

4th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Acts 16:16-40

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.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 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. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, 'Let those men go.' And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, 'The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace.' But Paul replied, 'They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.' The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

"There's freedom and then there's freedom."¹ We are blessed to live in a country that talks about freedom a lot. In just a few weeks, the Fourth of July will yet again be upon us and we will give thanks for "the land of the free." *Freedom is coming* cried the patriots who died on the battlefields of the

¹ From William Willimon's Commentary on Acts in the Interpretation Series (Pub. Westminster John Knox)

Revolutionary War. *Freedom is coming* cried the slaves in plantations across the country and perhaps even here on Shelter Island. *Freedom is coming* cried the Japanese families enslaved in American internment camps during World War II. *Freedom is coming* sang the civil rights leaders crossing the bridge in Selma. *Freedom is coming* cried the enraged peoples of McKinney, Texas last week. *Freedom is coming* cried the transgender persons seeing Caitlyn Jenner on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. *Freedom is coming* prayed the congregants of Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, SC shortly before they were gunned down by a white supremacist. Ironically, *freedom is coming* might have even been cried by that very white supremacist who slaughtered nine women and men. Freedom seems to be a subject that pops up on a rather continual basis in this country.

The author of the Acts of the Holy Spirit certainly play with this theme as well.

There's freedom and then there's freedom.

Paul - or, more accurately, *Saul* - was free in a sense before his conversion experience. He was going hither and thither on his own accord, persecuting Christians and, we are told, Jesus himself. However, in another sense, at the very same time he was terribly enslaved. Enslaved to his own sinfulness. Enslaved to his own oppressive tendencies. In a beautifully ironic fashion, it isn't until the Holy Spirit encounters him and takes away his sight that he truly becomes free. As he blindly walks around with his hands on the shoulders of his companions, his true freedom begins.

Today's passage tells the story of freedom from a few different perspectives. The first perspective, we are told, is that of a slave-girl whose owners exploited her mental illness to provide entertainment to passers-by who would pay money to have their palms read. In her psychotic state, she follows Paul and his colleague Silas and tells them that they are slaves to the most High God. She follows them, the text tells us, for *days!* Paul, ever the cranky old curmudgeon, got more than a little annoyed.

One of the things that Tricia and I learned about Rome, Italy is that wherever you go there are these street vendors that are all trying to sell you the same thing - these little "selfie sticks" that you attach your phone to and hold to takes pictures of you and your companions. Absolutely *everywhere* these street vendors would follow you and ask if you wanted to buy a selfie stick. After several days in Rome, it got to the point that Tricia and I just wanted to throw something at them as soon as we saw them approaching us.

I imagine Paul felt similarly because, after a few days, he's had quite enough. Shouting to Silas over the din of this slave-girl's rants, he says, "I've had it! We're gonna have ourselves a good old-fashioned exorcism." And so, Paul turns to the slave-girl and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, frees her of her demon and, consequently, her ability to generate income for her owners. The woman is glad because she is no longer possessed. Paul and Silas are glad because they finally have some peace and quiet. But their peace and quiet would not be for long because the girl's owners did not share in their enthusiasm.

Having been robbed of their means of income, the girl's owners have Paul and Silas dragged into the streets, beaten, and thrown into jail. Sitting in jail with their legs in irons, one would think that Paul and Silas might have wondered if the price of this slave-girl's freedom was that of their own. But even in this prison, they are free.

There's freedom and then there's freedom.

Paul and Silas are bound and imprisoned. The sun goes down. The jailor locks the door and retreats to his slumber. The sound of dripping water echoes through the cold, damp cells. But then,

another sound is heard. A verse of "We shall overcome" is heard in two part harmony sung by Peter and Silas. Their fellow prisoners begin to peek through the bars of their cells to see what the noise is about. Right about the time the jailor wakes up, Peter and Silas are already into verse three of "Freedom is Coming." By the time he makes it down the long hallway, they have begun a rousing chorus of "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

And just when the final verse comes to a close, the Holy Spirit brings forth a mighty earthquake. Not a terrible destructive earthquake that destroys peoples lives but the kind that allows them to begin. Not the kind of earthquake that causes famine but the type that breaks open chains; not just the chains of Paul and Silas but the chains of *all* the prisoners around them! Everyone is jumping up and down and praying and praising and singing. Everyone, that is, except the jailor. The man who, until just a minute ago, had the freedom to go about as he pleased, is now enslaved by his very real fear of losing his life for being on the clock during this massive jailbreak! He draws his sword and is about to take his life when Paul says, "stop! We're still here!" The jailor asks what he must do to be saved and Paul replies by saying, "believe what you just saw." And the jailor welcomes them into his house where he cleans their wounds, feeds them, and he and his whole household is baptized and brought into the Christian fold.

