

Acts 16:16-24

“Fear, Freedom and the Fulfillment of the Spirit”

If you are someone who plays the piano or organ for a living, I can only imagine what a treat it is to hear someone else give a concert. If you are a choir director who is always directing, it must also be wonderful to listen to a choir directed by someone else. If you are a physical therapist who is always helping someone else strengthen *their* muscles and limbs, it must really be great when someone helps YOU when you need to be stretched or limbered up. I think you get the point.

By the same token, if you are the one who is ALWAYS in the pulpit, it is wonderful to be fed by someone else’s sermon. This is what happened when I watched worship with Nazareth Presbyterian last week and heard Christi Brown’s excellent sermon about fear and perseverance. So I was glad to be able to preach about a miracle from our sermon series this summer that builds on her thoughts from last week. This is the miracle story in Acts that we just heard.

Before this passage, Paul receives a vision of a man pleading with him to come to Macedonia. So he and Silas set out for modern day Greece to answer the call of God. On the way, they decide to go to a place of prayer, perhaps for clarification or direction. Here they encounter a slave girl who has been given the “spirit of divination.” This means that she claimed to be able to predict the future.

Paul and Silas somehow get detained and the girl begins to follow them from place to place, crying loudly, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation!” Luke tells us that she continues to follow them, yelling, for many days.

Can you imagine how annoying this would be? Trying to do your job while someone follows you every step of the way, yelling like a deranged street preacher. Finally, Paul has had enough. Paul knows all along that the so-called spirit is NOT a divine spirit, as the description implies, but rather a demon. The Greek actually says that the poor girl has a snake in her. So he turns to the spirit and says, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!” And the spirit leaves her. But this only created a new problem.

Now before I tell you about this problem, I want to talk about the miracle in this passage. Paul’s ability to banish this demon is a fulfillment of the promises made by Jesus Christ. At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples to go throughout all the earth, teaching, preaching and baptizing. And he promises, “I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.”

In the Gospel of John, knowing that he is headed toward the cross, Jesus tells his disciples that he will not leave them orphaned but will send a guide, a helper, an advocate who will enable them to carry on God’s work without him. And in his last discourse with them, again in John’s Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples that because God is in him and he is in them that God will be with them **and** in the world.

Friends, the story in Acts between Paul and the girl possessed with the demon shows that these promises that Jesus made have come true. The Apostle Paul was not one of the twelve original disciples. In fact, he was one of the most outspoken persecutors of the early church. Yet, once he claimed Christ as his savior, he TOO was filled with the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit who enabled him to cast out the demon from the girl. It was the Holy Spirit who empowered him to preach in spite of the threats being made to him. It was the Holy Spirit who

enabled him to preach rather than dwelling on any fears he may have felt in such adverse circumstances.

And that same Holy Spirit is with us today. In the midst of the fears and frustrations and uncertainty that life is presenting us with right now, the Spirit can help us conquer these emotions. The Spirit can help us in the decisions we have to make. The Spirit can remind us that God is always with US. And that is what qualified this passage to fit into the series on miracles.

Quite simply put, the presence of the Holy Spirit – active, working, loving, healing, praying and directing us day by day, minute by minute when need be, is a miracle. And it is a miracle that occurs every day, whether we notice it or not.

But that is not the main reason that Luke tells us this story. The miracle of casting out the demon leads to another miracle of Paul and Silas being rescued from prison and I promise I will preach from part of the story one day. But the main emphasis of this passage is found in the reaction of the people who witness the miracle. And it so perfectly mirrors the society that we live in and the one which our world has operated within for centuries, that I would like you to follow me down the rabbit hole that my mind and heart jumped into when I read it.

While this is technically a miracle story, it is really the story about how fear can guide our thoughts and actions. You see, the truth is that the people that arrested Paul and Silas did not care one bit about the girl or what happened to her. Indeed, they did not care one bit about Paul and Silas' preaching. What they DID care about was money. This was not a spiritual issue – it was an economic one.

Luke is very clear in verse 19 when he says, “But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace

before the authorities.” This is how their business worked. The owners of the slave girl would go throughout the villages, touting her abilities to read the future. They basically preyed upon the fears of others. Because if we know for certain what will happen tomorrow, many of our fears are eliminated.

