

Freedom from Our Chains
Preacher: Rev. Jill Olds
Date: May 8, 2016

00:00

Let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts and minds together be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer, through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Okay, a random question for you all this morning. Is anyone here an Elvis fan? Okay, I see a few hands. For those of you who missed this particular gem in pop culture history, Elvis' "Jailhouse Rock" tells a story of a bunch of inmates who throw a party in a prison cell, and are having so much fun, that they don't want to leave. It's a completely absurd song, and despite its undeniably catchy tune, it can sound almost spiritually dissonant if we think of the terror and corruption of our current prison system in this country. Prisoners today do not "get their kicks" in any way but the literal sense these days. Today's story of Paul and Silas, the singing bringing about an earthquake, has jokingly been known in preacher's circles as the Bible's version of "Jailhouse Rock." In an oddly similar way, our passage this morning is likewise not without its flair for the dramatic, so much so that its theological richness can become lost if one does not look more closely.

Paul and Silas have traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony that nonetheless was given great autonomy, and thus had a strong Greek influence. Prior to our particular story, we learn that Paul and Silas have been there for some days, ministering to a small group of people on the outskirts of the city; there is no synagogue in Philippi, which might indicate that the city "lack[ed] a quorum of ten Jewish males" to create one. (Quorums were as tricky back then as they are today, it seems.) Anyway, this is significant because Paul and Silas were very much in the minority—they are in "pagan" territory, which becomes more apparent as our story for this morning continues. We are then told that a girl begins to follow them: a slave girl who, in a way that might remind us of stories of Jesus' encounters with "unclean spirits," incessantly proclaims the truth about them. "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." After several days of this, she annoys Paul so much so that he commands the spirit to come out of her. Well, of course, now the slave girl's owners are very much annoyed, their fortune vanishing along with her clairvoyance, so they follow conventional protocol of the day. They first bring Paul and Silas to the "marketplace before the authorities." The marketplace at the time was where people gathered to conduct legal transactions; they are then quickly turned over to the "magistrates," who were responsible for settling legal claims. It is here where things begin to break down from convention, however. The slave owners start to incite the crowd against Paul and Silas; in a way that has nothing to do with actual laws broken, they are referred to as "Jews" and are subsequently stripped and beaten, and thrown into prison. They are put in the innermost cell and their feet are put in chains.

Now, friends, if this were you or me, I suspect we'd be pretty terrified. I suspect we'd pray quite a bit for release. Because back then, unlike today, people weren't sentenced to prison. The idea of people living in prison was a much later phenomenon. Prison in Paul and Silas' day was merely a holding cell, where one of two fates was decided: trial or death. It seems that their "trial" had already happened, and appeals were not exactly legion back then, so they had one reasonable expectation for how they'd get out of there. Furthermore, while prisons aren't exactly luxurious resorts these days, prisons back then were rough. They actually weren't even buildings—they were more like catacombs, holes dug underground. Little ventilation, minimal water, nowhere else to use the toilet. And Paul and Silas were in the innermost cell, reserved for the worst of the worst. This is hardly a place for celebration.

And yet. The next thing we hear is that Paul and Silas are praying to God and singing hymns. And probably not in a quiet, desperate sort of way either, for we're told that the other prisoners can hear them. If their feet hadn't been secured, they may have even been dancing to the Jailhouse Rock. And sure enough, the ground beneath them starts rocking: "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." As if this weren't dramatic enough, apparently the guard has slept through all of this. He suddenly awakens to find all the doors opened and, before even checking on the prisoners, prepares to kill himself, an act intended to maintain his honor. But the voice from within somehow knows this is going on, and calls back, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The guard, quaking in his sandals, asks what he can do to save himself. He is converted, as is his household, and he takes his new brothers up out of the dungeon and into his house, where he tends to their needs.

Seriously, if we were writing a movie script, the fantastical nature of this plot wouldn't make it past the editing floor; much like the whole rhythm section being the Purple Gang, on the face of things, this story is pretty darn preposterous. But in actuality, this "rhythm section" is pretty darn holy. Earthquakes were known at the time to be an example of supernatural power. And in light of that, it seems reasonable that the jailer would be terrified, and choose to believe these prisoners, and in their God. But what I find most amazing about this story is not the wholesale conversion or God's grandiose ground gyrations. In fact, the drama of the story is pretty unimportant. What is more compelling is the nature of the faith found in Paul and Silas, and what it does to those around them.

