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"Singing in the City"

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

7th Sunday of Easter
May 16, 2010
Acts 16:16–34; Ps. 97; Lk. 24:44–49; Jn. 17:20–26

Gracious God, in a world with so many voices, people shouting at each other, talking past each other, we long to hear a word that you had called us to live together as brothers and sisters. Speak that word to us again, that your Word may be a light to our path and that you may lead us in the way that you would have us go. All this we pray in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

Do you think it was strange that Paul and Silas were singing hymns in prison at midnight? I find that a little weird. Paul and Silas are not unique as Christians being thrown in jail. Christians have been persecuted from the very beginning. Jesus himself was treated as a criminal, beaten and crucified. Even before him, there was Jeremiah in jail, and later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his letters and papers from prison in Germany, and Martin Luther King wrote a letter from a jail in Birmingham.

I was thinking about this early in my ministry when I was a pastor in Tallahassee, Florida. At the time, I was working in prison ministry. I had the idea that it might be good if I spent a night in jail just to find out what it was like so that when I read these letters or when I visited people in jail, I'd know something of what they were going through. I got permission from the local sheriff to come and check it out. When I got in the jail and I heard that big, strong door clang shut as they locked someone in a cell, I lost my nerve. I thought, "Unless I have to, there is no way I will spend time behind those bars."

What were they singing? You heard the story that Homer read for us: they'd been beaten, locked up, and chained. Were they singing a favorite hymn? The text doesn't tell us. That singing part bothers me also because those of you who know me very well know that I am musically challenged. I was the Associate Pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Tallahassee, working with Rev. P.C. Enniss and his wife, Jane, who are with us this morning. Our sermons and worship services were broadcast on the local station every Sunday. One day, I got a message that the station manager wanted to talk to me about the broadcast. I thought, "Yes! I have been discovered! It will not be long until I am the Voice of Protestantism." I returned his call. He said he was calling about the broadcast. I said, "Yes?" And then he said something rather strange: "Nobody has called complaining about your sermons." I thought, "Well, no, they've probably been talking about how good they are." But he continued on, saying, "We have received some complaints from people who have asked if I would call and ask you when you are singing a hymn, would you please stand back from the microphone?"

How Paul and Silas happened to be in jail was interesting. They were Jews, followers of Jesus Christ, who, they had come to believe, was the promised Messiah, the Son of God. They were Christians, although they probably were not called that yet. They had traveled from Palestine by ship and by foot, west and then north, all the way into Europe, north of Greece, to Philippi, a thriving city on the coast of Macedonia. They were there because they believed God wanted them to be there, to be witnesses to this Jesus, who was crucified and raised, how he had taught and healed, how he himself had been tortured and executed, and how he had risen from the grave and was alive and present in our world, and how the world was now a new place because of his risen presence. The kingdom of God, the reign of God, was now no longer a dim hope off in the horizon somewhere out in the future, but it was a present reality, here and now.

A wealthy woman by the name of Lydia heard the story and believed it and was baptized, and she took Paul and Silas into her home. But it wasn't long until the real trouble began. There was a girl, a slave girl actually, who everybody knew was different, peculiar. Some said she had an evil spirit, a demon; today, we would say she was mentally ill. She behaved oddly, unpredictably, and did outrageous things.

Sometimes they were amusing, sometimes they were not. She was like a character in the circus; she was following Paul and Silas around, shouting out about them. “These men are slaves of the Most High God!” It was annoying, a real problem. Everywhere they went, every time they tried to start a conversation, there she was, interrupting, shouting. So finally, one day, Paul had had enough and he shouted back, “Shut up! Stop it! In the name of Jesus Christ, whoever you are—whatever it is, causing her to do this—come out and go away.” And the stunned girl stopped babbling and shouting and was quiet, still, serene; a smile came over her face. Her demon was gone. Whatever had possessed her, driving her, enslaving her, was gone. And so also was her bizarre behavior, her craziness, her entertainment value. The demon was gone, but so was the owner’s profit.

The owners became angry. They dragged Paul and Silas to the marketplace, to the magistrate. “These men are disturbing our city! Besides they are Jews, not Macedonians. They’re outsiders, they’re undocumented aliens. Who let them into our community? They aren’t our people!” Sound familiar? The crowd is whipped into a fury and starts to attack Paul and Silas, so as much for their own protection as for punishment, the magistrate orders them beaten and thrown in jail. And that is how they came to be singing hymns at midnight in the darkness of a cell.

