

*Texts: Acts 16:16-34; Luke 6:18-19, 22-23*

*Subject: Paul and Silas in Prison*

*Theme: The Reason Why We Sing*

*Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2022; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven, and our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Music is powerful. Just the other day I had a song stuck in my head - something I had heard on the radio. I didn't know the name of the artist so when I finally got around to looking it up, I was devastated to learn it was a new song from Justin Bieber. That was not intentional. You know I love music, but that's not on my faves playlist. When you get a song stuck in your head, sometimes you just can't get it out. You might find yourself singing it all day long, even if you don't like the song. I have heard that the only solution to this issue is to listen to the song the whole way through, from beginning to end. We all love music in our house. Ivy has her Depeche Mode album collection. Lily loves new alternative music and shares her favorite songs with me. She knows music from every decade. Elise is learning Spanish at school and sings songs with the colors and animal names. Jacob loves to whistle. I wonder where he got that from. I've been teaching Isaac some guitar basics, and as we learn notes and chords and scales and octaves, I'm showing him the connections between music and math. Frequency, beats per measure, tone, tempo, are related to numbers. Isn't that amazing? The same principles that govern physics & chemistry, are found in music. *The whole creation sings*. Music is powerful. It can change our emotions. It can be a potent reminder of a specific moment or season of our lives. It transcends time and cultures. It brings us together. Here, our worship music gathers us, centers us, tells the story and proclaims

God's love and strength, glory and peace, protection and power to us. Music can do that.

Music is part of just about every sporting event, political rally, and protest march. It settles us down and riles us up. Funerals and weddings, birthday parties, and graduations, typically include music as part of the event. It unites our minds and bodies, and connects us with others around us.

Some of the earliest worship music used the words of the psalms, and as people gathered to become the early Christian church in the ancient world in homes, they sang together. Paul was invited into the home of a wealthy woman named Lydia in Macedonia, and spent time there, preaching and sharing the good news. This was not something the young Saul of Tarsus might have ever imagined himself doing, but the encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus had changed him deeply.

Paul and Silas were attracting a crowd, and were being followed by a slave girl. She is not wealthy. She has no name in the story, no agency. Her owners profited from her prophetic gifts. Typically slaves were not considered trustworthy or credible, but she must have been good at the service she provided. Remember in the Gospel where Peter is correctly accused of being a follower of Jesus by another slave girl, and Peter denies it. This slave girl tells the truth too, maybe *that's* what's annoying Paul on the way to the place of prayer. He doesn't want people to hear it from this young woman, on the chance that they will not believe her. Without the woman's consent or request, he casts out the spirit of prophecy in her, and ends her career as a prophet. What will she do now? How will she survive? We don't know. But her owners were not thrilled. When they found out they could no longer rely on this slave for income, they had Paul and

Silas severely beaten and locked up. Paul and Silas responded to this persecution by praying and singing hymns through the night. No one got annoyed with them, or tried to perform an exorcism. The other prisoners were listening. Even in the midst of their physical pain, they were singing. They were praying. Their voices were heard by God.

As our world changes rapidly, we might wonder if God hears our prayers. Some of us live with debilitating chronic pain. Others continue to grieve the loss of a spouse. Some live with anxiety, depression, or addiction. We are praying for you and with you. We are singing for you and with you on those days you cannot sing for yourself. Music can be healing. Music therapists in hospitals and rehab units soothe patients and families and help bring a relaxed environment. It was enslaved people who sang Christian hymns and began what we know as gospel music, as they were forced to perform backbreaking work in fields. So maybe it's not that surprising that Paul and Silas were singing in prison. Maybe they were trying to heal from their wounds, or encountering others in need of encouragement or peace. Maybe they didn't know what else to do but pray and sing.

In the prison cell, as they sang and prayed, the walls began to shake. The ground moved and the voices grew louder as the earth seemed to vibrate along with the power of the spirit between Paul and Silas and the other prisoners. The earth quaked, and it was "so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken" and the doors of the prison flung wide open. I don't think that's ever happened at a Bieber concert. The chains even fell off the feet of those who were shackled! Like Daniel in the Lions' den, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Paul and Silas knew the Word of God was in the place with them. They were not alone. They did not move, but waited. When the

jailer came and saw what happened, he nearly ended his life, for fear of the consequence of losing the prisoners. *Desperate people do desperate things.*

Every day it seems, I get to meet people in difficult and desperate situations. Every story is different, but might include homelessness, mental health episodes, or drug addiction. They've been beat up, thrown out, left behind, or separated from support systems. They are trying to figure out how to survive in a world that does not want them. They are trying to find a little rest, a little peace, a little freedom. Sometimes I get to pray with them and for them. Sometimes they pray for me. Always, when we get a chance to know each other, and I can share a little bit of Christ with them, there is a change. I haven't witnessed any earthquakes, but maybe a little bit of peace make a difference. Maybe hearing that we are loved beyond measure without regard for our worst moments helps the day not feel like a total loss. Maybe knowing that we are forgiven and welcomed into new life with Christ begins a process of liberation for hearts that have been locked away a long time.

Paul called out to the jailer to let him know the prisoners did not escape, but were all accounted for. They had saved his life by staying put. He fell down, and trembling, asked "What must I do to be saved?" This person knew that the singing and the prayers had power. These men he guarded were not common criminals, but men of God proclaiming good news. He would be forever changed, too.

In our churches, we work hard to create an environment where faith can be shared. We get frustrated with slow growth, or think we have to do it all the right way. We might covet the gifted staff of one church or the musical gifts of another, or the shiny building that others worship in. But to God, *anywhere* is a place for the word to work, for

a spiritual awakening to occur. Wherever we speak the word, sing hymns, share our stories of faith, gather together in prayer, and serve one another, God is with us.

No matter what we go through, or what the world does to tear us apart from community, from family, or from relationships, we have a God who draws near to us, who goes to the to the most difficult places, the prison cells, and hospital rooms, and every hell we create for ourselves and will not rest until the ground is shaken and we are liberated from our own private prisons. You are so loved, that God chose to recreate the world in Jesus Christ, to live and die for you, to promise you grace and life in his name here and with God even beyond this human existence. Jesus died and rose for you and for everyone who disagrees with you, for ones who have committed crimes, for those who have been cast aside, or beaten up, or who have struggled to find a job or a house or food. God sees you. God hears us when we sing. God knows what we need and hears the prayers of our hearts.

This good news breaks chains. Prayers and praising God shakes the earth. For those who feel restrained and for those who have been beaten this gospel must be proclaimed: Jesus Christ is Lord of all, and our liberation is in Christ alone. The powerful fall down trembling. We are all servants of the most high God and proclaim freedom to all in captivity. This is *the reason we sing*, to gather in all who are lost and suffering, who have no home, who are in fear, who struggle every single day, that they may come to know the all-encompassing love and grace of Jesus; that they would know the one who cares for creation like a mother, the mothering God who fights for her children fiercely, who gives us a new birth, a living hope, and abundant life. Share it! Shout it! Sing it! Make a joyful noise! Amen.