

Text: Acts 16: 16-34
Title: 'Round Midnight
Date: 04.22.18
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It was not my finest moment as a parent.

Zach was in eighth grade. We were in a record store in Albany, New York. He wanted to buy Blink-182's "Enema of the State." The cover art featured an adult film star snapping on a rubber glove. The music was harmless pop-punk....

Except,
at that moment,
to this dad,
it didn't feel harmless.

I wanted something better going into my son's mind, heart and soul. He was impressionable. He was being shaped by the media that he consumed. This made a mockery of fidelity and celebrated vulgarity. There was little here that pointed beyond itself ~ little that sustained or nourished life. If this was food it was a toxic swirl of cotton candy. I wanted something better for my son.

Zach glared at with me with a mix of cold rage and disbelief. I couldn't believe that I was having the same argument that I had with my father when I wanted to buy albums by America, the Eagles, and Simon and Garfunkel. It was just music. What did it matter? I love music. Zach's inheritance will be little more than a CD collection. And, great truths have been communicated with little more than a guitar, a bass, and a drum kit. In the words of Bruce Springsteen,

*We learned more from a three-minute record, baby
Than we ever learned in school*

And yet, here we were, father and son, toe to toe, arguing about music and its power to illumine and influence. I wanted something better for my son....

I don't remember who won that round.
I can't forget the look in my son's eyes.
I don't know what I'd do if faced again with the same question.

Music is a wonderful gift of God.

Every people, tribe, and culture sings. We create and are shaped by music. We make and are moved by music. We all have some manner of music in our hearts. It is a tired and tawdry marriage that doesn't know a love song. Nations have anthems that capture their hopes and histories. Colleges have fight songs, churches have hymns, and products have ditties. At the core of the human enterprise there is music.

Which is part of what makes this story of Paul and Silas so enduring and endearing. Strip away the drama of screaming demons, jailers going from suicide to baptism, earthquakes, jailbreaks, and exorcisms, and you have a musical.

Paul and Silas traveled from Palestine, by boat and by foot, north of Greece, into Europe, to Philippi in Macedonia. They traveled that distance to tell the story of the execution and resurrection of Jesus as the embodiment of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom had come to Jew and Gentile alike. God was alive and among them, even now. Believe and be baptized...

Lydia, a wealthy woman and worshipper of God, took Paul and Silas into her home in Philippi. That's where we pick up the story....

There was a slave who was being used for "entertainment at business conventions" (William Willimon). For a few shekels she'd read your palm or tell your fortune. She was a cash-cow for her handlers.

That woman began to follow Paul and Silas shouting that they came from the Most High God. Her shrieking disrupted their missionary flow. So, in a moment of exasperation, Paul whirled on the girl and cast out whatever spirit troubled her soul. In doing so, he also cast out whatever spirit allowed others to cash in on her troubled soul. Her entertainment value and her owner's profit margin were gone. And in turn, Paul and Silas were dragged from the marketplace to the magistrate and charged as outsiders and rabble rousers.

For some reason, even as they are stripped and beaten by the guards, Paul keeps quiet about his Roman citizenship. He could have spoken up in his own defense and changed the dynamic, but with bruised limbs and bloodied backs Paul and Silas are tossed into the cold stone holes of the inner cells.

You have to believe that they were a little discouraged.

They'd followed the movement of the Spirit and now their legs were locked in stocks. Solitary confinement is not the freedom of the gospel they anticipated. And yet 'round midnight they sing. The music echoes off the prison walls, bounces into the prison yard, and overflows to other prisoners. They sing at night in prison.

What would you sing at night in prison?
Blink-182 does not quickly come to mind.

Our text says that they sang "hymns." The Greek word here means something like "singing praise to God." So, my guess is that whether they were singing to fight off fear, or singing out of habit, or singing with great gusto and good humor, in the darkness of a prison cell they were singing what they knew by heart. In the words of Charles Spurgeon:

Any fool can sing in the day. It is easy to sing when we can read the notes by daylight; but the skillful singer is he who can sing when there is not a ray of light to read by. Songs in the night come only from God; they are not in the power of men.

Dear friends, we've been considering what it might mean to practice resurrection. As one who struggles to believe in the resurrection how can I live into its reality? What I can't always do with my brain maybe I can do with my body. So, we've been asking....

