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Alexandria, VA 22310
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John 17:20–26
Acts 16:16–34

IMPRISONMENT

The story of Paul and Silas in our Scripture reading today is not the first time that Paul has gotten himself into trouble. It's not the first time he's been in conflict with the authorities. But it is the first time Paul runs out of options. It's the first time he's incarcerated. Yes, back in Chapter 9, he escaped punishment from his one-time Jewish admirers while he was in Damascus. And he even escaped assassination plots while he was in Caesarea. By the time Chapter 14 comes along, Paul is traveling with a different partner—Barnabas—and he escapes with Barnabas when they attempted to stone him in Iconium. And in Lystra, they did in fact exact Paul's execution, but he was not dead. They failed.

So now in Macedonia, Paul is with Silas. He has parted ways with Barnabas. They have had a falling out of words, and he and Silas are jailed—put in chains in the most secure part of the prison. And what was their crime? What had they done? Supposedly, on their way to and from prayer meeting and maybe while they are out there with all the women, they are stirring up the city. Supposedly, they are teaching un-Roman customs. The citizens of Macedonia join in the melee that follows.

It sounds very similar, doesn't it, to what happened to Jesus and to Peter before him. *We don't want anything that smacks of Jerusalem here in Macedonia. And your Jewish citizenship: that in itself is enough to be offensive. We feel threatened and unsure because your message is so radically different than what we live and how we practice faith.*

Is this really why Paul and Silas got into so much trouble? Is it really what bothered the slave girl's owners? No. The real issue is the same as it often is for us and for our world. The real issue is about profits—about making money—even if you have to do it at the expense of the innocent.

Money issues finally land Paul and Silas in jail, hopelessly chained in the inner most cell. How often do we allow money matters to strip us of our enthusiasm. How often do financial concerns weigh down on us? How often are we imprisoned by our own fears? But this story continues, doesn't it? Paul and Silas are, of all things, singing and praying in prison, and they are heard by the other prisoners. Paul and Silas continue to be the church of Jesus Christ despite their circumstances. At midnight there is an earthquake. The doors of the prison are opened and the chains fall off. What had once been hopeless is now a new day of freedom. The same thing happens for us when we recognize that our punishment has been rescinded—our sentence of death has been cancelled.

How much of your life have you spent worrying about those things that in reality never happened? How much have you dreaded something only to live through the time when disaster was supposed to take place and you were saved. Have you ever been in a

hopeless situation only to experience God's sending a friend to help you? Often we do endure hardship, but if we are honest, on the whole our life is not marked by disaster, and we are not controlled by our fears. What is the answer for us? Is what we're doing part of the solution? Is what we are sharing in our community songlike and prayerful?

I wonder today if we can accept what those prisoners accepted from God that day—a different understanding of freedom. It's not freedom to run, but freedom to stay and be at peace. You see, we're offered the same hope. It is interesting that even before the sun comes up and all the implications of the jailor's actions could be inflicted on Paul by the authorities, God has already worked and the magistrates have changed their minds. They've changed their minds, and if we had kept reading, were even willing to apologize to Paul and Silas. The whole situation was always in God's hands. That's why Luke kept saying, "And the jailor's entire family was saved."

Salvation brings that kind of complete renewal. But often we are tempted to hold back just enough of our life, and those parts we are afraid to let go of never receive the blessing of God making us completely new. Salvation is meant to bring us true joy and happiness. And so, if we claim to be Christ's disciples and our life is still marked more by misery than joy, something is wrong.

Today, we as a congregation will hear in our Congregational Meeting about our building plans. And I believe if we listen carefully, we'll be able to discern God's refreshing good news for our future. But we'll have to resist the temptation to be afraid. Yes, there is news to share, and we anticipate this meeting with great anxiety and yet with great hope. Listen carefully as Neil Sampson, Chair of the Building Committee, talks to us. But don't forget to listen to God speak, also. Just as he went to the innermost part of that prison, he will come to the deepest recesses of our minds and hearts today. And we will be able to leave here at peace.

So may it be. Amen.