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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
January 7, 2018
Sunday after Epiphany

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 49:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

Hymns: 106; 126; 129; 127:1,4,5 (237:1)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Acts 16:25-34

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

Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. ²⁷ And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. ²⁸ But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here."

²⁹ Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹ So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed *their* stripes. And immediately he and all his *family* were baptized. ³⁴ Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Epiphany --

An Epiphany! A light turns on. Confusion instantly becomes understanding! The darkness of ignorance suddenly becomes the light of knowledge. In church we use the word Epiphany to signify how the glory of Christ was revealed, and not **to** just a few, or **for** a few, but that glory of Christ as our Redeemer Lord was displayed for **all the world** to see! Christ was born for the salvation of nations to the very ends of the earth!

That is why the gospel lesson for Epiphany is the coming of the wise men. They came from the east in search of the infant Jesus that they, foreigners from far away, might worship Him. And they did, and they knew Jesus as Lord and Savior.

From days of old, as we read in our Old Testament lesson, it was God's desire and intent to broadcast the gospel of Christ to all the world that the peoples of all nations might come to know and believe that we have forgiveness sins, life, and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Our text today takes us forward to after Jesus' ascension into heaven and the actual commencement of God's plan for the gospel to go out into the world. Paul and Silas were in Philippi, a major city on the trade route from Italy to Asia Minor. The city was a Roman colony, making its residents Roman citizens. Its governance was to adhere to Roman law. Most of its populace were gentiles, many were retired Roman soldiers.

Paul received a special dream calling him to leave Asia Minor and to cross over to Macedonia. That led them to Philippi, where having commanded a demon to come out of a teenage sorceress. Paul found themselves on the receiving end of the old adage, "No good deed will be left unpunished." Dragged before the city magistrates they were severely beaten and thrown into the inner dungeon where they were placed in stocks. They were cold, damp, in the dark, in severe pain from a terrible flogging they didn't deserve. And this is where the Spirit presents us with our Epiphany lesson as --

THEME: The Jailer of Philippi Reveals the Breadth of God's Desire to Save.

As I was saying, they were in the stocks in the inner dungeon with the worst of the worst criminal offenders, several undoubtedly awaiting execution, and these were the Lord's missionaries? As such they were facing --

I. Unlikely Prospects in Trying Circumstances.

Paul and Silas had been characterized by their enemies as troublemakers. The city magistrates took their word for it, and had ordered Paul and Silas to be severely beaten. The order had been given to keep them securely, which furthered this false characterization and led the jailer to secure them in stocks, adding to their discomfort. The rest of the prisoners must have been wondering what great evil these two men had committed to receive such harsh treatment.

But then our text picks up the account by telling us exactly how Paul and Silas responded to all this pain and misfortune.

Acts 16:25 "But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them."

Paul and Silas did not respond in a way others might have expected. They did not respond as many of their fellow prisoners may with curses and angry threats. Neither did they respond with whimpering self-pity, in spite of their painful wounds from the beating they had received. They weren't even complaining about the discomfort that the stocks that bound their hands and feet in such an awkward position would cause. In the middle of the night, in the midst of their distress, they turned to the Lord in prayer and **praise**. Yes, they were singing praises to the Lord.

And the prisoners were listening to them. Criminals, lowlifes, what did it matter if they listened to Paul or Silas or not? They weren't the kind of people they sought out for an audience when they were preaching the gospel, were they? They were a bunch of unworthy

sinner locked up in the inner prison because that was very likely exactly what they deserved, or worse!

Now, please note that Paul and Silas weren't acting. They weren't putting on a show to impress anyone. They were turning to their God and Savior and praising Him, and surely also calling out to God for help, for strength, and for deliverance.

The prisoners were listening to them. Perhaps some might have thought it funny that these two new prisoners thought saying some prayers and singing some hymns might get the prison doors to fly open so that they would be delivered. But they were listening, they were listening to the prayers, and they were listening to the songs of praise which certainly spoke of the wonders of a gracious and loving God who is powerful to save. So what if Paul and Silas were in trying circumstances? They had been there before and they knew that God is faithful. So what if others might judge their audience as being poor prospects for conversion; their first audience was the Lord, and they were not ashamed or embarrassed to call out to the Lord and sing the Lord's praises when others were listening. Secondly, Paul knew and confessed that he was chief among sinners, and the Lord had called him to faith! Yes, these other prisoners were dead in their trespasses and sins, (Ephesians 2:1) but the Lord is powerful to save, powerful to make alive.

