

16One 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. 17While 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." 18She 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. 19But 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. 20When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews 21and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." 22The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26Suddenly 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. 27When 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. 28But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34He 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.

JR Ryder took us all by storm. It was our senior year at Rockford's Guilford High School. About 3500 students, it was pretty diverse for a suburban high school in the Midwest in the 80's. However, friendships generally stayed within the bounds of the different ethnicities. Rockford wasn't a transient community - most of us had known each other from grade school or at least junior high. But JR showed up that fall. He was charismatic, smart – he was so at home with himself (which in high school is pretty rare). He didn't abide by the group boundaries that we all observed. He was African American, but somehow he crossed in and out of different social circles with ease. We elected him our Homecoming King, beating out the long time favorite – Jeff "Whitey" Anderson.

Looking back, I wonder if it was as easy as JR made it look, coming into a high school where everyone knew everyone and everyone knew their place. I wonder what it was like for him in the other schools he attended, if he had always been so sure of himself, or if Guilford was a fresh start for him...

There's that window of opportunity that comes with new schools, new jobs, new towns, an opportunity to start fresh – people only know what we tell them about our past – so at the beginning at least, we can craft and tweak the story of who we are to suit who we want to be.

We meet Paul and Silas in the text this morning, Jews traveling far outside Jewish strongholds, and its like they are starting their senior year at new school, right with JR. Paul and Silas found themselves called by the holy spirit to come to Macedonia and had landed in the city of Philippi.

Philippi was an ancient city, under Roman rule. Adjacent to some gold mines, it was a wealthy community. Just to set the timeline, Paul and Silas grew up as Jews, and now they've converted to Christianity, but it's all quite new. They are going out into the larger Roman world to bring the news of Jesus. Even though Paul was a Roman citizen, to the average Roman, Paul and Silas lumped in with all the other Jews they had known. And Jews were considered by many in the Roman world to be suspect. In the political narrative, the Jews were often assigned the blame for any civil unrest.

I imagine Paul and Silas were a little flummoxed about where to begin this work that the Holy Spirit had sent them to do – clearly they had felt the Holy Spirit leading them to Philippi – yet there certainly wasn't an obvious starting point – they didn't know anyone, no one knew them, or could vouch for them. So they improvised – and initially it worked out quite well.

After kicking around Philippi, Paul and Silas had gotten into a pretty fruitful daily routine of going down to the river, which was the local "place of prayer".

They had met up with Lydia, a wealthy gentile woman. She and her entire household had received the Good News and now I imagine that Paul and Silas were feeling like they were in the groove – that it would just be a matter of keeping to the daily schedule and then they could get established.

The rhythm of the days fell into place nicely, meeting for prayer by the river, talking with people, connecting with Lydia’s circle of friends. They found themselves crossing over from being treated with suspicion to being welcomed.

But lately they were getting some interference. It started out small – curious, really, - a slave-girl possessed by a spirit of divination, shouting out who they were - like someone following you around shouting out details from your resume.

In those days, in towns like Philippi, divination businesses were a part of the fabric of the community. One would go to a healer for medicine, a banker to borrow money, to the local diviner to get answers to life’s perplexing questions. This spirit possessed slave-girl was essentially the golden goose for her owners and had made them a lot of money, by providing answers to life’s perplexing questions.

And here she was, trailing Paul and Silas around as they went about their daily routine - Outing them in front of everyone with in earshot – “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation”. “These men are slaves of the Most High God”

What she said - It was true, they couldn’t deny it, but apparently her persistence or her volume got on Paul’s last nerve. Very much annoyed, the scripture says, Paul casts out the spirit of divination that had been possessing her. And her proclamations ceased, and Paul and Silas drew a breath of relief and continued on their way in peace. Finally they could think again, like when the neighbor’s leaf blower stops, and the delicious silence returns to your living room.

The calm was relatively short lived because when the slave girl’s owners realized what had happened, that their golden goose, was now just a goose, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the city officials. It was as if Paul and Silas had robbed the bank or set fire to the hospital – these foreigners - Jews in fact - had destroyed a local small business, and the owners wanted revenge!

A riot broke out – everyone attacking Paul and Silas – the city officials were able to restore order in their marketplace by condemning Paul and Silas as dangerous outsiders, beating them and locking them up in jail. Well so much for making a good name for the Gospel - a pleasant ordinary day turned into a fight for their lives just because Paul lost his temper and cast out a spirit. So now they find themselves locked up, in the high security section of the jail – their feet in stocks, in the inner most part.

The jailer pats the key on his belt, just to make sure its there – confident that the dangerous foreigners are locked up and that he and his family would be safe. Then he goes to his house next door to the jail. Climbs in bed, kisses his wife good night and tries to get some sleep.

There sit Paul and Silas in silence. Started the day free and now facing nightfall locked up in jail – black eyes swollen shut, ribs bruised, their shirts caked with blood from the flogging, stomachs hard and empty – there had been no due process, nothing close to the type of a trial that their citizenship guaranteed them. A terrible injustice and mistreatment of them as human beings, and yet, it would appear from the sound of it that Paul and Silas have kept their balance.

All of this disruption had stripped away all of the trappings of their identity, its pulled away all of the storylines that they knew to be true about themselves

- successful preacher, respected missionary
- Roman citizen in good standing
- wounded prisoner, victim of injustice

...and as the moon climbed into the velvet sky their prayers rose in their throats and they lifted their voices in song to God. And God's love and presence entered in to that painful cold long night, in the innermost part of the jail. And they remembered again their true identity as God's beloved children.

