

Prepared by Pastor Sarah Sanderson-Doughty for St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

There have been better days. We've had many an occasion to say that these past several years. In more than one conversation this week, I've been privy to the heavy weight many of us are carrying, the anxiety, the grief, the fear, the anger... And really, after two full years of pandemic... the exhaustion. On Wednesday nights on zoom we're watching a series of short videos by Kate Bowler, prepared for the Easter season in 2020. When she talks about "extended uncertainty and struggle" and we know she was speaking these words in April/May 2020, I think "How could these words still be so true? Even more true?" I listen to about 45 minutes of news a day and it is unrelenting. Katy and I were talking about this Tuesday. She added to the list of things I had heard, and with tears said "And millions of bees died on a tarmac in Atlanta." Ugh. There have been days indeed.

Paul could have said that about that day, or really, series of days, in Philippi, long ago. Perhaps he did. Let me say it for him. There were certainly better days for Paul than one that ends with being beaten and chained... But even before that... a slave woman is following Silas and him around for days shouting out a rather powerful and accurate declaration of who they were, but anyone on your tail, shouting, for days on end... well, that would get grating. There were certainly better days.

By the time we arrive at today's story, Paul has been carrying out his call from God for years. He has made it all the way to Europe, to Greece to be more specific, making good progress on the task of taking the witness to Christ to the ends of the earth. He has been carrying the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Gentile and Jew alike, but especially to Gentiles. And in Philippi he was definitely in Gentile territory. Before his call he already considered himself a servant of the most high God, but after his call he submitted himself to the servant Lord who revealed that most high God, Jesus Christ. And he set about proclaiming the way of salvation that unfolds when one follows Jesus.

So, this slave woman, who had a gift of sight— or was it a burden?— shouted out repeatedly, for days, "These people are servants of the Most High God. They are proclaiming a way of salvation to you." On the one hand, this was some decent free advertising. On the other hand, anything shouted repeatedly... gets annoying, to put it mildly. Mothers in the room, can I get a witness? Mom, mom, mom.... Paul may have changed radically after his blinding encounter on

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the Damascus Road, but he was still human. And he eventually snaps. He performs an exorcism on the woman to get her to be quiet. I once heard a scholar say that this may be the only miracle in scripture performed out of irritation.

Now, some will say that this was a great blessing to the woman; she was freed from possession. But every time I read this story, I see it as a missed opportunity in Paul's ministry. Generally someone or something following you for days and shouting at you... wants or needs some attention. And as far as I can tell, from the way the story is told, neither Paul nor Silas ever turn around to talk with the woman, to understand her circumstances and the yearning of her heart, to know what salvation might look like for her. When Paul does turn around he doesn't seek to connect with her; he speaks to the spirit possessing her. And then seeks to go on his way.

Now it was this act that resulted in the imprisonment of Paul and Silas. This act of exorcism had economic consequences. She was a piece of property made valuable by her ability to see the future. Without the spirit, she lost her value. But there's no indication she was freed from slavery. If they were willing to beat and imprison Paul and Silas, there's no telling what they would have been willing to do with her. We can hope she got away and a better life began, but that seems quite a stretch. It seems to me that in Paul's continuation of Jesus' work of setting captives free, he only attended to the portion of this woman's captivity that was inconveniencing him. He inconvenienced the earthly systems and structures that kept her bound, but I don't know that she was released from earthly captivity. And I shudder to think what her owners did to her. And I grieve this.

I grieve it intensely because I've probably done it. You probably have too. We, who have received the Spirit of Christ, and been sent into the world to free the captives and share the good news... we miss opportunities all the time. We privilege our own comfort and convenience over the needs of neighbors all around us. There are better moments in life and ministry than these... but there are such moments.

So Paul's not so good day began with, in my opinion, a missed opportunity. And then it just gets worse when those who saw their fortune slipping away when the spirit left the slave

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woman drag Paul and Silas to court, accusing them of causing an uproar and promoting customs that are anathema in Roman culture. Of course neither of these charges reflects their real beef with Paul and Silas. We're reminded of Jesus' trial, aren't we? Trumped up charges? A crowd joining in? Vicious beating? There were certainly better days. Last week you heard the risen Christ tell Ananias that he would show Paul how he had to suffer for his name. Well, I think Paul knows now. He ends up locked in the innermost cell, feet in stocks. Surely aching from head to toe. Maybe bleeding. In chains.

But things start to turn in the dark of the night... somehow in the midst of their suffering, Paul and Silas manage to pray and sing praise to God. And because they are in the center of the prison, everyone can hear them. And all the prisoners, all the captives, are listening. They were praying and singing of God's goodness, witnessing to Christ by practicing their faith in that prison cell.

A few years ago in the Seekers Bible Study we were imagining ourselves as early Christians awaiting our fate in the Roman Coliseum. We were imagining being gathered with all our family members, and hearing the lions and the crowds... we were asked what would bring us comfort in that situation. The only thing I could think of would be if we would all start singing together, drowning out the scary noise with song.

That's how I got through the long birth of sweet Caroline... singing much of the way through. And it's how civil rights activists endured many a frightful night... And it's how Paul and Silas greeted midnight in chains. And so began a better day. The earth quaked violently and the doors flew open and the chains fell off. And it seems, somehow... the worship that was unfolding in that prison kept everyone from running out.

But the Jailer didn't know that. This servant of the state, who was charged with keeping especially these prisoners secure, awoke to open doors and desperation. He was ready to end his life. He had lost all hope. He drew his sword to kill himself. Somehow Paul sensed this. He did NOT miss this opportunity. Now he is the one shouting. "We are all here. Don't harm yourself." And as a result the jailer rushes in, sees it is as Paul said it was, and falls on his knees, trembling, asking for help. These servants of Christ are called masters and they are

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asked, "What must I do to be rescued?" And the answer they give is, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved— you and your entire household."

Just believe... I've talked about this before... belief does not mean mere intellectual assent. Belief is about trust and commitment... about giving our hearts to something. All the jailer needed to be rescued from death dealing desperation was to give his heart to Jesus... that's it. Now, he needed to hear the story of Jesus in order to give his heart to him. So they told the story. That's what they do. And in response the jailer welcomes these servants of Christ, washes their wounds. And then Paul and Silas are blessed to wash the jailer's entire family in the waters of Baptism. And then the jailer manifests the spiritual gift of hospitality by welcoming these prisoners into his home for a meal. The jailer was overjoyed because his whole family had come to believe. Indeed, a better day for all.

Even on this side of resurrection there are, and there always have been, better and worse days. We aren't always going to hit the mark in our call to witness to the good news of Jesus. Sometimes we fall way short. But things always turn around when we bring our hearts back to Jesus. When we find a way to sing even through the pain. When we continue to gather for prayer and song. When we find a way to admit our powerlessness and surrender to the power that can and does rescue us, again, and again, and again, to the one who promises and delivers better days.