

DCCCP 5/29/22 Memorial Day Sunday
7th Sunday of Easter - Sunday before Pentecost

A Transformed Living Sacrifice

Acts 16:16-40

16 One day as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a female slave who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. 17 While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." 18 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.

19 But when her owners saw that their hopes of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. 20 When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men, these Jews, are disturbing our city 21 and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe." 22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23 After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely.

24 Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 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. 27 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. 28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34 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. 35 When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." 36 The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace." 37 But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."

38 The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. 39 They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. 40 After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them.

The Word of the Lord

Reflecting on this series of scenes, what would you want me to use as the foundational point of scripture today. What would you have me preach?

There's the story of the girl possessed by an unholy spirit who follows Paul and team until Paul gets annoyed with her ranting.

There's the story of lost economic power, a mock trial, a beating and then being thrown in a local jail

There's the story of worship at midnight, an earthquake that sets prisoners free

There's the story of the jailer about to take his own life when his prisoners are gone

And there's the story of the jailer seeking salvation and the conversion and baptism of his entire family.

Maybe all these stories together mean something more.

Paul's story is a bit of an infinite rabbit hole. You really never know where to start or end because so much of what he did was connected to so much of what he continued to do. He was the evangelist to the Gentile world. This is his whole intent in his 2nd missionary journey - to be led by the Holy Spirit and spread the story of Jesus. He had never been to any of these areas he was traveling into.

This is Luke, the writer of Acts, recording the story.

6 They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; 8 so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

The Conversion of Lydia

11 We therefore set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. 13 On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. 14 A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. 15 When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

And then we come to our story today.

And there's a lot going on here.

This story starts with the decision to go to a "place of prayer". This is not just any place of prayer. It should be noted that it doesn't say they are headed for a synagogue. Why not? Well that would be because a synagogue cannot be formed because there are insufficient Jewish men in the town of Philippi to form a Jewish synagogue. So instead they go to a place by the river.

The place by the river is chosen because it is a common place that harkens to the Israelites a time 600 years earlier when they would pray and sing by a river in Babylon, in exile, as an

incomplete people sitting in an incomplete place but remembering God. In this place of prayer Paul and Silas meet a woman called Lydia. She's praying by the river with maybe a dozen other women. Some Greek like she was, some Hebrew, none in a synagogue or a church but all seeking God in worship. Lydia starts our story and she ends it today.

In the midst of the story is this charge by a slave girl's holders that Paul and Silas are teaching something Romans aren't supposed to hear, a trumped up charge. They take them to the authorities in the center of the marketplace and make a spectacle of them. They play to the crowd in the city try to give them what they're itching ears want to hear. There is an enemy within their midst, they say. And in the end they give them a beating and commit them to jail. Deep in a local jail.

This is truly a story of liberation. A woman is liberated from a demon within her, Paul and Silas are liberated from a prison, a jailer is liberated from his sin as is his family. We do not know what happens to the jailer and his family afterward. There may be a story out there that says he became a mighty warrior for the church. Maybe not.

But we do know that Paul and Silas go to the river to a place of prayer and singing and instead they continue their Sabbath prayer and singing in a prison where other prisoners are blessed with the worship these evangelists engage in.

A baptism is given first by the jailer to Paul and Silas and their wounds and then in return by Paul and Silas to the jailer and to his family freeing them of their human wounds, of their sin. Bread is broken and praises are given. The story is not really a story of a beating and captivity, it's a story of a worship service and of a time when the Holy Spirit brings freedom to all who are captive; no matter what their captivity looks like.

The jailer asks what must I do to be saved. A personal question requiring a personal answer. What are we saved from when we ask the same? Are we saved from our enemy, are we saved from poverty, from abuse, from addiction, from sin?

This whole story is one of a need of salvation - a need for protection from harm, for protection from what mess you have gotten yourself into, an escape from bonds that hold you. It's a story of how God shows up.

What happened because this story happened? What happened to all the other prisoners? How were their lives changed? Did they go free also?

In our opening sentences is today, from Romans 12 the apostle Paul tells us to be transformed and transformation is the point of all of these stories together today.

Paul is transformed as a living sacrifice by Jesus; the slave girl was transformed by Paul's admonition of the demonic spirit within her, and the jailer's life was transformed when he received new life in Christ and a new Christian church is born in Macedonia. It's a church that grows and thrives in Philippi.

