

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* prisoners exercise by pacing the yard at Shawshank Prison, making plans for what they will do once they are released, and even scheming about how to escape. One of the older prisoners, a man named Brooks, is released after spending most of his life behind bars. You'd think that after a life of imprisonment, he'd look forward to freedom. Instead there is feared anxiety about whether he can make it in such a different kind of world. After trying his best to make it on the outside, he carves his name into a beam in the boarding house where he is staying and then sadly takes his own life, hanging himself from the same beam. He had become so accustomed to captivity that the free world became too much for him to bear.

In Acts, there is a story that is full of surprising contradictions. Contradictions between freedom and imprisonment. First, we meet someone whose freedom is compromised: a slave girl. This girl may be free to follow Paul and Silas around, but in truth she is not free at all. In fact, she is doubly enslaved. She is bound by the evil spirit that inhabits her and she is taken advantage of by the slave owners who make money through her fortune telling. She is calling Paul and Silas slaves of the Most High God for she knows slavery well, and declaring that they are proclaiming salvation. Paul frees her of her evil spirit, more out of annoyance than compassion, and promptly finds himself immediately in trouble with her owners, who are too much slaves to their own financial gain to appreciate her newfound emancipation.

So, what do Paul and Silas get for their generosity in freeing the girl? They are dragged to the authorities, attacked by the crowd, stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison - a bad day at the office, to say the least. So what do they do once they are in prison? At midnight they are still praying and singing hymns to God while the other prisoners listen incredulously. Their bodies may be in chains, but their spirits are free to worship.

Then an earthquake remedies the problem with the chains. The visible manifestation of God's power shakes the foundations, not only of the prison, but of the earthly powers as well. Nothing can keep his servants locked up forever, and Paul and Silas are free to go. The jailer, on the other hand, while he seems to be a free man, is so enslaved to his authorities that he is about to attempt suicide rather than face what his superiors will do to him if he has lost his prisoners. Paul and Silas reassure him that they are still there, and he ironically does what he was afraid the earthquake had done - he liberates them from prison and brings them out to his own home, where he now becomes a joyful follower of Jesus himself. After washing the physical wounds of his prisoners, he is washed in the waters of baptism, and he and his whole household become believers in Jesus.

This jailer and his entire newly baptized household - mentioned here again and assumed to include adults, slaves, and children- are rejoicing in their new faith as the story ends, despite the problem of the magistrates punishing him for having to let such high profile prisoners to go free. This is a great story of reversals as we see first-hand how God's vision for us tends to turn the world as we know it upside down. Everyone whom we assume to be free (the jailer, the magistrates, the owners of the slave girl) is really in bondage, and everyone whom we assume to be enslaved (Paul, Silas, and the slave girl) has been freed.

Having the key to lock someone up doesn't make you a free person. Being on the inside of prison bars doesn't necessarily mean you aren't free. The determiner of freedom is so available, so accessible, so immediate, that we don't have to wait for a key to unlock it or an earthquake to experience it. "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

As Christians in the United Methodist tradition, we pledged at our baptism to accept the freedom and power that God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. There is so much evil and injustice in this world that we have our hands full. Yet we have confessed Jesus Christ as our Savior, put our whole trust in his grace and we have promised to serve him as our Lord and Savior in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races.

Like Paul and Silas, we need God's help to get through it all. When we try to do it on our own, we just mess everything up. But when we trust in God's grace, the going gets easier.

I remember back when I was a teenager working in the concession stands at the Grand Ole Opry House at Opryland USA in Nashville, Dressing room #1 backstage, the dressing room of the King of Country Music, Mr Roy Acuff, had a sign on the door. That sign said, "A'int nothing gonna come up today that me and the good Lord can't handle." Now that saying is in stark contrast to what I have heard others say that "God won't give me more that I can handle" because, well, God gives us more that we can handle just about every day. But God calls us to turn our troubles over to God. Because God will take those troubles in hand and bring us through the troubles and back into life. Just like he did with Paul and Silas in that jail cell.

Paul and Silas had a deep faith in God. They depended upon God to keep his promises to them. And God did just that. In the process, the jailer and his entire household, and perhaps the other prisoners in that prison were converted to the faith, baptized and became believers in the truth that Jesus is Lord and Savior to the whole world.

Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.