

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 16:16-34

June 2, 2019

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

SAVED AND FREE TO SERVE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The road to the prison was straight, long, and dark, especially on a cold winter night. In the distance the bright prison lights carved out a bright island in the inky black night. From the prison parking lot, the 7,500 acres of fields stretched out in all directions. The multiple rows of fences topped with barbed wire provided a formidable defense against escape attempts. Besides, if someone did somehow make it over the fences, where would he go? There was no place to hide.

The first time I visited Caledonia State Prison Farm in Tillery, Halifax County, North Carolina, I was intimidated and nervous, to say the least. I felt like I was in a Hollywood movie as I stood at the base of the guard tower and called up to announce my presence. The watchman lowered a basket on a rope, I put my drivers license in the basket, and he hauled it up again. In a few minutes, the basket dropped down, I retrieved my license, the first gate slowly swung open, and I began my journey through many gates and barred doors to get inside the medium security prison.

For six years on many Monday nights, I visited inmates at Caledonia as part of a prison ministry Bible study sponsored by First Presbyterian Church in Roanoke Rapids, NC. Even after six years of visits, I never quite got used to the sound of the barred gate clanging shut behind me after I had been cleared to go upstairs. A guard would accompany me to a small meeting room in the innermost part of the prison on the second floor. I sat and waited for the prisoners to arrive so we could begin our worship and Bible study.

Caledonia Prison is a medium security facility which is mostly for men serving life sentences. In six years, I never once asked an inmate what he had done to deserve being in Caledonia, although sometimes they would share that information in our group talks. The men got no special treatment for attending Bible study. They didn't get credit for good behavior. They didn't get time shaved off their sentences. They weren't required to be there. As far as I could tell, just about everyone who attended **wanted** to be there.

My favorite part of each Monday night visit was when we would sing. One man in the group could really play the piano. He would crank up some good old gospel hymns and the group would join in, complete with harmonies. To this day, the singing in Caledonia Prison is the most joyful and animated singing I've ever been part of.

I was never really afraid when I was "in prison." However, there was one Monday night when I stood at the locked gate and called out to the guard [it was something like "back gate"] and the guard didn't come and didn't come and didn't come. Finally, he arrived, unlocked the gate with his ring of keys, and let me through. When he closed the gate, he kind of chuckled and asked, "Were you getting a little nervous?"

It would have taken quite a strong tremor in Halifax County to knock down Caledonia's walls and loosen the locks and open the doors. If that had ever happened, it's hard to imagine the 1,038 prisoners staying put in their cells. During the horrific earthquake of 2010 that decimated Haiti, almost all of the 4,000 inmates in the main prison in Port-au-Prince escaped. A spokesman for the International Red Cross said, "They obviously took advantage of this disaster." Reporting from the prison, Anderson Cooper said, "We heard the prison was destroyed. We didn't realize we'd find the door wide open."¹

A similar event happened last October in Indonesia following an earthquake and tsunami. Three different prison facilities were badly damaged and 1,200 prisoners escaped. When floodwaters came up in the prison yard, the inmates apparently panicked and fled through the collapsed walls. A Ministry of Justice official said, "I'm sure they escaped because they feared they would be affected by the earthquake. This is for sure a matter of life and death for the prisoners."²

It was for sure a matter of life and death in that Philippian prison where Paul and Silas found themselves, but on a much deeper and more important level. And the matter of life and death wasn't primarily for Paul and Silas. They had already received the promise of new life and eternal life in Jesus Christ. No, it was a matter of life and death for the slave-girl, her masters, the chief magistrates, the unruly mob, the other prisoners, and, last but not least, the jailer himself.

Who is really free in this story? And who is still bound? At first glance, the major players seem to be free – the girl's owners, the chief magistrates, and the jailer. After all, they have all the power and call the shots. And you can't get much more bound than being flogged, then shackled in leg stocks in the innermost cell of a Roman prison. Don't forget the other prisoners. And what about the slave-girl, captured by a spirit of divination and taken advantage of by her money-hungry owners?

However, as the story progresses, we find out once again that God's good news turns the world upside down. As William Willimon says in his commentary, this story shows us that "there is freedom and then there is freedom. If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."³ How else can we explain how Paul and Silas act when the earthquake tears down the prison walls and flings open the prison doors? And not only the two of them, but all the rest of the prisoners with them?

