

“What Must YOU Do to be Saved?”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden for FUMC
Grand Junction, 4th Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2022

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Scripture Texts:

Acts 16:16-34 [NLT]

OPENING

On many levels, the passage today functions a lot like one of Jesus’ parables in the Gospels OR one of the many similarly parabolic stories in the Hebrew Bible, like those dealing with Daniel and his three friends or the prophet Jonah.

I mean, there are –

- ✓ the larger-than-life experiences that threaten those who are faithful to God and from which God delivers them;
- ✓ the characters that appear in the narrative and then disappear after their usefulness is “used up”;
- ✓ the plans of the wicked that are thwarted by divine intervention;
- ✓ the vindication of the faithful, even if their faithfulness is, so often like ours, “spotty”.

And one of the amazing things about parables that historical reporting has to work at is that the brush used by parables to paint scenes on a canvass that teach deep truths of God is much broader precisely because it is freed from the narrow historicity that fetters our imagination and limits our perception of and

ability to apply those deep truths to our lives. Said another way, parable engages us more deeply than history because it activates our imagination. It invites us to explore our own responses to the story and how we might be a character in it, too.

Yes, Luke writes as a self-described historian, but we can profit much more from his work if we let it speak to us on levels past the historical. A case in point is that of the slave girl that got under Paul’s skin in today’s reading.

SERMON THOUGHTS

How does your imagination respond when I tell you that in the Greek, Luke’s “spirit of divination” that possesses the girl, is πνεῦμα πύθωνα? πνεῦμα...“a spirit”. πύθωνα...that’s where we get our word “python” from! If I were to put this in my own words, I would say that the slave girl was possessed by the spirit of a snake – a serpent...

If I were versed in Greek mythology, I’d make the immediate connection to the god, Apollo, who killed the mythical Python at the city of Delphi and set up a temple there where he and his sister Artemis would be worshiped.

Or if I were versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, I’d think immediately of the serpent in the Garden of Eden who lured those first “earthlings”, as Eugene Peterson once called them, into the sin of pride that destroyed them.

Doesn’t it bother you that Paul reacts to the girl out of irritation, rather than compassion? She is possessed by a spirit that binds her to the world of the serpent.

Doesn't it bother you that Paul is annoyed at the spirit but appears to show no outrage at...[the girl's] being a slave – to it or to her masters?

Doesn't it bother you that Paul frees her from her possession but does nothing to free her from being a possession?

With our imagination freed to explore this character without whom there would be no night in jail for Paul and Silas, no miraculous delivery from imprisonment, no opportunity to save a lowly jailer and his household, no story at all...and then she just disappears as if she were merely a “prop”?... does it bother you to reflect on what kind of “πνεῦμα πύθωνα's” might possess you and me?

We don't call them “spirits” today because that sounds rather antiquated. But there's a whole book today called the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or DSM – now in its 5th edition – that might look a lot like a catalog of “πνεῦμα πύθωνα's”. And even if you and I don't suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder, we can still suffer from any of a number of unhealthy spiritual distractions and distortions from which we might call out with the jailer, “What must I do to be saved?”

SERMON THOUGHTS (Cont'd)

Which brings me to the second point of the sermon that really is the whole focus of the passage, I think, far beyond the miraculous deliverance from prison that we tend to focus on. And that is the jailer's question, “What must I do to be saved?”, and Paul's response.

More than an important question – we could say this is the key question that we all might ask along with the jailer: “What must I do to be saved?”

Paul's answer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved”, is not a quick, self-help strategy aimed “to fix all that ailed the jailer”. It is far more profound than that: It points the jailer to the truth that the Lord Jesus Christ is already actively working to save the jailer – and his household!

What the jailer needs to do is embrace this truth and actively align his life with this saving work of Christ. That is, when he decides to embark on a life-long journey of discipleship in Christ, he will be saved...not as a superficial, “name it and claim it” matter of theology that many Christian churches offer today and have offered for centuries, but as a gritty, hard-won reality whereby one passes from death to life, as Jesus promised (John 5:24), in the day-by-day outworking of our salvation with fear and trembling to which Paul referred (Phil. 2:12).

The Gospel, the good news, for us today is the same... What must YOU and I do to be saved? “Believe in the Lord Jesus”...commit ourselves to a life-long journey of discipleship in Christ, and we will be saved – because Christ is already actively working for our salvation!

CONCLUSION

There is no question that there is still a host of problems to be solved in this world, problems that we must apply ourselves to beyond a confession of faith that too often serves as an end point in our discipleship

rather than a beginning. We have much yet to do to bring release to the captives, justice for the oppressed, and peace for those ravaged by conflict. As important as these actions are, they are only a part of a higher, more important action that puts all of them in proper perspective, and that is the saving action of a sovereign God who enters our humanity to take it up and redeem it to its final destiny.

May it be so for you and for me – and for all those with whom we interact. Amen.

REFERENCES

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009)

- “[Paul] is annoyed at the spirit but appears to show no outrage at...[the girl’s] being a slave. He frees her *from* her possession but does nothing to free her *from being* a possession.” (p. 522, Theol. Persp., emph. added)
- “spirit of divination”, Luke 16:16 = πνεῦμα φύθωνα(!), “a spirit, a snake” (p. 523, Exeg. Persp., emph. added)
- An important question in this passage – we could say *the key question* that we all might ask along with the jailer – is, “What must I do to be saved?” (These sermon thoughts are based on those in pp. 524, 526, Theol. Persp.)