

Jail House Rock

^{NRS} **Acts 16:16** One 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.¹⁷ While 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."¹⁸ She 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.¹⁹ But 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.²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe."²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods.²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely.²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.²⁶ 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.

“Sometimes you feel discouraged, and feel your work’s in vain.” This is, of course, a line from There Is A Balm in Gilead, one of my favorite spirituals- one that we’ll sing this morning. No one knows who wrote it or exactly when- all we know is that a weary, tired, spat upon people used to sing it when they were feeling particularly low, and that somehow, somehow just in the singing of it they found the strength to keep going.

That’s what our text for this morning is all about- two men who find themselves at the lowest of a series of low points looking for the strength to keep going. I remember studying this text all the way back as an undergraduate at the University of Texas of recent Rose bowl fame. I had the great privilege of studying Classics in a really unique program. Now the University of Texas has always traded places with the University of Ohio for the largest college in the nation- not exactly something to boast about. It’s a

daunting thing to enter a first year class full of five hundred kids- basically the size of my entire graduating class in high school. The professors and TA's are all mixed up, the folks in the back are wishing they knew what the heck opera glasses were, because they'd be pulling them out if they did. I was fortunate to get into a program that was one of those good news bad news kind of things. The good news was that we had really small class sizes- my third year I remember working through most of Paul's letters as well as Revelation in a Greek class that had 7, count them 7 students. So the good news is that we had really small class sizes- the bad news is that our final year on top of our regular class work we also worked our tails off on senior thesis projects.

Now, always being kind of an odd duck, I did my thesis on ancient magic in Luke and Acts- despite being separated by John in the canon, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are actually written by the same person. Now this subject might sound strange, but believe me I wasn't alone- in fact I wasn't even the chief nerd. My good friend Vasu took that prize. Vasu's project had something to do with Hamlet and postmodern textual interpretation. None of us really understood what he was talking about and so we just nodded our heads in appreciation of Vasu's dark genius. Megan studied Guatemalan midwifery. (Thank goodness there were no pictures.) Jennifer studied Theosophy and the art of Piet Mondrian. My favorite though was Leah. Leah's thesis was titled "The Ugly in Architecture" and subjected us to a half hour lecture on mobile homes in Texas. (Unfortunately, there were pictures.) So believe me, compared to watching slide after slide of pre-fab housing in Buda, the ancient magical worldview in Luke-Acts starts to look downright normal.

Now, this was one of the texts I studied and lectured about. See, the point of the work is simple. When scholars talk about the ancient magical worldview they are simply reminding us the Biblical writers viewed the world in a phenomenally different way than you and I do. While anything remotely magical or mysterious in a text sticks out to us as strange- people in the ancient world take it for granted. The meaning of this is that if we don't realize this- we are liable to get really excited about things the author didn't care about, and we are liable to miss the moment in the story we're really supposed to be wowed by.

And it would be so easy to do with this text. See, Paul and Silas, after a long, long journey already, find themselves in Phillipi. Now, they having a really decent time- they had met a woman named Lydia who accepted them into her home. Most of the other places they traveled, they were constantly being hounded by rabbis who didn't like the competition and by Greeks who didn't mind religion, but did mind people telling them their gods were false. So finally, finally, on their way towards Macedonia they have a breather- they actually find someone who listens and doesn't want to throw them over a cliff.

And so, Paul and Silas are just keeping a low profile- they're hanging out with Lydia and her family enjoying a little peace and quiet. And what happens? This stupid girl with a spirit of divination starts following them around crying out at the top of her voice: "Look at these guys! Look at these guys! They're trying to convert you! Watch out- I tell you! They're trying to convert you! Here they are- look at these guys!" And poor Paul and Silas- she's basically blowing their cover. And so Paul, in his characteristically warm and fuzzy way just Paul zaps the girl- which probably wasn't the

brightest thing he ever did. Because what happens? Well the woman's fortune telling days are over- and the incredible profits this prophet was bringing in are no more. And when the girl's owners find out- the days of peace and quiet are over again for Paul and Silas.