The owners of the slave-girl were bound to their pocketbooks. Their desire for making money led them to abuse the girl's condition. When she was freed in the name of Jesus Christ, were they compassionate and rejoicing? Not at all, "but when they saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities." (Acts 16:19)

The authorities were bound to their system and their customs. They were blind to God's power on display before them. So they "stripped [Paul and Silas] of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. . . [and] they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely." (Acts 16:22-23)

The jailer was bound to an unjust system that threw innocent people in jail for doing good and "disturbing the city." Later in the story, on the next morning, we find

out that Paul is a Roman citizen, and the magistrates were afraid (because you don't treat Roman citizens by throwing them into the innermost cell without due process). The jailer was bound to a system that demanded he put the innocent in the innermost cell and fasten their feet in stocks. The jailer was bound to a system that was so oppressive he started to kill himself rather than face the wrath of his superiors if the prisoners had escaped (as we have seen from the Haiti and Indonesia stories, a legitimate concern on the jailer's part).

But the slave-girl and the jailer don't stay bound to the spirit and the system. In the name of Jesus Christ, the slave-girl was saved from the spirit of divination and (we hope) from further exploitation by her masters. In the name of Jesus Christ, the jailer was saved (and his whole household) from the system that crushed its opponents. We know what the jailer was saved **from**, but saved for **what**?

In late 1849, the Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky faced a military firing squad, along with five other men who had been sentenced as revolutionaries. As Dostoyevsky waited for his turn before the guns, a messenger arrived with a stay of execution from the czar himself. The original sentence of hard labor was reimposed. Such a last-minute deliverance sounds wonderful, but apparently the czar used such dramatic events as a terror tool.

Dostoyevsky was taken back to his cell. This is how he described his reaction to the unexpected news from the czar: "I cannot recall when I was ever as happy and suddenly was overcome with joy. I walked up and down my cell . . . and sang the whole time, sang at the top of my voice, so happy at being given back my life!" In a letter to his brother, he said, "Never has there seethed in me such an abundant and healthy kind of spiritual life as now. . . Now my life will change, I shall be born again in new form. . . Life is a gift. Life is happiness, every minute can be an eternity of happiness. . . Life is everywhere, life is in ourselves, not in the exterior."

Other than not being executed, Dostoyevsky's life didn't suddenly become problem free. He spent four years at hard labor in Siberia and then was a soldier in Mongolia. His wife and brother died in a two-year span, a magazine he had founded folded, and he went deeply into debt. Only later did he publish *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, for which he is so well known.⁴

Dostoyevsky's sheer joy in his prison cell – "sang at the top of my voice, so happy at being given back my life!" – describes what Paul and Silas experienced as "servants of the Most High God" and what the jailer experienced when he "believed on the Lord Jesus." The circumstances of their lives didn't necessarily change, but they were "born again in a new form." How else can we account for Paul and Silas standing in the ruins of the tumbled-down prison instead of fleeing? How else can we account for the jailer inviting them into his house when just a few hours before he had followed orders and "put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks"?

At the beginning of the story, the slave-girl, who was herself trapped and bound by the spirit and her masters, identifies Paul and Silas for who they really are – "slaves of the Most High God." That's why and how Paul and Silas were able to stay put when the open prison door beckoned with freedom. The Son had made them free, and they

were free indeed – free to pray and sing hymns and speak the Word of the Lord to the jailer and his whole household.

In turn, the jailer was free from the oppressive system that led him to chain Paul and Silas. He was saved and that freed him to wash their wounds and set food before them. Even more than that, “he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.” (Acts 16:34) That sounds a lot like singing hymns to God and singing at the top of your voice because you have been given back your life.

You hear the question often, especially in this part of the country – “Are you saved?” Unfortunately, that question comes with a lot of baggage. But, if you believe on the Lord Jesus, you **are** saved – saved from sin, saved from the oppressive systems that bind you, saved from the self-centeredness that only looks after your personal needs and wants, saved from putting your trust in and giving your loyalty to rulers or leaders or ways of doing things that exploit other people and prop up your own power and privilege at their expense.

If you believe on the Lord Jesus, you **are** saved – saved to serve others, saved to show in your life and actions what a difference Jesus Christ makes in your life, saved to be set free so you can bind yourself to Jesus Christ as Lord, saved so you can be a servant of the Most High God.

That good news is enough to make you want to sing for joy at the top of your voice at being given back your life – the new life of service and joy and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: Lord, we pray to you now with hope. We have hope in the saving grace of Jesus Christ! We have hope because your Son is working in and through each of us! We have hope in your forgiveness! God, remind us of our hope, even in the midst of despair, heartbreak, and stressful situations. Thank you, Lord, for your love for us made real in Christ. May we embody Christ in all we do. Amen.

NOTES

¹Neil Katz, “Haiti Earthquake News: Main Prison Destroyed, 4,000 Prisoners Escape,” January 15, 2010 at www.cbsnews.com.

²“Sulawesi quake: Indonesia confirms multiple mass prison breaks in quake-tsunami zone,” October 1, 2018, updated October 5, 2018 at www.straitstimes.com.

³William Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), pp. 140-141.

⁴David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019), pp. 50-51. Information also taken from “Fyodor Dostoyevsky is sentenced to death,” Updated December 13, 2018, at www.history.com.

