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SERMON

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Get Me Out of This Mess

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At times, some the stories from the Acts of the Apostles seem far-fetched. This book tells of an apostle transported through the ether as in a *Star Trek* episode when someone says, “beam me up.” Out of the blue, a man receives blinding messages. A woman is raised from the dead. We skipped over the time an angel strikes down Herod for not acknowledging God. He falls to the ground and is immediately consumed by worms.

Laura Bentley reminded me of the man who climbs into a window to hear Paul preach, only to fall asleep, tumble to his death, and then be restored to life. Snoozing during a sermon is not far-fetched but my ability to raise the dead is.

Never dismiss the relevance of these stories because we’ve become too sophisticated for supernatural events. We let a wicked witch enchant us with a song. We cheer for the caped man to protect the world from a villain’s threats.

In the same way, we can let these biblical stories take our imagination on a journey for their messages to convict us, teach us, and then free us. By dwelling in holy scriptures, we learn eternal truths about our lives with one another and with God.

Our lectionary reading picks up today as Paul and Silas push further into European territory to spread the gospel.

A demon-possessed and enslaved girl follows them. She’s learned to channel the demon into telling people’s fortunes. Her owners traffic her *gift* as a form of entertainment,

something like Tarot cards or tea leaves. This girl is doubly-trapped. First by a kind of demon and then by people who profit from her misfortune. The girl/demon recognizes the divine spirit accompanying Paul and Silas. She/it pesters them, shouts at them. Paul frees the girl from her demon.

This miracle harkens back to Jesus' inaugural sermon "to free the captives" and heal the afflicted. Luke (4:4-16)

By casting out the demon, Paul also destroys her market-able talent. Her owners become enraged. Seeking justice, bring Paul and Silas before the magistrates screaming "these Jews, are disturbing our city and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe." (Acts 16:20-21)

Without a trial, they have Paul and Silas beaten and hauled to the innermost cell in the local prison. A jailer shackles their legs in iron cuffs.

Dear God, we approach this this ancient story with trepidation, send your spirit among us so we are startled with the enduring truth. Amen.

The Acts of the Apostles 16:25-39

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly 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.

²⁷ 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. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹ They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

³³ At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴ 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*.

³⁵ When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." ³⁶ 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." ³⁷ But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Romans, 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."

³⁸The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, ³⁹so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.

Fear creates prisons. Let's talk about three of ways this happens.

We put ourselves in prison because of our fear. Here are a few examples.

Jaten Dimsdale is an American singer-songwriter, known for blending genres including R&B, soul, country, and pop. This heavily tattooed artist needs to blink his eyes for us to see the words "tough" and "love" inked into his eyelids. He's adorned his body with images to deflect you from seeing who he is.

You'll not find Jaten Dimsdale's name soaring on the charts. He records and performs under the name "Teddy Swims". A childhood friend called him "Teddy" because he looks like a big bear. Swims (S-W-I-M-S) is an acronym of the phrase "someone who isn't me sometimes."

The fear of being compared to his idols in R&B, country, or soul music drives him to perform under a different name that literally means, "someone who isn't me sometimes". He is

afraid of falling short of what everyone expects from him. He is afraid of the judgements.

Teddy Swims isn't the only one.

Music icon, Beyonce musters the courage to get on stage by donning an alter ego she calls "Sasha Fierce".

Country music star Orville Peck literally wears a mask when he sings. At first Peck wore a mask to protect himself as an openly gay man. The country music industry has or had a reputation for hostility towards LGBTQ+. He refuses to answer questions about his masks since even publicly naming his fears makes him more vulnerable.

These artists know how much we fear someone who is not like us. In a vicious circle, they become self-imprisoned by their fear of us.

That brings us to the second way fear creates a prison. Only this is the kind of prison with walls and bars and chains as we read in today's scripture lesson.

When Paul and Silas free an enslaved girl from being demon-possessed, she loses her prime economic value. Rather than bring charges against Paul and Silas of essentially robbing their business, her owners complain that these men are Jews, political subversives, undermining Roman order, and a threat to the livelihood of other residents.

Can you hear the antisemitism and nationalism?