What does life look like in the light of resurrection morning?

What is a resurrection ethic?

How do we practice resurrection?

This morning let me suggest that the practice of resurrection calls forth a life of song. We join Paul and Silas in singing. Karth Barth puts it this way:

The Christian church sings. It is not a choral society. Its singing is not a concert. But from inner, material necessity it sings. Singing is the highest form of human expression....

In *The Return of Ansel Gibbs*, an early novel by Frederick Buechner, a seminary professor, Dr. Henry Kuykendall, exhorts a group of seminarians concerning the serious nature of their confession:

Every morning you should wake in your beds and ask yourself: 'Can I believe it all again today?' No, better still, don't ask it till after you've read, The New York Times, till after you've studied that daily record of the world's brokenness and corruption, which should always stand side by side with your Bible. Then ask yourself if you can believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ again for that particular day. If some morning the answer happens to really be 'Yes,' it should be a 'Yes' that's choked back with confession and tears and great laughter. Not a beatific smile, but the laughter of wonderful incredulity.

I think a robust faith looks at the world with clear eyes, with all its brokenness and corruption, and yet still holds out the hope of resurrection ~ that the Kingdom of God is alive and among us even now. Then, in that tension, may we still find reason to sing.

The song might be choked back with tears.

The song might seem irrational and incredulous.

The song might be laced with lament or longing.

The song might be off key and mumbled.

The song might shake the earth, rattle jailhouse doors, and unlock shackles.

But, the practice of resurrection calls forth singing.

We bear witness to God in Christ in our singing.

The wife of an old friend has been battling an aggressive cancer. She recently completed 15 months of a new chemotherapy protocol that beat her down, damaged her heart, messed with her blood, and left her weak. But...

But, a week ago the doctors released her from treatment. They were done. While not using the word "remission" they encouraged her to go live her life without fear and they would monitor her every year ~ for years to come. Thanks be to God.

My friend is powerfully grateful for good doctors, researchers, and the application of medical technology. But he is also profoundly grateful for the faithfulness of God. He said,

*I want to raise the roof with my church singing "Great is Thy Faithfulness."
I don't want to sing "Our God is so good, good, good, good, good, good...."*

You get the point. He has a song in his heart ~ learned, seasoned, and sung for a lifetime ~ that gives language to his deepest faith.

Faith is rarely an abstraction in scripture. It is barely a noun. More often than not faith is a verb; it is an action, or a movement, or a practice. Faith is like music that surges, ebbs, flows, and rises to expression. And so, with all hell breaking loose, Paul and Silas sing and faith finds expression. Or, as my friend and his wife come out of a long darkness he wants to sing ~ and resurrection is practiced.

My head and heart are a jumble of lyrics and riffs. For every great hymn that I know, I have layers of lines by Springsteen, Jason Isbell, Kanye West, Wilco, Prince, and Wham. I know the songs that I want played at my funeral and where they fit liturgically; but I don't know the hymns I want sung. I am not suggesting that there isn't a place for rock and roll and repetitive praise songs....

But, it seems to me, to tweak a line from our baptismal liturgy, we need songs that can "stand the light of the day and endure the dark of night." We need to sing that which is honest about the human condition and yet still proclaims the grace of God expressed in Jesus. We need to sing, and teach our children to sing, the great songs of the faith bearing witness that God in Christ has the last word over whatever is dark or demonic or has the stink of death. We need to sing, and teach our children to sing, songs that can be sung in the dark of night.

By the end of our text, most everyone is free.

The slave is free of the spirit that enslaved her, the jailer is free from fear and his whole family is baptized, Paul and Silas are free from their stocks. And, they're all eating breakfast together. A happy ending punctuated by singing.

Dear friends, when we raise our voices in song, in whatever prison we find ourselves, we join in the song of Paul and Silas. We practice resurrection.

We practice resurrection....

1. By proclaiming and embodying forgiveness.
2. By recalibrating our sense of self, others, and God.
3. By singing.

Whether through tears and great laughter, on sunny days and in the dark of night, let us join in the singing. For....

*My life flows on in endless song above earth's lamentations;
I hear the real though far off hymn that hails a new creation.
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging;
While love is Lord o'er heaven and earth how can I keep from singing?*

Amen.