrics, to speak the words without singing the music,
but if we NEVER sing these words, something of the reality toward which they gesture
gets SERIOUSLY lost in translation.

- 6) Immersed as we currently are in such strident sounds of cultural conflict,
it's fair to ask the question: SINGING--What's the POINT?

For Paul and Silas, and sometimes even for us, however;

that singing can and does unleash an economic-political-social earthquake: *We shall overcome.*

- Some, like the fortune-teller woman, who are exploited for their gifts and vulnerabilities—
they gain their freedom.
- Some, like her greedy masters, who exercise unjust control—
they get cut loose from the power positions in which they are held captive.
- Some, like the fellow prisoners, who overhear the singing—
they find the hope to claim a freedom that they didn't know they had.
- Some, like the Roman jailer, who are both victim and perpetrator—
they are liberated from both at once.

Through their enacting—in SOME God-engendered good deeds—virtue IS validated.

But not obviously and immediately, everywhere and always.

Hence, a more sobering question:

can singing God's justice even be heard above the cultural cacophony?

If we were to pose this question to Paul and Silas, to Mary, to Zechariah,
to Simeon, to the choir of angels, to the community of John,
to a Crucified, Risen, and Ascended Christ—

I'm guessing they would all respond—spontaneously, in unison:

COME WHAT MAY, NO MATTER WHAT, HOW CAN WE KEEP FROM SINGING?