

May 16, 2010  
Elon Community Church United Church of Christ  
Reverend Dian Griffin Jackson

Text: Acts 16:16-34

Title: Singing in the Night

**Prayer:** O God, settle us. Settle our wandering minds, our rambling thoughts. Speak to us in these moments. Let us hear in these words a message of hope, a message of comfort and of peace. Holy Spirit, fall fresh on us here gathered. Let the words of my mouth, the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable unto you, for you are our strength and our salvation.

There is something magical about music. Don't you agree! Last night, my son Darian and I were privileged to be a part of the extraordinary cast of singers and dancers at Alamance Country Club, performing Smokey Joe's Café. This morning, all of us here have been moved, transformed, and inspired by the hymns we've sung in praises to God together. *And, oh my, how awesome is this choir! "Go down Moses", a rendition I've not heard before --Truly a gift from God to us. Amen.* This afternoon, my dear friend and sister, Dr. Carol Troxler, is looking forward to joining with members and friends of this amazing congregation in singing favorite hymns and songs, in an old fashion sing fest. Again, this afternoon the cast of Smokey Joe will be performing at the Paramount Theater. Later this evening I understand that Elvis Presley has arisen, all the way from the grave to the Parrish House at Elon Community Church. Amen. *There is just something magical about music. Amen.*

I was reading a blog from Sonya Hutton's *A Daily Cup of Good News from the St. Alban's Café* in which Sonya, had this to say about music: "Music is a mystery. Its capacity to deepen, enlarge, and unify human experience enhances spiritual encounters and the religious life, in general."

Our New Testament text would indicate that, if Paul and Silas were in our midst this morning, they would agree with Sonya. For the Scriptures tell us that while they were in jail, "About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and **singing** hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them." I wonder what they were singing, sitting there in their dark prison cells, chained and bound. What was the little night music with which they favored the inmates of that miserable jail in the Macedonian City of Philippi? Remember now, this was more than 2000 years ago. There were no constitutions, amendments, or Bill of Rights to guarantee a prisoner any rights, not even the right to be treated fairly. There were no protections for prisoners in 80-85 CE. Paul and Silas were likely in a filthy dungeon, cramped, with other prisoners, separated by a stone wall. Visibility would have been very faint, for the rays of the sun usually could not penetrate the fortress. This would have been a horrific experience, one in which these two, well-educated and highly respected Jewish men, was not accustomed. I imagine they felt disoriented, alone, and afraid.

The author, James Carroll, a former Roman Catholic Priest, recalled an episode in his own life when he had been imprisoned for his part in an antiwar demonstration in 1972. In that recollection, Carroll recalls how eerily quiet it was and dark. He says, "no one knows what prompted this prisoner to do so, but at some point in the night, the man in the next cell began to sing, softly at first, and then with stoic determination, the man's baritone began to fill the air as he sang words from Handel's Messiah: 'Comfort, comfort ye my people'." This man, Carroll says, was William Sloan Coffin, noted theologian and fellow antiwar demonstrator. "Coffin sang as if he was the only person on earth", continued Carroll. "His words reverberated through the prison cell block. It was as if the prophet Isaiah himself had returned to speak to you for God—to speak to God for you. Soon others joined in the singing...*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light...*" [Credo, William Sloane Coffin, Foreword by James Carroll]

Surely it must have been something like that for Paul and Silas, at midnight, arrested, bound, chained, in jail, praying and singing to God.

Why were they in jail? What had Paul and Silas done to warrant their imprisonment? These two, Jews, followers of the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, whom they believed was the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. They were good Christians, though the word *Christian* probably had not become a household word yet. Christians, who had traveled by foot and ship from Palestine to Europe, north of Greece, and now to Philippi, a thriving city in Macedonia. All they wanted to do was tell the story of Jesus, the One who had healed, was arrested, tortured, and crucified, who had risen from his grave, was alive and present in the world. They wanted to tell the story of how the world was now a new place because of Christ's risen presence, that the kingdom of God was no longer just a dim hope. It was present reality. God's kingdom had come.