They are seized and taken to a kangaroo court. They are stripped and beaten. And then they are thrown into the deepest, darkest hole in the Philippian jail bound in excruciating chains- their vacation turned into a nightmare.

Now, believe it or not the whole ancient magical worldview stuff helps us here. See, when we read and hear this text for the first time, many of us get stuck on Paul zapping this poor girl and think that the miracle, the wondrous element in this story takes place when Paul casts the spirit out of that little girl. We think- wow, that was weird and kind of magical. That must be the miracle. Well, no. My sense is that someone in the original context hearing this story wouldn't be amazed by this at all- they'd just accept it without so much as blinking. Here, our scientific lenses, normally so helpful, get in the way of what's truly wondrous, or miraculous in the text. See, the *really* bizarre thing that takes place in the text happens not when Paul frees that woman, but later, when the men are in jail, rotting in the dark. Oh, the strangest thing in the world happens- strange in the original day and strange in ours as well. Those men, beaten and naked- they start to sing. They start to laugh and sing and praise God- and it's so beautiful, so ethereal the other prisoners can't help but listen. Paul and Silas that night find hymns, or hymns find them, that raise their souls from that pit and remind them that no matter what happens to them, to their bodies, no matter how heavy the chains- they are children of God and free, no matter what.

Now, throughout scripture music has a power to give captive men and women strength that words often do not. When Jesus is on the cross he cries out those famous words: *Eli, eli lama sebachthani* (My God! My God- why have you forsaken me.) Most of us imagine him speaking or yelling this cry- in actuality he was probably singing it. This cry comes from the very first line of Psalm 22- and Psalms are most originally meant to be sung. If you ever read through the Book of Psalms and you see them begin with instructions like “With stringed instruments” in Psalm 4 or “with flutes” like in Psalm 5. Indeed, the word *Psalms* in Greek means songs. Music just has this kind of power to give captive men and women strength that words alone just do not.

It’s the power known outside of scripture, too- it’s a power the slaves knew for instance- the ones that survived the Middle Passage, only to arrive at America’s shore to see their families torn apart and to know physical and sexual abuse on a scale never before seen on the face of God’s green earth. Reading about these courageous men and women this week- I was shocked not only at their resilience but at their creativity. It’s one thing to think a person might endure oppression like that- but to create new songs, spirituals, that we still sing today- it staggers the mind.

I learned this week these Spirituals weren’t simply moral support for slaves working in the field- although they certainly were that. They were often coded with hidden meanings, as well. There were what scholars now call signal songs- passing along coded messages and information. Swing Low Sweet Chariot, for instance is a signal song, telling the community that the operators of the underground railroad are close. “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot- coming for to carry me home.” Other songs, melancholy

songs like “Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child” gave the message that an escape had been stopped and to keep their heads down.

Along with signal songs, there were also map songs- these songs contained information about how to travel north. The great Spiritual Follow the Drinking Gourd describes the Big Dipper- and how to use it to find Polaris, the North star to keep oriented in the right direction.

These songs are so creative- and they are creative with scripture, too. Take a song like There Is A Balm in Gilead- now this isn't just a simple, straightforward use of scripture. Did you hear the text that Dorothy read to us from Jeremiah this morning? In the text Jeremiah is asking a question- is there a balm in Gilead? Is there healing? Is there help? This is what he wants to know. The slaves say this isn't good enough. They say this isn't good enough and so they come up with a song that answers the question- is there a balm in Gilead? There is a balm- you'd better believe it. And this isn't playing fast and loose with scripture- this is creative art that's in tune with scripture, living with it, and responding to it.

Now, at this point you might be thinking- hey, this sermon would be great...if I was in prison! But we're not. And so what on earth does have to do with us? And it's a great question. I mean I love this story with Paul and Silas the innermost cell and the plantation slaves singing songs- but it seems so distant from our lives here in Tualatin. Reminds me of this guy Tertullian at the birth of the church. He was not a big fan of philosophy and Greek philosophical learning leaching into the church, and he once wrote, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” A good question for us might be, “What has

Tualatin to do with a Philippian prison?” And this is a great question. I think the answer lies in the fact that prisons come in all shapes and sizes.

