

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

On this Seventh Sunday of Easter, we continue shadowing Paul and Silas as they go about ministry in the Book of Acts. We continue reading about Paul's second missionary journey. You might remember from last week, Paul and Silas were teaching in Philippi. There they met Lydia, and she and her entire household were baptized. This week's installment has a similar ending.

Paul and Silas were going to the place of prayer, and a slave-girl was following them. She kept shouting out that they were slaves of the most-high God. While we might think that her heralding would be welcome by the apostles as some sort of announcement of their ministry, Paul was annoyed.

Perhaps, Paul wasn't impressed by the spirit of divination that possessed her. Perhaps he didn't want to be connected with one who looked to other gods for inspiration. In a production of this story made entirely out of Legos, you can watch it on You Tube, the slave girl is hopping around, interrupting Paul and Silas as they try to teach the people about Jesus. Whatever the reason was, the text tells us that Paul, "very much annoyed," turned to her and cast out the spirit.

This exorcism becomes mere background to Paul and Silas' imprisonment. The slave-girl's owners had lost their income. Paul, in effect, had stripped them of their livelihood. The frustrated businessmen turn to the local authorities and accuse the apostles of "advocating customs that are not lawful for Romans."

Paul and Silas invoked the name of Jesus and demonstrated God's power in Christ. The crowd attacks them, has them stripped and beaten and thrown into jail. The jailer is ordered to keep these men securely. He has Paul and Silas put in the innermost cell and fastens their feet in the stocks. The jailer does his job.

So what do Paul and Silas do? Beaten up and thrown into jail, they pray and sing hymns. In this time of challenge, they continue to do ministry. They continue to witness to Jesus. As they pray, as they sing, the other prisoners are listening to them, the author of Acts tells us.

Now, this is the part of this story that I like the best because of the time of day that this all takes place. "About midnight," the text says. "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God." For a night owl such as myself, I love that the events of this narrative happen at midnight.

Living in River Forest or the surrounding suburbs, midnight looks different for us from midnight might have looked around Philippi in the first century. With all the lights of the city, we experience the constant glow of light pollution, that strange deep blue color of our night sky. But midnight in Philippi would have been dark, real dark, even with any urban candlelight or oil lamp light of the time.

At about midnight, the praying, singing apostles' chains are broken. A violent earthquake shakes the foundation of the prison. Everyone's chains are unfastened. In the darkness, they could run. They could escape. They could flee into freedom. The jailer, who obviously takes his job quite seriously, fears that the prisoners have escaped. Just as he is about to take his life, Paul shouts, "Do not harm yourself, we are all here."

The jailer takes Paul and Silas to his house (at the same hour of the night). He washes their wounds. His entire household is baptized. He sets a meal out before them. And his entire household rejoices. What a

night. What a night for the apostles and the other people in that prison. What a night for the jailer and his household.

In the midst of challenge, the apostles sang and prayed, and then they stayed in jail when they could have run. Paul and Silas' witness that "we are all here," stands in contrast to what the twelve disciples did immediately following Jesus' prayer in our gospel reading this morning.

The setting of our gospel text is the Last Supper, just before Jesus is betrayed and hauled off to the high priest. John's gospel tells us that Jesus has washed the disciples' feet. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that Jesus has fed them with bread and wine and commanded them to eat and drink in remembrance of him.

But these first followers don't stick around like Paul and Silas did. Judas will show up with soldiers. Peter will deny his relationship with Jesus. The others will disperse.

How are we like the disciples who run? When do we put Jesus aside because it seemingly serves us better? When security trumps ministry or reputation prohibits vulnerability, when greed is greater than giving and preservation proceeds welcome, I think we are more like Peter in his moment of denial than we are like Silas and Paul in that prison.

One of the gifts of our stories in scripture is that we have forebears in the faith, folks who have gone before us, who didn't always get it right. Even the two carvings on this very pulpit remind us of Paul and Peter who denied and persecuted but also, and most importantly, proclaimed the gospel.

"We are all here," Paul shouted these simple words that led to the baptism of an entire household. We are all here. Like Paul and Silas, we sing hymns and we pray. Like the disciples, we eat together and we gather around the font.

We might not always get it right. Our sharing of the good news, our love for our neighbors, our ministry might fall short sometimes. Not everything we do or say or sing is going to lead to a household conversion.

Like Paul and Silas and Lydia and the jailer, we are truly on a missionary journey. Every week we leave worship with a reminder to "Go in peace. Serve the Lord." And during this Easter season, we've added in Alleluia! Alleluia!

We ground ourselves in the Word and in the Sacraments, all of which point us to Jesus who died and who was raised. Alleluia! We sing and pray because of what Christ has done for us in conquering death and freeing us from the jail of sin. Alleluia! We follow in the footsteps of those who first shared the good news as we experience God in our lives and invite others to do the same. Alleluia!

To the glory of God.