

Release

Acts 16:16-34 ~ July 2, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.

These were the words of a child. Not a child like our children who worship here at Heritage. Our children have homes and parents that love them. They are cared for. Their physical and spiritual needs are met. But the child who uttered these words was very unfortunate indeed. She was a slave girl. She had been purchased on the open market. To her owners she was not a child, she was a thing. They fed her enough to keep her alive. But they were not concerned for her well-being. Their concern was for how much money she could make for them.

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When the little slave girl in Philippi said these words she was talking about Paul and Silas. Now we all know that little girls don't talk this way. As great as they were, no little girl would spontaneously say such things about the apostles. But we recognize this behavior, don't we? We have seen it other places in Scripture. When Jesus walked among people it was not uncommon for a demon possessed person to shout out about his status as the true son of God. And right away we perceive that the same sort of thing is going on in this story about Paul and Silas in Philippi. It is the demon who is crying out. Crying out the truth about Paul and Silas.

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But for a moment, let's turn our attention from the demon to the little girl it possessed. Compassion compels us to think about her situation. Not only was she cruelly possessed by her owners, but she lived with a demonic affliction that dominated her life. And it was that very affliction that attracted her masters to possess her. Her utterances were seen in the ancient Hellenistic world as oracles from the gods. They were valuable to people who wanted to make decisions about what to do. People would pay to have their fortunes told by this little girl. The money flowed in, not to the poor girl, but to her masters.

There must have been some way her masters controlled what she did or they never would have attracted customers. But, evidently that control slipped when it came to Paul and Silas. Their route to the place of prayer, down by the river, led them past the slave girl. She became alert whenever they drew near. And in so far as it was possible she would follow them. For whenever they were around she would start up with her message again in a loud voice for everyone to hear:

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Now the Bible tells us that this happened for many days. Day after day the situation repeated itself. And it makes us wonder. We wonder about why Paul allowed it to go on so long. We know that as a servant of Jesus, Paul would care about the misery of this child. It makes us wonder how Paul could bear to let it continue. Here we demonstrate our modern bias as well as a weakness in our faith. Yes, Paul could have released the little girl from her possession the second he first saw her. And we should not doubt that Paul was tempted to do exactly that. Our modern perspective teaches us to think first about rescuing this child before we consider all of what was at stake. Paul depended on the guidance of the Holy Spirit for his daily walk, and when we look back at this story in that light, we see the wisdom of God in the timing of the events.

The Holy Spirit had guided Paul to Philippi to do an important work. Included in that work was the release of the little slave girl possessed by a demon. But the timing of these events was crucial. Paul need time to preach and teach new believers so that a Christian community would form. During that part of his work the little slave girl had to continue in her bondage. Even so, she served the purposes of God by daily pointing to Paul and Silas as “servants of the most high God.” Think about it for a minute, releasing the slave girl would make her worthless to her masters. Who would see to her care when that happened? Only a vibrant Christian community in Philippi would give her a chance for care and adoption after her release. Furthermore, Paul likely knew that releasing her from possession would bring exactly the reaction that it did. That is the public expression of anger which cast Paul and Silas into prison. This would have to wait until the Holy Spirit was ready for their work in Philippi to end. So, the little girl had to endure her misery while everyone waited on God.

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The ESV translation states that, "**Paul, having become greatly annoyed...**" performed the exorcism that released that little girl. This is an unfortunate translation of what the Greek scriptures actually say. It leaves us with the impression that Paul was bothered and angry with the little girl. What the original Greek actually says is that, "**Paul became very distressed...**" By this we can interpret that Paul reached the point where the little girl's suffering became too much for him to bear. In that moment, by the guidance of the Spirit, he released her from the demon that had possessed her. She was at last free from the evil spirit that had plagued her entire life. She was free to be the little girl God had intended.

But in this act of mercy, Paul and Silas, lost their freedom. Public outrage ended their ministry in Philippi. The child slavers brought charges against Paul and Silas for their loss of income. They did it in a way that enraged the crowd so that Paul and Silas were publicly beaten and thrown in Jail. We tend to think of this as an awful turn of events, because we easily forget how the power of God's Spirit guides our lives. For what happened was by God's design. The little girl was released from her torture. Even though they were beaten and imprisoned, Paul and Silas were positioned to proclaim the Gospel to the prisoners in that Philippian jail. And even more amazing they were able to convert the Philippian Jailer and his whole family to faith in Jesus Christ. This is the kind of amazing course of events that can only be attributed to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It was true, Paul and Silas were "**servants of the Most High God, who proclaimed the way of salvation.**"

Now let's talk about what this means for our everyday lives. Each one of us faces significant challenges. Maybe there is nothing as dramatic as what the little Philippian slave girl faced. But our challenges frighten us and make us worry a great deal. Often, we find ourselves turning to God in our pain and frustration begging him to release us from our challenges. And we have every right as his children to do that. But when we ask for release and God allows the challenge to continue, what should we think then? It may help to bear in mind this story about Paul, Silas, and the little slave girl in Philippi. It may be that God has plans to use our challenges for the benefit of the kingdom of God. In fact, we can be certain that this is the case.

St. Paul teaches us about this in the fifth chapter of his letter to the Romans when he writes:

...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

When we suffer with challenges, the Holy Spirit is hard at work accomplishing great things for our well-being. These accomplishments both serve God and shape our character. This was what happened as the Spirit delayed the little slave girl's release. We want to jump in with our own judgements about God's work in our lives. But faith calls us trust God in his way of handling our lives. We do not have to like the process, but we can still be confident of God's love and his guidance even when things seem to go against us.

It is important to remember that we follow a savior who faced suffering willingly on our behalf. Struggle and suffering are sometimes the result of following the leading of the Holy Spirit. Suffering itself doesn't validate faith. And we should never seek suffering as a sign of our faithfulness. But we need to recognize that followers of Jesus Christ will face circumstances that cause us pain and prove difficult to endure. The story in Philippi is a perfect example of how this works. And when Paul and Silas were released from prison, there was a new Christian Jailer in charge of its future. He had been released from his bondage to sin and was free to rejoice in his new-found faith in Christ.

You too have been released from your sin. That is Jesus' great work in you. As we have said this does not release you from struggle or pain in your life. But know that by the Holy Spirit's power, God seeks to benefit both you and His kingdom. And also know such struggle and pain is confined to this life alone. You stand released from the eternal consequences of human rebellion. You have been adopted as the true daughters and sons of God the father. You are made members of Jesus family. And you will live with him forever in the Kingdom of God.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.