

## **“Whistling in the Dark? Or Praying in the Dark?”**

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### **Scripture:**

#### **Acts 16:16-34 (NRSV)**

##### **Paul and Silas in Prison**

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.’ The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly 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. 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. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They answered, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ They

spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 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.

### **The Sermon:**

The book of Acts makes a really good read! They tell fascinating stories, with interesting characters, and lots of drama. and like any good book, you wonder what is gonna happen next.

Last week it was all about the woman Lydia, outside of Phillippi, being baptized and offering community hospitality to Paul and Silas.

This week, we have a slave girl, and a jailer. We have Paul and Silas getting beat up by the cops, and thrown in jail. We have an earthquake and a near suicide, a teaching, a baptism and a party.

Our story begins with a young woman who is being treated as property, is being used by others, is in bondage to people who abuse her...but this girl can truly see who Paul and Silas are. As she is a slave to the oracular powers of Apollo or Zeus, she realizes that Paul and Silas are “slaves to the Most High God”. They are all slaves...but she is oppressed by her gods, and sees that Paul and Silas are free and rejoicing. She can perhaps “offer salvation” through prophecy, but Paul and Silas offer salvation through Jesus.

Salvation: there are a lot of understandings wrapped up in that word. “Forgiveness of our sins” is well known and usually the first definition to be invoked.

Heck yeah; I want God to love me and forgive me, in spite of my brokenness. And I have come to realize that I am loved and I am accepted, with all my brokenness. God, in Jesus, isn't afraid to love me with all my crazy, and all my cruel, and all my stupid, and all my selfish.

And yeah, that love from God actually has helped me love myself in spite of my flaws, my brokenness, my sins. And that has helped me live fully, more powerfully, more joyfully.

But I **really** like the definition of salvation that is “well-being, wholeness, healing of the body and mind”. And another definition of salvation that I **really** like: “friendship with God”.

The girl receives healing and freedom, well-being through an end to her oppression.  
The jailer receives friendship with God and God's messengers, Paul and Silas.

Healing and freedom, well-being and friendship with God: these sound wonderful!

And into the darkness of the jail cell, in the darkest hour of the night...comes the singing of the friends of God.

Paul and Silas; beaten, jailed, in stocks in a dark hole in a dank prison...they sing as they pray.

Together they encourage one another with prayers; words of love of God and love of each other through God.

And they sing; filling their lungs with air and with hope. And the hopeless listen to them.

When I was a child, my Mom told me to "whistle in the dark" when I was scared of the dark. It helped to tame my fears of what might be there in the dark. She said she used to do it. My Mom could whistle, I never got past the basic "tweet, tweet". But I did it, too. I whistled in the dark. The dark was still dark, the unknown was still unknown, but the whistling helped, sorta!

But Mom also taught me to pray. When I was overwhelmed, when I was afraid, when I was at wit's end, she would encourage me to offer a simple little prayer. Like "Help! Please, help" or a simple heartfelt, "Thank you!".

And I prayed those prayers, a lot, too. And it helped.

And again, my Mom taught me to sing, sing, sing. We sang in the car (because we had no radio and we took some long road trips over the years of my Dad's career as an anthropologist studying culture change among the Native American tribes of the West!) we sang around the house, we sang around the campfire, we sang on the ski lifts!

I would sing on a swing going high, or on a bike going fast...for the sheer joy of it. And I would sing alone in the dark, scared and afraid. Maybe just under my breath; half song, half desperate prayer. It helped.

Paul and Silas knew what they were doing.  
To sing is to pray twice, St. Augustine has famously said.

Singing unites hearts and minds, calms and strengthens body and spirit. Singing with others, scientists have found, brings you into unity on a cellular level, with resonance between and among people!

They sang and prayed as they marched in Washington, in Selma.

They sang and prayed in Tahrir Square, at the beginning of the Arab Spring.

Singing is a human universal. So is prayer. Singing changes you. So does prayer.

Friends of God, sing. Friends of God, pray.

Let yourselves be changed by the blessing of praying, the joy of singing. Together, we can be uplifted and strengthened by prayer and by song, whether we are in the midst of civil disobedience, or prisoners of injustice, or simply trying to be brave to face another day.

Isn't that why we come together on Sunday? To Sing together? Praying together? We aren't in jail, in the dark, but if we were, it would help us if we were to sing together, to pray together.

There are forms of imprisonment that make us feel chained. Sing!

There are forms of darkness that discourage us. I encourage us to Sing!

Don't wait until you can do it perfectly. Don't hesitate because you don't read music, don't know all the words. Singing is blessing. Singing is praying.

Begin where you are.

Know yourself as one granted "salvation"; know yourself as a "friend of God".

That is a grand reason to sing!