It is thought that the group in prayer by the river, led by Lydia, formed the Philippians church in her home. Paul visited the church at Philippi again on his third missionary journey, and the believers there gave generously to support Paul's ministry and the needs of the church in

Jerusalem While Paul was imprisoned in Rome, this church, the church at Philippi sent Epaphroditus to minister to him. In return, Paul sent Timothy to the congregation at Philippi.¹

The church there gets a foothold when the jailer asks: What must I do to be saved? He was in trouble.

They say that there are no atheists in fox holes because when bombs fall and bullets fly soldiers reflect on God. Here, the jailer, for the same reason, asks Paul and Silas about salvation. He might be asking about human salvation, he might be asking about Jesus' salvation because of Paul's teaching, we don't know. He was a part of the Roman state apparatus, a military jailer who feels his life is over, to be taken from him in service to the Roman state.

We remember our military members who have died in service, tomorrow, Memorial Day. Memorial Day was established in 1868 after the Civil War to honor those who died in American wars. Memorial Day was originally called Decoration Day. After World War I, the day came to honor all those who had died in all U.S. wars, its name changed from Decoration Day to Memorial Day.² It is a day of memorial. It is a strange day of patriotism mixed with grief because it's a day set aside for those who gave the "ultimate sacrifice" but it's still a day of grief.

These have been some pretty hard weeks in our nation and Memorial Day will feel a little different tomorrow. Life is taxing enough if it's just the economy, just the pandemic, just the war in Ukraine, and just global warming in the face of a next hurricane season. That would be enough to consider but then there's a supermarket in Buffalo, and a school in Uvalde, Texas where innocents lost their lives.

I know the men and women killed in Buffalo just two weeks ago and the children and teachers killed in Texas just a few days ago did not "give the ultimate sacrifice" but instead, they were laid upon an altar of racism, of hatred, of a society seemingly bent on a war between the forces of good and evil.

While I am here I will preach about knowing God's grace, about believing in the Lord Jesus Christ and how that grace and that belief will change your life. But in a time like this, grace must be mingled with grief.

Paul's answer to the jailer ignored his personal individual circumstances from which he felt he needed to be saved. Paul didn't fix his jail problem. Instead he spoke the Gospel. He probably told the jailer's family what do you preach everywhere. He said I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. 39 Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin. He didn't promise them an easy life.

God is not really about fixing our worldly problems but totally about coming alongside us and living within us supporting our worldly problems. But sometimes it's a mystery.

¹ What is the History and Significance of the Church in Philippi? <https://www.gotquestions.org/church-in-Philippi.html> Accessed 5/28/22.

² Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/video/216652/Overview-why-we-celebrate-Memorial-Day>, accessed 5/19/22

The work of the Holy Spirit is unknown and unknowing. Paul tried to go to Asia but was denied, he tried to go to Bythnia but also wasn't allowed, so he instead has a vision and goes to Philippi and the church is born in Macedonia.

You know how this works, right?

You forget your keys and have to run back in the house and you don't get into an accident that just happened at the corner

You get delayed in a trip and then you turn left by mistake and are very late but new important opportunity arises

We need to find ways to be in touch with our grief, to find a time of healing and wholeness. Unresolved loss like we feel this week leaves fear inside us, a fear of more loss. Accumulated grief inside us stops us from changing, from seeing beyond the loss and fear. We become stuck in grief.

We need to find a path to touch our grief.

I guess we could all be a little disappointed in God.

What do we say about a God who fails to answer the question so many people ask? I hear it in the hospital all the time.

How can God let innocent people be harmed? Why doesn't God act to stop it from happening? Maybe God does and we just don't see it.

If 100,000 people pray fervently to stop the terror, to stop the violence, and it does not stop, what does that say about God?

But if just one prays to stop the fear and stop the violence just before he intends to perpetrate that violence and he stops, what does that say about God? What can we do to address the grief and then to address the hearts that need God?

We are to be transformed so that this will happen

You see, we keep asking God to be transformed and God keeps asking us to be transformed.

We pray: "Lord stop the madness" and God says I will bless you when you stop the madness.

Our Bible is clear that God's answer is already given to us. We are to protect those that are weak, it is given to us to keep evil and sin in the world from damaging the world and the people in it.

We can be transformed into the likeness that God would have us be when we stop asking God to do the work God has assigned us to do.

And that work starts with our choice to not be conformed to this world but to be transformed as a living sacrifice for God's purposes.

May it be so.

Amen.