These are lessons we need to take to heart. We may not ever find ourselves beaten for the gospel's sake or imprisoned for Jesus' sake, but it is the way of life in this sin cursed world in which we live that we will face trials and tribulations. When we do we may well be surrounded by a variety of other people who may be judged by us, or others as poor prospects for the gospel. They may be members of a false religion. They may not believe in God at all. They may be entrenched in a sinful lifestyle, even a life of crime that reveals that they have no true faith in God. That should not deter us from expressing our faith before them, for first we express our faith to God. We know the Lord is powerful to save, we know He cares for us in all our ways; we know He is able to strengthen and comfort us with His presence and His love, even sending His angels to attend us. Our first audience is the Lord, and let others hear us sing His praises and express our faith and hope in Him. In those times faith doesn't care what others might think of us, that

we might be perceived as silly or ignorant or superstitious. And yes, be assured that others will be listening, even if it is in spite of themselves.

The rest depends upon the Lord and --

II. . God’s Call to Faith in Jesus.

The rest of our text focuses so much on the jailer of Philippi that we might forget about the prisoners. Don’t forget about the prisoners for they witnessed a great deliverance, you might say more than one.

Acts 16:26-30 “Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were loosed.²⁷ And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself.²⁸ But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, “Do yourself no harm, for we are all here.”

²⁹ Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.³⁰ And he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

The earthquake got everyone’s attention. The foundations of the prison were shaken! It wasn’t just a tremor. It was a great enough earthquake that it caused alarm for the jailer, and well it should! He awoke to find the doors of the prison standing open. All the doors were open! Yeah, remember I told you not to forget about the other prisoners. Their doors were opened also, and their chains were loosed as well. Worst case scenario for the jailer! He would be found in dereliction of duty and would be sentenced to endure the most severe punishment of the worst prisoner. More than likely it meant crucifixion, or worse. He assumed that he had lost all prisoners, that all had escaped! All doors were standing open. He quickly concluded that his best course of action was to end his own life and avoid the sufferings he would surely endure at the hands of his tormentors. Fear and dread seized the man. He was in despair of his own life.

That is where the law brings sinners, if not now in this life, at the end when they must face their Maker. Despair reigned over us. Remember our Christmas Eve service and the verses we sang from Martin Luther's hymn:

“Fast bound in Satan’s chains I lay, Death brooded darkly o’er me, Sin was my torment night and day, In sin my mother bore me; Yea, deep and deeper still I fell, Life had become a living hell, So firmly sin possessed me.

“My own good works availed me naught, No merit they attaining; Free will against God’s judgment fought, Dead to all good remaining. My fears increased till sheer despair Left naught but death to be my share; The pangs of hell I suffered.”

(The Lutheran Hymnal: 387:2-3)

Paul intervened calling out for the jailer to stop, to do himself no harm. Paul didn't just let things go as they might. He acted, he stopped the man from sealing his fate, his eternal fate. How many people would be content with the thought that the jailer was receiving his just end by taking his own life? How many would hesitate to intervene for fear that it might endanger their own liberty? Paul not only kept himself in jail, but the other prisoners as well. He assured the jailer that they were all still in their cells.

It appears that this only added to the jailer's terror. Calling for a light he entered the dark dungeon and he fell down before Paul and Silas trembling. Who could these men be? He asked the question; “What must I do to be saved?” He knew Paul and Silas had the answer.

Acts 16:31-34 “So they said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.’³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed *their* stripes. And immediately he and all his *family* were baptized.³⁴ Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household.”

That initial statement was not the complete answer. It was not all the information necessary for the jailer to believe. It did however

present him with hope, hope for life and salvation. Hope not just for himself but for his entire household. He had taken them from their cells to the part of the prison that served as the jailer's home. There Paul and Silas **“spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.”** For the jailer and his family this was the day that the light of the glory of Christ dawned in their hearts and the gospel of Christ our crucified Redeemer who rose again and brings us the hope of resurrection to eternal life was all laid out before them. Through that wondrous gospel message the Holy Spirit worked faith. Indeed these gentiles who had been without hope were now the children of God. They gladly received the sacrament of holy baptism for the washing away of their sins.

The fruits of faith were immediate. The jailer washed their wounds and tended to their needs. No longer did fear and trembling reign in his heart but he rejoiced having believed in God with all his household.”

What a wonder of grace and salvation. Yet do we appreciate that our own salvation is no less a wonder? Do we realize that the Lord has intervened in our lives to grant us a great deliverance? He delivered us from sin, death, and hell. He has cleansed our souls and calmed our troubled hearts and given us cause for joy and rejoicing. What greater joy can there be than to know the peace of God that is ours in Christ Jesus, unless it is this that we know the joy of our household's holding that same faith, that same hope of eternal life that they also rejoice in God our Savior.

This is our Epiphany! Hallelujah and Amen!

AMEN.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans15:13)