These owners swirl religion with economics and do what the powerful do to protect their vested interests: they incite fear of this “other”. Without anyone questioning Paul or Silas. Without testimony from witnesses. Without even asking Paul’s identity, they strip and torture the men. They send them to the most secure prison possible and shackle their feet with iron bindings. This ancient story tells of how a community let fear of the “outsider” drive them to imprison innocent men.

An earthquake frees Paul and Silas and all the other prisoners. But they don’t leave. An injustice has been done against them and they will not go quietly. More is at stake than their freedom. Paul was denied due process. Roman law prohibited any citizen of being abused or imprisoned without a trial. Even in the ancient of days, a fellow citizen, even if a foreigner, was entitled to due process. The remorse and apology of the magistrates confirm that Paul and Silas should not have endured humiliating imprisonment.

Perhaps the people felt threatened by Paul’s message of the good news of salvation. Paul was merely doing what Jesus sent him to do.

Some people do bad and horrible things. This is an irrefutable fact. And some people go to prison. This too is irrefutable. But there is often no direct connection between these two

facts. Prisons and prisoners say more about societies, their fears that persist than about those who linger behind bars. This leads us to a third way fear creates prisons. Consider the jailer. Even though he does not have a name, this is a man first and foremost. He is accountable to and responsible for his family. His work for the Roman government has turned him into merely a cog in the wheel of the empire.

When the earthquake unlocks the doors, he imagines those prisoners he is paid to guard have fled. He fears the retribution headed his way and is likely filled with shame at witnessing the divine intervention. What he was doing to his fellow human beings was wrong and yet he will be judged guilty for not enforcing that wrong well enough. This is another vicious spiral.

Paul approaches this jailer with compassion, persuading him to not follow through on a suicide attempt.

The jailer asks, “what must I do to be saved?” It’s a compelling question laced throughout the New Testament books. A more faithful rendering of the jailer’s plea is “Can you help me get out of this mess?”

The jailer witnessed Paul and Silas, bound with iron to the walls of the innermost jail cell, and yet they are singing. Wrongly imprisoned and accused of subverting the status quo, Paul and Silas find joy in worshiping God. Even when freed,

they remain without a care for again being imprisoned or fear of the jailer or their accusers.

The jailer wants what they have – that inner security – and asks, “can you help me get out of this mess?”

Paul says simply “believe in the Lord Jesus.”

In the face of this complex tangle, that seems terribly inadequate. Why not tell him to get another job? Why not offer some self-improvement program? Or, even invite him to escape this town by joining them?

To trust in the truth of Lord Jesus means that we give up efforts to save ourselves and solve our problems. Isn't self-determination and the attempts to manipulate others towards our economic advantage what got them into these prisons in the first place?

In the modern day context, the commerce of imprisoning people – disproportionately brown and black bodies – generates big profits. Mass incarceration becomes possible by the fear mongering that portrays as a criminal anyone who is poor, illiterate, or with brown or black skin. And it profits by a desire to protect our status quo from disruption by those who we see as “other.”

A research arm of the University of Chicago's School of Public Policy, The Crime Lab, exposed the direct connection in the

State of Illinois between poverty and illiteracy and the likelihood of imprisonment. By measuring the reading skills of 3rd graders in under privileged neighborhoods, where crime and illiteracy are highest, the penal system could estimate the expected capacity to house inmates when those same kids turned eighteen.

Most often these are for-profit prisons.

It should feel like an earthquake to learn that fear leads us to imprison people, whose family of origin – the color of their skin and access to education – differs from us. It feels like an intractable mess at times. We've become so inured to the climate of fear that we cannot imagine another way.

Trusting in Jesus becomes the first step. Trusting in Jesus is necessary in every step along the way. We do this one-by-one and as a fellowship of believers.

We, the church, are called to set the prisoners free, which includes those who become self-imprisoned by fear. We settle their anxiety by assuring them of their belovedness and by silencing their bullies.

We, the church, are called to set free all those unjustly confined from a constructed fear of being the “other,” someone who is painted as a thief who will rob us of our income and disrupt our community. Recall Jesus' words that when we see the prisoner, we see him first.

We, the church, are called to set free those who work as a cog in the political wheel of the powerful. We need to call out the injustice of profiting from prisons rather than investing in human lives.

The church's task is to be the ark of deliverance. Trusting in Jesus becomes the first and necessary step. We do this one-by-one and as a fellowship of believers.

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