James Carroll, who was a prominent Roman Catholic scholar and priest, wrote the foreword to William Sloane Coffin’s book, *Credo*. He tells about a time when he was imprisoned in Washington, DC. He was arrested for trespassing at the U.S. Capitol. He was there in 1972 with some others to protest the Vietnam War. In the cell block, in separate cells, were another two dozen prisoners who were part of this antiwar demonstration.

Carroll remembers how eerily quiet it was and dark, how he had been raised and educated as a priest to respect authority, and how disoriented he felt—and alone and afraid—in jail.

He recalls:

> Even now you have no idea what prompted him to do so, but at some point in that night, the man in the next cell began to sing, softly at

> first. His resolute baritone gradually filled the air as he moved easily into the lyric of what you soon recognized as Handel's *Messiah:* "Comfort, comfort, ye my people." And then you recognized the voice as that of William Sloane Coffin, the most familiar voice in the group…. Coffin sang as if he were alone on earth, and the old words rose through the dark as if Isaiah himself had returned to speak for you to God—to speak for God to you. Others in the cell block soon joined their voices to Coffin's—"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light."[1]

Singing in the face of adversity, making a joyful noise to the Lord is not something new or strange. My mother used to whistle whenever there was a crisis in our family. She would not just whistle anything. She would whistle one of the familiar hymns of the church. It calmed us down. It put our lives in perspective. It said: "God is in charge." She was doing that as a good Reformed Christian. John Calvin believed that in Jesus Christ, the reign of God has already begun in earnest. He lives and rules in political and economic structures, in jails, in homes, in slums, in suburbs.

That's what the Ascension, which we celebrated this week, was about. The authority belongs to Jesus, so therefore, we could live our lives without fear.

You know what Paul and Silas did: they used their faith and put it in action in a way that affected the economic system of those owners. Those owners had a vested interest in that young girl and her performance. Paul and Silas threatened her vested interest and therefore had to be dealt with. But in the middle of the night, God put a song in their hearts—a song that lifted them up and enabled them to continue to bear witness to a love that is more powerful than hate or greed or economic interests—the love of God made known in Jesus Christ.

[1] James Carroll, Foreword, *Credo,* by William Sloane Coffin, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, pp. ix–x.

Pauli Murray, the first African-American woman ordained as an Episcopal priest who grew up in Durham, North Carolina—you see her picture on the wall on Foster Street—she had a great line I love:

"Hope is a song in a weary throat."[2]

Right before his ascension, Jesus told his disciples to stay in the city, and they would be empowered.

This congregation, the First Presbyterian Church of Durham, has been on this corner for 140 years, and we have been singing the Lord's song in good times and in hard times. This church was founded six years after the Civil War. It has been through depressions, and we have continued to make a joyful noise to the Lord. The economic crisis is stretching us at the moment. But we sing on. We sing on, and we try to lift up a prophetic voice about things like what is too much interest to charge those who have too little. We have renovated this space, and we are celebrating the fact that our debt has been paid so the music can be heard, so that hope can be a song in a weary throat so that even in the midnights of our lives, we can make a joyful noise to the Lord.

Mark Higgins, a friend of FPC and an owner of Hall-Wynne Funeral Service, called me last week. He was on his way to Burlington to speak to a gathering of Presbyterians. He said, "Joe, I remember a verse from a hymn you used to quote all the time, and you said it was one of your favorite verses. I think it was from *For All the Saints*." I said, "Mark, you're right. The line was this:

> And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
> Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
> And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
> Alleluia! Alleluia!"[3]

[2] Pauli Murray, *Dark Testament and other poems*, Norwalk, CT: Silvermine, 1970, p. 22.

[3] William Walsham How, "For All the Saints," *The Presbyterian Hymnal (*Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 526.

I have a vision that it might have been something like those words that Paul and Silas were singing on that midnight. We don't know what they were singing in prison. Or maybe it was these words:

> Where cross the crowded ways of life,
> Where sound the cries of race and clan,
> Above the noise of selfish strife,
> We hear Thy voice, O Son of Man.[4]

Better still—let's sing it together. It is #408 in your hymnal. Let us make a joyful noise to the Lord.

[4] Frank Mason North, "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life," *The Presbyterian Hymnal (*Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 408.