

First Sunday After Epiphany – January 7, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

We Have Something to Share with Others

Acts 16:25-34 (NIV)

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. (26) Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. (27) The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. (28) But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" (29) The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. (30) He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (31) They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." (32) Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. (33) At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. (34) The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole household.

Dear Friends in Christ:

How did you ring in the New Year? Were you among those who stayed up till Midnight to ring in the new year with a rendition of the traditional New Year's Eve song, *Auld Lang Syne*. (A Scottish song about times gone by.)

It wasn't New Year's Eve and it wasn't exactly a party and it wasn't *Auld Lang Syne* – but it was around midnight when the sound of singing was heard coming from the prison cell of Paul and Silas in the prison at Philippi. Our text reports: **About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.**

There are many good reasons why this account is designated as one of the Scriptures readings for this Sunday of the Church year. One of the great Epiphany themes is the emphasis that Jesus is shown to be the Savior of all – in this account we have another example of the Good News about Jesus being shared with individuals who were Gentiles – people outside of the Jewish religion. Another Epiphany emphasis is reaching out to others with the Gospel – and that's what we observe Paul and Silas doing in this text. When we add in the reference to the baptism of the jailor and his family we see how nicely this lesson compliments the other lessons for today which speak of the baptism and ministry of the Lord's anointed one – Jesus the Savior of the Nations.

I suspect that the account of the baptism of the jailor at Philippi is familiar to many of us. It's often used as a proof passage to remind us that both children and adults can benefit from the Sacrament of Baptism. Perhaps what is not so easily recalled is the back ground of this account and what may be even more unclear to us is how we can apply this account to our own lives.

So let's explore this text a bit more today by considering the fact that

Theme: We have Something to Share with Others

- 1) In our times of trial we can share our hymns of praise to God
- 2) In their times of despair we can share God's forgiveness in Christ

Let's begin exploring this text by considering how Paul and Silas ended up singing hymns and praying to God in prison at midnight. Prior to their arrival in Philippi **Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."** Concluding that God had called them to preach the Gospel their Paul and Silas immediately traveled to that part of the world and upon arriving in Macedonia they began working in Philippi which was one of the leading cities of the providence of Macedonia.

While they were there they were followed for several days by a slave girl who was possessed by an evil spirit that enabled her to predict the future. As she followed after Paul and his companions she kept calling out **These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." (18) She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.** (Acts 16:17-18 NIV)

When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. (20) They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar (21) by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." (Acts 16:19-21 NIV)

... the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. (23) After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. (24) When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. (Acts 16:22-24 NIV)

In spite of this harsh and unfair treatment, Paul and Silas found reason to turn to God in prayer and to sing his praises. At first consideration, this might appear to be a bit unusual and even unrealistic. When we stop to think about it, even in the midst of our difficulties we still have reason to praise God with our hymns and prayers. Those hymns offer us comfort and encouragement and enable us to express our trust and confidence in the only One who is able to understand our situation and enable us to overcome. Think for instance of how we might sing God's praises as part of a funeral service – *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, we sing or I'm but a Stranger here, Heaven is my home. Asleep in Jesus, Blessed Sleep, I Know that my Redeemer lives.* These are hymns that express our trust in the Lord Jesus and let others know the hope that fills our hearts even in the midst of trouble, difficulties and sorrow.

So we see that the actions of Paul and Silas aren't that unreasonable at all – in fact it's evidence of the fact that in their hearts they had set apart Christ as Lord. The apostle Peter encourages us to do the same: **But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.** (1 Peter 3:15 NIV)

When the going gets tough, God's children take comfort in the fact that the trouble in front of them is not great than the Lord who is behind them! Think of the times that you can put this principal into practice in your lives. We all face difficulties of varying degrees. The way we handle them is what sets us apart from unbelievers and provides a testimony to them. If all we can do is grumble, complain, and seek pity from others, we're not taking our faith seriously; we've lost focus of the grace, the love, the power of our Lord and Savior. Then others will conclude that we're no better off than they are. On the other hand when we speak of troubles with others and acknowledge our lack of understanding of the situation together with our willingness to place all things in the hands of our gracious Lord – then we're sharing our hope with others who could very well learn of their Savior from us.

The prayers and hymns that Paul and Silas sang were for their own benefit but others were listening, others were being encouraged and others would benefit and be blessed when the Lord responded to their pleas.

Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. God not only opened the doors of the prison, he also opened the doors to an opportunity for his messengers to share the gospel with a lost sinner.

In our times of trial, we have something to share. We can share our hymns of praise to God. We also have something to share when others are in despair. In their times of despair we can share God's forgiveness in Christ as we see from the hope that Paul and Silas provided to the despondent jailer.

The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. (28) But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

We might wonder why the jailer was about to take his own life. This was a Roman colony and under the laws of the Romans, a guard or a jailer would be required to suffer the punishment due the prisoner who had escaped. Perhaps some of the jailer's prisoners were guilty of crimes, punishable by death and the jailer wanted to take the easy way out by taking his own life. Paul's shout from the darkness, "we're all here", required further examination and answers.

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. (30) He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

When we recall everything that had happened to the jailer that evening we not only will understand the reason for his despair but also the reason for his trembling and his question, what must I do to be saved.

That evening two of his prisoners raised their voices in prayer and song expressing their confidence in their Lord and Savior. Is it possible the jailer fell asleep hearing those hymns? The place had been rocked by a violent earthquake. In its aftermath the jailer was confronted with the very real prospect of his own death. No doubt, his conscience was shaken. He was afraid to meet his maker for he knew he deserved punishment from God. Paul and Silas had sung hymns and spoken prayers as they confronted an uncertain future. Surely, they could point him to the reason for their hope and so he fell before them looking for the reason for their hope and the key to his own salvation.

Confronted with his sins and terrified at having to face a holy God, the jailer asked the most important question any human being can ask, "How can I be saved?" Paul and Silas gave him the most important answer that any human can receive. **They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." (32) Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.**

Here we see what mission work is all about. Here we see what we have to share with others who might be in despair. We can share Jesus with those who are troubled by sin and its effects. Like the jailer, they might be looking for something to do – but the way to eternal life is not found in what sinners do but on what Christ has done. And he has done it all! So the only answer that Paul and Silas could give and the only answer we can give to that question is to point to Jesus and encourage them to believe in him. Believe in the Lord Jesus – that's an invitation not a command. The Holy Spirit will use this invitation to bring people to faith in Jesus. It's just as Paul has written in Ephesians 2:8-9: **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- (9) not by works, so that no one can boast.** (NIV)

What joy filled the heart of the jailer and his family – joy that displayed itself in his acts of kindness to Paul and Silas, joy that was increased as God strengthened and encouraged his faith through the sacrament of holy baptism. **At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. (34) The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole household.**

Lord willing, you and I will never find ourselves in prison at midnight as a result of living our Christian faith like Paul and Silas did. But

Theme: We have Something to Share with Others

- 1) In our times of trial we can share our hymns of praise to God
- 2) In their times of despair we can share God's forgiveness in Christ

Amen.