While in Philippi, Paul and Silas encountered a business woman named Lydia, who believed the good news, was baptized, and invited the two of them into her home. Things were looking up for them. BUT, soon after the encounter with Lydia, as Paul and Silas traveled through the city, they had another encounter. There was a slave girl, who everybody thought was peculiar, different. This young girl, according to the gossip, was possessed by an evil spirit, a demon. Today we would say that the young girl was mentally ill. She behaved oddly, unpredictably, and she would say outrageous, sometimes hilarious things. She would answer every question one asked of her. Her greatest strength, it seems, was predicting the future. The Scripture says that her owners decided to capitalize on her strength, and charged folk to have her predict their future. Dr. Will Willimon, noted theologian and Bishop in the United Methodist Church, says "the owners rented her out as entertainment for business conventions, set up a fortune-telling and palm-reading booth". It was a very profitable business for her owners. Everything was going along quite well, until Paul and Silas came on the scene.

This girl began to follow Paul and Silas around. She was fascinated by them. As she followed them, she would shout things about them. Some of the things she shouted were quite controversial, provocative. "These men are slaves of the Most High God." This began to annoy Paul and Silas. No matter where they went, there she was, and there were her continued tirades about them. Well, Paul just got fed up with her. And one day, he simply shouted out to whatever possessed her: "Stop this. Shut up. I command you in the name of Jesus Christ. Come out of this girl." The Scriptures say that immediately the spirit left the girl. She stopped babbling. She became serene, quiet. She began to smile. This young girl was finally at peace. Whatever had possessed her was now gone. BUT so was her profit value -- Trouble in the land.

We all know what happens when someone starts messing with our money. Folk get upset. Lord. Lord. Hot. Mad. Even good ole Christians. Folk will put up with you, pastor, about most anything—BUT— if you start talking about tithes and offerings, giving—almost anything to do with money—how you earn it and what you do with it—Houston, we have a problem. Amen!

This young girl's owners were angry. So, they dragged Paul and Silas to the marketplace, before the magistrate. Took the boys to court—ONLY—because these two men had taken a moment to speak to the injustice of what was happening to this young girl and dared to speak a word of healing, deliverance, and freedom to her. The owners were so upset that they accused Paul and Silas of being a threat to the city. "These men are disturbing our city; besides they are Jews, not Macedonians. They are "other", outsiders, outside agitators." Can't you see how Paul and Silas' accusers are even willing to question their citizenship and patriotism, saying that Paul and Silas were anti-Semitic and unpatriotic. "They aren't one of us; they're probably unregistered immigrants." Of course, this whipped the crowd into a frenzy; they wanted something to be upset about. They began to attack Paul and Silas. For their own protection as much as for punishment, the magistrate ordered them beaten and thrown in jail. This, then, is how Paul and Silas came to be singing hymns in the night.

Oh. Yet, look at God. There was an earthquake. So severe on the rectal scale that the chains around their ankles were dislodged from the stone wall, and the doors were knocked off their hinges. The jailer became so frightened after checking over everything, that, fearing the worst had happened, a prison break, he decided to commit suicide. But, a voice rang out: “Stop. Don’t do it. We are all here.” This voice, no longer singing, yet still speaking words of peace, life, hope. Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke words that touched this man where he needed to be touched. And the jailer invited Paul and Silas into his home, to tell the story of God’s love. The Scripture tells us that before the night was ended, the jailer and his entire household believed and were baptized. They all sat down together, to share a late night dinner, to enjoy good fellowship, good drink, and great laughter, giving thanks to God for the new friendships and the transformations that had taken place in all of their lives. All of this, brought on by praying and **singing**.

Our lesson gives us glimpses of hope and peace. Yet, as Christians, we continue to struggle with many questions. What is the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Is this gospel simply to save the individual or to change the community? Is the message of the gospel about reforming the individual or transforming the life of the whole city? Were Paul and Silas wrong to be concerned about the plight of the young girl and the devastation the owner’s were causing at her expense, even though they were getting rich? Does the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message we’ve been commissioned to share, have social, political, and economic implications? There are those who would say that the gospel is about the individual, that being Christian is personal, about my own soul, my personal relationship with God, the eternity of my soul. There is merit in that. For we have learned, mostly tragically, that when religious institutions act like civil authorities, we can behave in pretty unseemly ways. When given power, religious folk, like everyone else can become caught up in that power and exploit others, cause violence, and even kill. All in the name of Jesus—recall the witch hunts, Crusades, Inquisitions, and burning “heretics” at stake. We can behave quite wrongly.