The earthquake struck without warning, as they always do – like the tremors at 4:31 a.m. yesterday morning. This was a big one – shaking the foundations of the prison, doors burst open, chains unfastened. I'm a practical person, so if I had been in jail, and praying, and there was an earthquake that freed me from my chains and unlocked my jail cell, I'm pretty sure I'd be hightailing it out of there, giving thanks to God for setting me free. That's what prisoners do best, isn't it? Escape to freedom.

Funny isn't it, that wasn't Paul's reaction, or the reaction of the other prisoners for that matter. It was dark, so maybe they didn't know it was possible for them to escape. It's as though something had shifted in them before the earthquake struck, somehow in the singing and praying, they no longer knew themselves to be prisoners, but they realized the deeper truth that they were free as beloved children of God.

The Jailer must have been pretty tired, because he slept through the songfest, but no one can sleep through an earthquake like that. He jumped out of bed, grabbed his sword and ran to the jail while the walls were still trembling, he knew he would pay with his own life if the prisoners were to escape. The moon shed just enough light for him to see the jail doors wide open and his heart fell.

Just as he was about to take his life, Paul calls out to him “don't harm yourself, we are all here” again, words of grace and life that cut across the storylines about who is imprisoned and who is free. Imagine an inmate urging the prison guard not to harm himself!?! Imagine an inmate choosing to remain inside an open exit door.

The jailer, with torches blazing makes his way, trembling, to the inner cell block, on his knees seeking the salvation that the possessed slave-girl had declared that Paul and Silas had to offer.

Soon the prisoners are gathered around the dining room table in the jailers home

- sharing a meal, passing the potatoes,
- The jailer's washing out their wounds,
- Paul & Silas baptize the family
- everyone sits down for coffee and dessert rejoicing.

A remarkably satisfying resolution to a very traumatic situation....

It's a sad note for me, the way that the slave girl fades from the story, used by her owners to make money, the object of Paul's anger, but after casting out the spirit – which he seems to do as a way of preserving his own peace and quiet, not out of compassion for her, we aren't told that he shows any concern for her well being...Her identity remains unclear and yet she spoke the clearest of anyone about the true identity of Paul and Silas.

The Slave girl reminds us about the multitude of threads in the larger conversation between God and humanity. Its rarely neat and tidy, with every plot line tied off. There's no set script, the Gospel is forever unfolding – playing through culture and personality and circumstance – bringing us ever deeper into God's healing embrace.

Sometimes we lose the storyline, like in the middle of the riot – when it seems that every thing that has been fixed and known in our lives is suddenly up for grabs. When we are being beaten without cause, and the pain eclipses everything that we thought we knew for sure about ourselves.

But then we turn the corner and bump unexpectedly into the Kingdom of God unfolding right in front of us

- a jailer kneeling at the feet of a prisoner

- a prisoner bound by love, not chains,
- a jailer tenderly binding up the very flesh he had torn apart.

When I think back about my classmate JR, I'm sure that there were moments when he lost the storyline of his senior year – when his being from outside Rockford eclipsed any hard won sense of belonging that had emerged. But JR's consistent ability to be at home with himself seemed to help him catch his balance and return to what was happening in the present.

This text instructs us to attend to the moment, to attend to the Holy Spirit, to attend to who we are in God's eyes. We might think we know who we are – we might be comfortable with what our identity brings us – respect in our neighborhood, a decent job, deference at a family gathering...

...but then, life shifts, there are riots or earthquakes that shake things up - we move, we lose our job, we divorce - and all of who we knew ourselves to be gets turned inside out. What served to anchor us now seems to be weighing us down.

We question what used to feel true – wondering if we should hold on tight to that “truth” because its our lifeline or if we should struggle to be free of it because now that “truth” feels false and it's a like a ball and chain.

For example, a particular spiritual practice might be exactly the thing we need right now, to nurture us in our journey of faith, that spiritual practice may be the boat that we use to cross the lake that stretches out in front of us.

I remember in the years after college I was all about a daily quiet time - I was an avid journaler – I loved to sit in the quite of the morning, before dashing off to work, to read a Bible passage and write my reflections. I filled journal after journal. Journaling was a tremendous tool for me in that season of my life.

There've been some earthquakes in my life since then. Somehow my questions and who I know God to be don't fit into the lines on the page in the same way. Now, it often feels forced and flat when I sit down to write.

Lately my yoga and meditation practice has largely filled that space before the day begins in earnest. How silly it would be if I forced myself to put pen to paper, just because that's where God met me before. What a loss it would be to sit still when my spirit longs for my body to move in prayer. I'd be a fool to forgo what brings spiritual nurture to insist on what was helpful before, but that no longer serves.

As life unfolds, as we deepen our understanding and life experience, another practice or discipline might be more of what we need. So we let go of the first one, much the same way we might leave the boat on the lake shore as we put on our hiking boots to climb up the footpath that now beckons us.

This text calls us to be like Paul and Silas, at the river bank, in the midst of the riot, chained in the darkness or at the jailers table, the text calls us to ever discerning who we are in God's eyes – letting go of what we've assumed to be true about ourselves and our place and open to receive God's truth as it unfolds in unexpected ways.

We are invited to be at home with our selves so that we can be ready to see what God's is doing in our midst. The text calls us to be free from our own plans and ideas about what should be, and free to life our hearts and voices in praise of the One who as brought us to this present moment.

AMEN