Paul and Silas were utterly fearless in their faith. They did not appear to be particularly concerned about the trouble they find themselves in; instead, we see them singing hymns and, when given the option, choosing to stay in their cell rather than escape. In fact, after our passage from this morning ends, the story continues to say that the magistrates, not really wanting to deal with the headache, try to let them go free in secret. But Paul and Silas have none of it. They realize that the arrest was public, so they want to be released publicly. It takes some serious chutzpah to say no to freedom for the sake of saving face. They were fearless. And I think they were fearless for one specific reason: they weren't actually imprisoned. Sure, they were thrown into jail, even in to the innermost portion of that hole, reserved for the most heinous of criminals. But they had their sights on something far more powerful, far greater. They had their sights on God. They knew, deep within them, they knew, that God would not abandon them. In this way, Paul and Silas were not imprisoned. They were actually quite free, unencumbered and not bound to their temporary setbacks. They were free because of the tremendous faith and trust they showed themselves to possess. If ever there was a time when Paul lives out his bold proclamation of "I count my life as nothing," it was now. For he knew that, even beyond this mortal life, he was saved. This example of Paul's not only appears to be larger than life: in fact, it is larger than life. At least, larger than his life.

And in our culture that is so centered around self-preservation, survival, caring for oneself, etc, this is a tough example to live by. A question for all of us this morning: "What do you love or believe in so much that you would die for, without a second's hesitation?" For me, it's my kids. No question. I believe I would lay down my life for my faith too, but our US culture has been so removed from this possibility that I struggle to envision what that might even look like. People in other countries are not so lucky, as we know. And Paul and Silas weren't so lucky. But they were sure of their faith, and exactly sure of how much it meant to them. Contrasted to this, we have our jailer. He is not his own man; he is beholden to a messy political system. He too is ready to die, but only so as to save his honor—really, to save himself. Paul and Silas, by not running, are able to show him that he can only save himself by trusting God and letting go. In the classic twist of irony, the jailer is the one who is jailed, imprisoned by his profession, and imprisoned by the situation in which he finds himself. His

chains are those of Rome where, not so different from the US today, self-preservation reigns supreme.

I struggled mightily with one question while preparing my remarks for today. I often find Biblical characters to be relatable, and in preaching, it's important to make things applicable to our lives today. Otherwise, what's preaching all about? In this story, the jailer—his fear, his subsequent conversion—this seems very understandable. But Paul and Silas? They seem like distant figures, too upbeat and just too... faithful to be realistic. The question I kept turning over in my head was this: "How realistic is Paul's and Silas' faith?" I came to realize that my struggle was rooted in the very fact that this is one of those stories in which their culture is not easily translated to today. For Biblical times, unlike for us today, the bar for faith is set very high. One has to be ready to give one's all. This is a far cry from the one hour a week commitment to church, or the occasional prayer lifted up to God when we need something. It's easier to relate to the jailer because we are imprisoned in this world; it's harder to relate to Paul and Silas, it's harder to see their faith as realistic because we—or, most of us, at any rate—don't live as though we are actually free.

What would that take? What would it take to be so free that being imprisoned was a mere frustration, a whim of the moment, but not something that dampened our spirits or stopped our songs? What are our chains? What prevents us from letting go and trusting God? What would we need to do within us to let go of our anxieties long enough to realize that these are temporary situations in which we find ourselves? The good news for us is that freedom has already come. We are indeed free. Jesus did that for us on the cross and in the empty tomb. Our chains have been unfastened. And yet, we still find ourselves clinging to them, for imprisonment is what we know. We are uber familiar with what it is to be scared, to be anxious, to not trust. But having faith to live into our freedom—well, that's a rare kind of faith. The radical faith of Paul's and Silas's didn't come out of nowhere, and it wasn't a faith they created themselves. World-changing faith like Paul's and Silas's is a gift from God. Otherwise we'd hear about a lot more Jailhouse Rocks—so rockin' that prisoners would be praising God alongside their jailers.

Until that day, we hope. We pray. We try to be faithful. We do our best to remember that we are clinging to our chains, chains which were unlocked long ago. In time, may God continue to reveal to us that we are in fact completely free, so much so that we can stick around this crazy jailed world and get our kicks. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.