

EPIPHANY 1 – 2009

Acts 16: 25 - 34

What a wild day these verses describe. Keep in mind that over it all is God, who knows what He is doing.

Our verses begin with the Apostle Paul and fellow missionary Silas in prison. Before they got there they had been attacked, lied about, publicly beaten with rods, and in every way treated as law-breakers completely without benefit of trial. Because of what he had been told, the man in charge of securing the prisoners had placed Paul and Silas into an inner cell and their feet in stocks. Because of the manner in which that was done, it was a form of torture. It is hard for us even to imagine how physically awful they felt. But the missionaries' attitude is almost startling and a considerable amount of rejoicing goes on in these verses.

On the basis of these verses in Acts 16, may we all

Rejoice in the Gospel!

- 1 The Gospel taught, and
- 2 The Gospel in Baptism
- 3 because of what the Gospel is and does.

The two men were in terrible pain and circumstances. They were where they were totally unjustly. Other people's utter and cold disregard for a slave girl, on the one hand, and their greed, on the other hand, was behind what had happened to Paul and Silas. Isn't it easy to imagine that they could have been 'eaten up' by anger and resentment or by self-pity or by fear or by some sort of depression, or could have become bitter and unwilling to serve the Lord anymore, or by a mix of these kinds of things?

Luke gives no such indications and no sooner does the jailer settle in for what he thought would be a routine evening and night, as routine as a prison can be, than prayer and singing and all kinds of worship sounded forth from that jail cell. And they were not singing sad songs.

Not only the jailer, but all of the other prisoners listened. Words like 'God', 'Jesus', 'Savior', 'thank', 'forgive' and the like were heard often. Such words had not been heard in that place before!

Suddenly, the prison's foundation was jarred hard. The whole thing lasted only a few seconds but in that time every prison cell door popped open, every chain dropped off the prisoners. It appears that things elsewhere in Philippi were not much affected. Certainly the jailer's house was still in one piece. Things seemed to be running normally in the city the next morning. Strange! Stranger, all the prisoners stayed put.

The jailer certainly didn't think they would stay. So certain was he that they had all taken off, he, in sudden despair, came this close to doing himself in, and would have, if it had not been for Paul yelling out to him not to hurt himself since everyone was still present.

And, here is where the story really gets interesting. That jailer had heard about Jesus that evening. He saw Jesus had made Paul and Silas so different, so calm, so okay. He knew they had something he did not have and he knew, having come so close to death, he needed what they had. He wanted to be saved, rescued! Their worship clearly showed sure confidence of salvation with Jesus. How could he be saved like that?

Paul, then and there, told the jailer how. It was all about Jesus. Jesus was the Savior. Rescue from death and guilt was in Jesus. Trust in, rely on, Jesus! With Jesus the jailer would be saved. "And," Paul added, "Jesus is for your whole family."

Paul did not know the jailer's family from Adam, hardly knew the jailer. But because Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, Paul knew Jesus and His rescue from sin, built, death, the devil, and hell was there for the jailer and his family, too.

Paul and Silas told not only the jailer but soon got to tell the jailer's whole family. They spoke the Word of the Lord to them. The Holy Spirit provided God's power for salvation in that Gospel and used it to create trust in the Savior, their Savior, in the jailer and his family.

What if there were very young children in that family? Surely they would not be able to grasp Apostolic preaching, would they? Don't be so sure. The Gospel is no ordinary Word. It is God's Word. In fact, the Gospel is filled with God, filled with the Father who sent Jesus, the Father who, by His son, makes people His family, His children, filled with the Holy Spirit who powerfully works in the Gospel to bring about that new birth and re-creation in Jesus (God's) image. New birth brings new thinking, new attitudes, new words, new action. Even this we see in how the jailer and his family suddenly cared about Paul and Silas, tended to their wounds, provided a meal, and all with great eagerness and joy. Suddenly they just thought the world of these two men who had brought Jesus and forgiveness to them, and life by telling them this Good News.

And they were baptized immediately. How did they know about Baptism? Paul and Silas told them. Paul himself had been told years earlier, by a man named Ananias, "Be baptized and wash your sins away!" Paul says we died, rise, and live new in Christ by Baptism. Paul says, "All of you who were baptized into Christ are clothed with Christ."

Today we saw how Jesus put Himself into Baptism and how the Father and the Spirit, connected to Jesus, also entered into Baptism, so that God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – gives Himself along with every spiritual blessing, especially forgiveness of all sin, in Baptism, by faith in this Good News. And Baptism certainly offers all this also to children, no matter how young, for Peter specifically says, "Be baptized...for the forgiveness of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children."

This is why the jailer and his family were so filled with joy, and why Paul and Silas were happy even when yet in that jail cell hurting, because the Gospel assures everyone of forgiveness, because it joins one with God and gives sure hope for the future, even for eternity, because it gives us new birth into a new self for new living, ending in eternal life.

This is your joy because of this Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Tell this Gospel so that others also may rejoice! Amen.