

June 2, 2019 | Journey worship

TEXT: [Acts 16:16–34](#)

THEME: Vitality

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

Most of my Bibles have been gifts to me. There is the illustrated Bible I received from Aunt Judy for my first Communion. Then there is the Bible I received from my youth group leader when I went to my first Bible Study—an NIV Bible with a closeup of Michelangelo’s hand of Adam reaching for the hand of God, replicated in vibrant colors. In college our campus minister gave me my first Study Bible. It is filled with notes and bookmarks, and the cover is well worn. I’ve also been gifted one of my grandma’s Bibles. Inside was tucked a note that I wrote to her on pink stationary when I was 8. I told her that I was sure that she would go to heaven when she died because she was a woman who was really faithful to God. After college, my Dad got me the travel Bible I took to India, and just a few years ago he got me the large print Bible that appeared on my Amazon wishlist at Christmas time. And on the desk of my office is the Bible I received from the middle school Sunday School class in 2008 when I was ordained.

It seems fitting that all of these Bibles were gifts. We often talk about the Bible as God’s gift to us—sometimes even calling it a love letter of sorts. We talk about how the Word of God incarnate in Christ is the greatest gift of God—the source of our redemption and the foundation of our hope. We order worship around the proclamation of the word—we prepare to hear the word; we hear the word; we respond to the word. It is foundational to our faith. Sometimes it confuses us. Sometimes it challenges us. Sometimes it instructs us, guides us, and comforts us. Sometimes people—sometimes meaning ill, and sometimes not—use the Bible to hurt others; usually pulling one verse out of scripture, taking it out of context, and then applying it to a current situation with an interpretation that forgets that a key verse in scripture tells us that God is love.

And so we have to remember to receive this gift with care—to never abuse it for our own purposes, to stop and listen to what it is saying to us even when our desire to understand requires us to dig deeper, ask questions, and pray.

Our Bible story for today is a bit peculiar in many ways. A quick read-through might have us focusing on the second part of the story: the part where Paul and Silas sing their hearts out praising God while shackled in the innermost cell of prison. We get swept away in the drama of the earthquake that follows, the breaking of all of the chains that bind them and the open doors that would allow them to get out of the prison cell and back into the world. We are struck, however, by the integrity of these apostles: how they *don’t* run out of jail, knowing that it would have dire consequences for their captor. They save his life, and then save him once more, proclaiming the Gospel to him and his family, and baptizing them in Jesus’ name.

When I first read this story, I am struck by the vital faith of these apostles. I’m struck how their faith is so strong that they can sing praises to God even in the worst situation—even after having been beaten, even when shackled, even when they have

been arrested for an absurd crime and even when they have no idea of what will come next. I know that for myself, situations that leave me tied up in knots—figuratively or literally—situations where I feel like I can do nothing to change the outcome; situations that seem unjust; situations that are scary; and situations in which I have no idea what might happen next...well, these are the situations in which I am usually least likely to praise God. Yes, I usually start my prayer with a compliment, saying something like “Gracious God” or “Loving God”—but then it’s clear that I’m just trying to butter God up before I ask God in every way I can imagine to help me out, to change things, to set the record straight, to protect me and those I love. So I’m amazed that seeking help seems so far from the minds of Paul and Silas, and I think “I want to be like that.”

Then I’m struck by the ability of Paul and Silas to do what is right—even when their choice might be to their own detriment. When the doors to the prison open wide and their chains break, they don’t go anywhere. They stay in their cell. They assure their captor. They don’t take advantage of the situation for their own gain, but make sure that no one else—not even the one who is guarding them—is hurt by their actions. Their integrity blesses the prison guard and transforms his heart. And again, I’m amazed. I want to do what is right, even when it’s hard or risky. I want my righteousness to point others to Christ. Yes, again, I want to be like that.

Then I realize that I’ve jumped to the end of the story. I’ve conveniently skipped over the opening verses—verses so integral to the story that they can’t be cut out or else we lose our entire context. I remember that there was a healing—an exorcism of sorts—that a slave girl was possessed by a spirit that allowed her to tell the future, and that her owners were profiting by her expense. I jump to the conclusion that Paul and Silas heal her because they, in their faithfulness, wish to do what is right—even for an unnamed slave girl; even when it might land them in prison or worse. So I go back and I read through those verses again. Only this time I find something different. The text tell us this:

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. 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." 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.

Paul was VERY MUCH ANNOYED! Paul had been followed around by this girl FOR DAYS and did nothing. He walked along, listening to her herald their arrival. She knew that they came from God and that they were proclaiming a way of salvation. Her calls may have even drawn others to Paul and Silas. She may have alerted others to listen up to their message—after all, the community around her knew that she had an uncanny ability to see the future plainly. They would trust her. But Paul and Silas walk around with this girl behind them and do nothing to help her. They do not address the injustice of her bondage; they do not address her exploitation by others; they do not feel

compassion upon her because of the demon that has possessed her. Rather, they do nothing to get her out of a mess, day after day. In fact, Paul seems to have no intention of healing her in the first place. He tries to ignore her, only releasing her from the demon when he becomes “very much annoyed.”

I’ll be honest, at first, I didn’t know what to think. I wanted to read a story that was clean and tidy. I wanted to see Paul and Silas immediately take pity on this girl and free her from the social, political and spiritual abuses she had been suffering. I wanted to proclaim a story that lifted up Paul and Silas and said, “This is what we need to do! This is how we need to be! We need to seek out injustice and overturn it. We need to free the oppressed. We need to do what is right, even when there might be a personal cost. And the whole time, we need to praise God, trusting that God alone is sovereign.” But I can’t.

Instead, I need to tell you a story about a guy who is trying to tell others about Jesus, but doesn’t always recognize that his message is for everyone. I need to tell you about a man who ignored the needs of a marginalized, oppressed, slave girl—a person who didn’t want to disrupt the accepted social order. I need to tell you about a guy whose act of grace occurred from a place of annoyance and irritation, rather than a place of love.

But then I need to tell you that this guy who gets it wrong gets it right a little later. I need to tell you that the God whose praises he sings gets it right the whole time. I need to tell you that even when Paul and Silas don’t see the slave girl, God does. I need to tell you that God can and does work through imperfect people—and can and does work even through their imperfection. I need to tell you that as much as we want the story to be about Paul and Silas—and as much as we, then, want to make the story about us, it’s really a story about God. It is a story about a God whose love and whose salvation extends to slave girls and jailers and imperfect men trying to do their best. It is a story that reminds us that no one, really, falls outside of God’s story—whether they are in bondage to a demonic spirit, whether they are bound in a prison cell, or whether they are bound to their sense of duty. God is a God who sets people free, calls people into unlikely community, and sends people—even imperfect people—out into the world to share this good news and to partner in this liberating work.

And there you have it—a gift.

As one commentator puts it:

“(O)ur small lives are swept up into a great drama, God’s story line. God is indeed reaching out to us in Jesus Christ, taking our lives into the gospel story of transformation and redemption.¹”

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

God sets us free:

Sets us free from sin

Sets us free from all that binds us

Sets us free from being who others say we need to be

Sets us free from our own limitations and irritations

Sets us free from fear, self-interest, isolation, and even judgment.

God sets us free for love.

The gift is ours. Thanks be to God. Amen.