

The Presence of God

A Sermon on Acts 16: 16-34 by Rich Holmes

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When I was a kid, I did not go to a Presbyterian Church, but every Sunday my mom and dad would take me to a church in another denomination, but which was and still is broadly a part of our same Reformed tradition. I remember one time when I was about eight or nine, I started going to a Sunday school class there which was teaching me all the kinds of things that being a part of this church meant. And so, they taught me that being part of this church meant you believed in things like baptism and communion and the bible, and of course you believed in God and Jesus. Well, I must tell you that I misunderstood all this. You see, I thought that these were all things that we believed in this church, and it is what we alone believed. And I wondered, what did my friend Jeff who was a Methodist believe? And what about Larry who was Lutheran, and Sean who was Catholic? So I got to talking with them, and I was so disappointed. It turned out that they all believed in God and Jesus, too. I was so disappointed because I thought that being part of my church made me special, but it turned out that we pretty much believed the same stuff that all of my other friends believed. But then there was my friend Lyle who was Jewish. I got to talking to my friend Lyle and I said “What do you believe, Lyle, do you believe in Jesus too?”

He said “No we don’t.”

I said “Don’t tell me you don’t believe in God either.”

He said “Yes, we believe in God, we just don’t believe in Jesus. We think Jesus was a nice guy and everything, we just don’t think there was anything special about him.”

Well I thought that was kind of neat. So one day, I got to talking with my mom and I said,
“Mom, I want to be Jewish like Lyle.”

“Don’t you believe in Jesus?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then you can’t be Jewish.”

“Well mom, all my friends believe in God and Jesus and I want to be different. I don’t want to be like everyone else. That’s boring.”

Well, you know what? I soon got over that. I soon got over the urge to be different, and came to accept that what I believed in my church was roughly what all my friends believed. But then, what I wanted to know was this. How did it happen that so many people came to believe in Jesus? You see in this class, as I was learning what all we believed, I also learned that when Jesus walked the earth, he only had twelve disciples. Twelve! So how did we go from twelve to everybody I knew? How did we go from twelve to a church on every corner and in every part of the world? Well, the answer to that question brings us to our story today from Acts.

The book of Acts is written by Luke, the same Luke who wrote the gospel of Luke, and it is mostly about the time after Jesus died, was raised and ascended into heaven, when the early church began its long vigil of waiting for Jesus’ return, a vigil which we of course are still a part of. And what the story of the book of Acts tells us is that through the witness of early Christians such as Paul and Silas whom we hear about today, the gospel was spread from city to city through the Roman Empire. Now, as people like Paul and Silas went around spreading the gospel surely their message was embraced by everyone, wasn’t it? No, it wasn’t. In fact, this gospel of Jesus Christ was considered a great threat to both the Roman and Jewish authorities

of the day, and so these early Christians faced terrible persecution in spreading the gospel. But one of the great ironies of our faith is that the more people try to destroy the church, the more it spreads. It is like trying to put out a fire with gasoline, kerosene or even alcohol. The more of this stuff you pour on the fire, the more the fire is going to grow.

And it is with that background in mind that we hear today's story that Luke tells. In today's story Paul and Silas find themselves in the town of Philippi where there is a girl who is a slave. Now this girl is also a fortune teller and as you can imagine people from all around want to pay this girl to have their fortunes read, and her owners end up getting quite rich from all this fortune telling. Now, I don't know if you've ever gone to a fair or a carnival and seen a fortune teller, but chances are, if you have, you have said one of two things to yourself. You have said "This person is a complete fraud and I wouldn't dare spend my money on something like that." Or you have said, "It might be fun to have my fortune read and worth doing it one time, even though, yes I know it is all baloney." But that isn't what we are told in this story. What we are told in this story is that this girl had a real power to tell fortunes, because she was possessed by a fortune telling spirit. And as she was possessed by this spirit, she would follow Paul and Silas and their band of other Christians around shouting "These men are servants of the Most High God and they are telling you the way to be saved." And she kept on doing this, day after day, following them around and shouting, and we are told that Paul became annoyed by this. Now, you may say "Why was Paul annoyed by this? Wasn't this true? And as they were spreading the gospel, didn't Paul and his band of travelers want people to know what they believed and what they were doing?" Well, sure. "So, what's the problem?" you might ask. Well, I don't know. I am not someone who goes around knocking on doors and spreading the gospel; nor do you see me