However, our Christian heritage tells us that God cares very much for the individual AND for the community, that life in the community is as important to God as the life of the individual. This is our tradition from the beginning: there is not either-or, it is both-and. The gospel of Jesus Christ is personal and corporate; it is a personal gospel, yes, AND a social gospel. We follow Jesus not to assure ourselves that we are going to a better place when this life is over, though this is an important piece, yes. Yet, the gospel calls us to break chains, open prison doors, and set captives free. It is our calling and our Christian hope that becoming a disciple, a follower of Jesus, will play back into the present realities of our lives. We are called to be vessels of God’s new creation, to help put the world to rights, which was inaugurated in Jesus. We are not only the beneficiaries of this new world we are also agents of the change to make the new world possible. (*Simply Christian*, Introduction)

This is why we come to church Sunday after Sunday. This is why we gather as a faith community. We strive daily to reflect this gospel in our lives in community—by being a faithful, loving worshipping community. We may not agree on the specifics of every ordinance, political or social, yet we know that the matter of a just and living is a matter of religious priority for us as is health care, public education, and immigration. So, too, is the matter of the culture of violence that is so prevalent in our society; we are obsessed with it. When we think of how Paul and Silas freed the young girl in our text from her demons in the name of Jesus Christ, how can we not also think about our children and the demon of violence and guns, about the continuous violence to which we expose our children through television, video games, and movies. The sad part is, having so thoroughly drenched them in this counterproductive behavior, we find it difficult or impossible to limit their access to guns, somehow ceding the matter to the NRA! What will they do? What is our responsibility as Christians, bearers of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

The gospel of Jesus Christ is personal. It is about the God’s love for you and for me. It is about God’s forgiveness and acceptance, and God’s amazing grace. It is personal. Yet, it is also more than that.

Bishop Desmond Tutu says it best in his book, *God has a dream*, “God has a dream for our world, a dream of a world at peace, a dream of justice and fairness for all people, where children are safe and loved and cared for and protected, a world where there are no outsiders, none excluded on the basis of sexual orientation, nationality, no one marginalized because of gender or the color of their skin, a world where love and compassion replace hatred and violence.” It is God’s dream and the hope of all who would Jesus, a hope big and bold and wonderful enough to command our love and commitment, our energy, imagination, passion, intelligence. It is a dream holy enough to command imprisonment, even our lives.

While there, in jail, at midnight, lonely, afraid, uncertain, follow the example of Paul and Silas. Pray. **Sing**. When the pain and fear are almost unbearable, **sing**. I don’t know about you, this morning, but there are times in my life that the troubles and sorrows can be so harsh, all I can do is moan, hum, or **sing**. There is strength and comfort in the music, at midnight, in the darkness of the soul, when everything seems eerily quiet and dark. **Sing**. Feel God at work in the music. Feel the peace that spreads from your soul outward. **Sing**.

Scripture does not tell us what hymn Paul and Silas were singing in that Macedonian jail over 2,000 years ago. Yet, because we know the history of their people and the strong faith the people had in their God, I believe Paul and Silas were singing words similar to one of my favorite hymns:

“Let not your heart be troubled”, Christ’s tender word I hear,  
 And resting on God’s goodness, I lose my doubts and fears;  
 Though by the path . . . God leads me but one step I may see:  
 God’s eye is on the sparrow, and I know God watches me;  
 God’s eye is on the sparrow, and I know God watches me.  
 I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free,  
 God’s eye is on the sparrow, and I know God watches me.

[From God’s Eye is on the Sparrow, Civilla D. Martin, c 1905, alt., Charles H. Gabriel, 1905]

Thanks be to God. Amen.