This week marked the birthday of perhaps the greatest writer of jailhouse protest music who ever lived. This week marked the 250th birthday of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. I know we don't normally think of Mozart as protest music, but he was perhaps the most musically gifted person who ever lived- and he lived in something of a prison nearly all his life but fought it every step of the way. You know, one thing that histories' cruelest leaders have always known is this- the best prison is not the one with the biggest walls and the most barbed wire. The best jail is the one that imprisons people without their even knowing it.

See, young Mozart had it all- he was brilliant, and he wasn't just great at music- he was also extremely funny, and very likable. And from the time he was a small child he was playing for kings and queens- for the royalty of all Europe. He was destined to climb to the very highest levels of Austrian's *haute couture*- which, at least from my perspective, looks to be one of the most beautiful prisons ever constructed.

Prison? How on earth is it a prison? Well, first off, being schooled only in music Mozart was never given any choice about his future. Much like our system today which forces kids to choose at ever earlier ages what they're going to be when they grow up and penalizes kids who dabble and wander- by the time Mozart is a teen his profession is fixed. But he never had a choice.

Well, but wasn't he paid well for courtly compositions? Oh yes, absolutely. But this week I learned about the expense of being attached to Franz Joseph- the expensive clothes, the soirees he was expected to throw as well as to attend. For as much money as

a court composer would make- he was also expected to spend nearly that simply to maintain his presence. The movie, *Amadeus*, portrays Mozart as an irresponsible spendthrift, chasing after wine and women- and to be sure there is a grain of truth to this. But equally true is the system of near indentured servitude musicians lived with that kept them forever dependant on the court. While it's true Mozart could have spent the little money he came by more wisely- it's equally true that in reality it just wasn't that much.

And worst of all- worst of all were the mediocre standards to which he was expected to cater. It's not at all as if Mozart was expected to let his genius free to soar and to compose just whatever it was that entered his mind. He was under constant pressure to sell his work. Selling his work meant he needed buyers. And when this absolute genius would rebel and say to heck with whatever everyone else wanted, that he was going to write the music he was hearing- he was cruelly punished for it. One of the most famous moments in Mozart's early life when he realized the pressure there was to be a company man, he worked his tail off on a work called *The Abduction of Seraglio*, Mozart worked especially hard and was incredibly proud. The laconic response from Franz Joseph? "Too many notes." And the young man was dismissed- all that work gone to waste.

The absolutely amazing thing about Mozart is that he never caved in. Later in his life, when he was at the height of his powers in his late twenties (how do you like that?) he composed a series of quartets- the last of which scholars now call the Dissonance Quartet. Mozart begins the piece doing something no other composer would do until the 20th century- he uses dissonant, clashing notes to produce tension that he resolves in the end. Mozart was critically thrashed for this- his contemporaries not ready for it. But 250

years later he has us shaking our heads, wondering as much as his courage to resist as at his genius.

And what's true for Mozart is true for us- yes, none of us sitting here at this moment are literally in prison. But each of us lives with constraints. Each of us live with pressures to conform- whether from our family or our jobs. And if it isn't today, I promise you it will be tomorrow or the next that you will be faced with the choice of following what you believe to be God's voice or going along with what others want you to do. And the good news in this text, the good news of the Gospel for us this morning is this- when we choose to follow after what is right rather than what is popular and find ourselves paying the price, we will have the comfort of knowing what everyone from Paul and Silas to plantation slaves to Mozart knew- we will know the deep comfort of God's presence and singing hymns and really, truly, meaning what we say.

Hear these words from Maya Angelou- a woman who knows what it is to sing words and mean them:

“I know why the caged bird sings”

A free bird leaps on the back of the wind
and floats downstream till the current ends
and dips his wing in the orange sun's rays and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage
can seldom see through his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.

Amen.