There's freedom and then there's freedom.

So often, in the American narrative, we are taught that because we *can* do something it means that we *should* do it. I used to know someone (in Charleston, SC, interestingly enough) would rake leaves in his back yard with his handgun on his hip. He did this in the back yard of his house in a very safe neighborhood. He carried this weapon visibly on his side not because he should, but simply because he could; "it was his 2nd Amendment freedom to do so," I was told. Sure I have the freedom to go and buy a gun - in many places *without* a background check - and slaughter innocent people; but is that really freedom? That is *not* the freedom spoken of in the Christian narrative. True freedom, we are taught in the Christian narrative, is this: we are free to secure freedom for others. We are free to live in perfect community with one another. We are freed from our sins that we might be captivated by a desire to respond accordingly.

That freedom is what is spoken of from so many perspectives in today's text. The slave girl was enslaved by her demon and then freed by the Spirit. Her owners were free to exploit her and then became enslaved to the act of finding another means of income. The jailor was free to enslave and then ended up being enslaved to freedom. Paul and Silas were free to proclaim the gospel in the streets and then, despite their chains, they were nevertheless free to pray and sing and hope and share. Even in the confines of their prison cell, Paul and Silas were relentless vessels of freedom. Even in the darkest of hours, Paul and Silas were free to trust in the mighty fortress that was their God.

Friends, the worst prisons in this world are the ones we cannot see. The worst prisons in this world are the ones that aren't built with stone or steel. Some of us are imprisoned because of the color of our skin. Some of us are imprisoned because of our sexual preference or identity. Others are imprisoned by the cancer, or the Alzheimers, or the depression, or the debt, or the divorce, or the death, or the darkness. Prisons are all around us and today's text gifts us with a beautiful and timely metaphor for the times when we find ourselves in them. This text fills us with hope that freedom can be found in the most unlikely of places. This text reminds us that there is no prison - physical or otherwise - that is isolated enough to keep us from the God who promises us that freedom is coming.

There's freedom and then there's freedom.

Who among us are imprisoned? Who among us are carrying around prisons that no one can see? What if the most important impression Shelter Island Presbyterian Church ever made in this community is that it is a place where people can come to be *truly* free? Free to be what God created them to be. Free to be who they want to be seen as. Free from whatever conditions serve as barriers between them and community.

Friends, we are vessels of freedom. We are free to invite others to freedom. Yes, prisons are a reality but they are a reality that belong to this world and not the Kingdom of God. We, as disciples of a Risen Christ, are called to bring the Kingdom of God to this world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Such is our calling. Such is our freedom. Friends, freedom is coming. That much we have been promised. Let us take part in that promise and welcome her with open arms and gladsome songs.

A few days ago, I spent some time in Manhattan doing research for our upcoming series on Genesis and I was reading Walter Brueggemann's discussion of the stories of Abraham and Sarah. We remember that Sarah's womb, we are told, was closed, barren. And because of this, the promise that God had made to them to make their descendants outnumber the stars in the sky seemed like a cruel, cosmic joke. Now, you and I know the rest of the story. We know that Sarah's womb did, in fact, become fruitful and God's promise was made true. However, Brueggemann calls us to rewind for a second to the reality of Sarah's barrenness. Brueggemann tells us that Abraham and Sarah were called to live as creatures of hope in a situation of hopelessness.

I'm going to repeat that...Abraham and Sarah were called to live as creatures of hope in a situation of hopelessness.

That is exactly what Paul and Silas did in that lonely prison.

That is exactly what the people of Emmanuel A.M.E. Church are doing this morning.

That is exactly what the Spirit is calling you and me to do.

It is a serious and blessed task that must be done and it must be done now.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.