standing on the street corners preaching too often. But I can imagine there is a certain technique to all this. I imagine if I were to ever try my hand at something like that, I would want to warm people up first before I laid the whole plan of salvation on them. You know, decades ago, I am sure that some of you probably had traveling salesmen knock on your door to sell you insurance policies or vacuum cleaners or whatever and what did they all do? Did they knock on your door and come right out and say “I’m here to sell you a vacuum cleaner.” Of course not. First they got their foot in the door. They introduced themselves, they made small talk and then eventually when they warmed you up enough they got to the point. But this spirit possessed slave girl was ruining all of that for Paul and Silas, so Paul finally turned around and cast the spirit out of her. No more being followed around. But sometimes when you solve one problem, you create another. And the problem now was if there is no fortune telling spirit in this girl, then that means there was no money to be made. So the owners of this slave girl had Paul and Silas dragged in front of the magistrates who threw them in jail. Paul and Silas were then stripped of their clothes and beaten, and whipped. And Luke says they were put in the inner most part of the jail. They are in a place where you go if you are really in trouble. They are in a place where there are no windows and no light. It is like solitary confinement, and their feet are even placed in stocks. And as Paul and Silas sit there in the jail cell, unable to move, in a place with no light as their bodies ached from being beaten and whipped, it must have seemed that God had completely forgotten them. It must have seemed that God was as far away from them as you and I are from the Land of Oz. But instead of wailing and moaning and wallowing in their despair, things that would make perfect sense in their circumstances, what do Paul and Silas do? They actually start singing hymns and praying. Suddenly there is an earthquake, the chains

of all the prisoners break loose and the doors of the prison fly open—and upon witnessing this, the jailer is ready to kill himself, because he knows he’s going to be in a lot of trouble if everyone starts running out of this prison. And then we come to the most interesting part of this story. The jailer turns to Paul and Silas and says “What must I do to be saved? What must I do to be saved? And what is interesting to know is that the Greek word for “saved” can also mean “rescued, delivered.” And I think that is important because we think of “saved” as being this churchy word. We think of saved as being this kind of word like “Hallelujah” or “Amen”. “Saved” is like that. But when we think of this word as meaning either “rescued” or “delivered” we see the irony of this story. If anyone seems to have needed delivering and rescuing in this story it was not the jailer, it was Paul and Silas, but then the story ends with God delivering Paul and Silas and delivering them to such an extent that the very person who imprisoned them is asking “What must I do to be rescued? What must I do to be delivered?”

We sometimes talk about God as being omnipresent, that is we talk about God as being everywhere. And I have been told from time to time that people don’t always like this idea that God is everywhere, as if God is always watching them. You know, these days when you go into a bank or a grocery store, isn’t it odd to feel like there is always a camera watching you? I understand the need to prevent people from shoplifting or stealing, but it is still a little creepy and unsettling to think that cameras are watching you everywhere you go. And I’ll tell you something, I can’t understand people on reality shows like the Kardashians who want cameras inside their home. I can’t understand that. It seems like even if I were famous and even if the paparazzi followed me everywhere I go and the world knew about my every move, I would want my home to be the one place that is a refuge from all of that. I would want my home to be

the one place where I could escape from all that. But God's omnipresence does not mean that God is the great eye in the sky who is always watching you like Big Brother with the eyes that follow you waiting to catch you in some mistake. What it means, rather is that there is no place in this universe, there is no place that is so hopeless that God is not at work even there. Even when Paul and Silas were in the most godforsaken place on earth, in the darkest part of jail with their feet in the stocks, having been beaten and whipped and in the most miserable condition we can think of, even there they knew they could call on God, even there they knew that God could deliver them. And their faith in God was such that the irony of this story is that the jailer, the jailer who seemed to have all the power in this story finds out that they are the ones who are really free. Paul and Silas are the ones who are free, and he is the one who need to be delivered.

What is the furthest place where you have ever been from God? What is the place in your life where you have said to yourself "God can't possibly be here with me in this place. God can't possibly be here with me in this of all places." I think we have all had places like that. As I think I have told you, I don't like the saying the word all in sermons because, I don't think all people have much of anything in common, but I think we all have those places. If they are not places where we have been, then they are places where we are afraid to go. But what is it that we are afraid of? What is it that we are afraid of if we are promised that nothing can separate us from the love of God? Paul himself tells us that. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor any

powers, neither height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation shall be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

In whatever place that may be in your life that is the furthest from God, that place that in your mind is as far from God as it could possibly be, may it be a place where like Paul and Silas, you can still find the faith to sing and to pray, and may it be a place where you still find the faith to wait for God’s deliverance.