To further exploit her, the slaveowners would wait until the supposed spirit led the girl to make a prediction and as the coins were tossed her way by the satisfied patron, they would grab the money for themselves. At the end of the day they might give her one coin from the fifty they collected if they were feeling benevolent. So, when the demon, the snake, the ability was taken from the girl, the jig was up for her owners. And they were afraid because they did not know what the future held for them.

That is why we are so fearful right now. We don't know WHEN the spread of COVID 19 will start to make a downturn. We don't know WHAT school will look like when it starts. We don't know HOW MUCH LONGER we can live with the restrictions that we have. We don't understand WHY people continue to be treated differently because of the color of their skin when it is clearly wrong. We don't know IF there will be more protests and if they will lead to change or more destruction. And this causes fear. And the most common way to act upon our fears is through anger.

When I was serving as the Chaplain of the Presbyterian Home, I dealt with grief and loss every day. Not just death, but other griefs and losses. The resident who finds out that they can no longer drive. The couple that is told that they must move out of their independent apartment into the nursing wing, to receive more care. The woman who is told that the walker will no longer be sufficient, and it will be the wheelchair from here on out.

But when we had a death in the community, that was a whole different kind of grief. You see, we would have the service for the family, and they would cry and hug all of mama's friends and tell them how much mama loved living with them. The family would thank the nurses for taking such good care of mama and praise the chaplain for the fine celebration of life that was held. And then – they would go leave.

But in the community, we were left with what I call COLLECTIVE grief. The chair at mama's table in the dining room, empty for *everyone* to see, *every day*. The place where mama always sat at worship, empty. And no one would dare take her seat. Even the missing fourth at the bridge table, as substitute after substitute are tried out. I tell you this because today, we as a nation, as a state, as a community and as a church are dealing with collective grief.

Grief that we cannot shop without wearing a mask that fogs up our glasses and gets caught in our earrings. Grief that we did not go to the Holy Land as planned. Grief that we cannot sing "Open my eyes that I may see" as a church. Grief that we cannot go to the playground or have the graduation party or baby shower. Grief that we cannot get hugs in church. And it is collective, everywhere, for everyone to see!

And before we knew what had happened, this collective grief has led to collective fear which has led to collective anger. In the story in Acts, the economic loss led to fear, which in turn led to anger, which in turn set the crowd on fire. And soon, it was all about disturbing the city and disregarding the laws and disrupting the peace and the girl and slavery and preaching the Gospel had become irrelevant. *All because it is human nature to put a higher priority on money than on a person.* And I think that is why Luke included this scene in his story. To help us see the error of our ways.

THAT is why the Civil War was so horrific for the south. That is why you may still hear many of us Southerners refer to it as the war of Northern Aggression. Because to free slaves in the south disrupted the entire economic system, not just for the plantation owners, but for everyone! Where would cotton come from? A farmer and his two sons cannot produce enough cotton to clothe the entire nation. What will we wear? How will we feed our children? Where will all these freed people live? Who will take care of them? Fear, which led to anger, which led to a war where brother fought against brother.

Now please don't misunderstand me. I am NOT standing up for the practice of slavery. Jesus Christ set the record straight when he said that among those who believe in him there will be neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free. But humankind never fully adopted his decree and it is because of *fear*. It is not because we don't know any better, it's just that we don't know anything different. And that scares the bejeebers out of you and me!

Because it is a lot easier to talk about how mad it makes us to wear a mask than it is to address how IMPOSSIBLE it is for the homeless to be socially distanced. It is easier to talk about our anger over the Black Lives Matter movement by saying WHITE LIVES MATTER TOO, than to admit that we don't know why unarmed black men who are still being shot. Because that exposes our fear of having to change a system that WE ARE USED TO. One that is working just fine for OUR economics. But how is it working for those whom the system has oppressed since time began?

And THAT is what leaves us with collective fear. And perhaps in light of today's circumstances, THAT is why the Holy Spirit led me to this story. Because while the story is about our faith it is also about putting our pocketbooks on the back burner and putting the welfare of the other person on the front one.

Friends, God may be using this pandemic to teach us that we have been living with uncomfortable truths for thousands of years that have been hiding in plain sight. Baptist Minister and Yale Professor Willie Jennings recently said that the volume of a crowd is never indicative of their strength but of their vulnerability. (1) And perhaps this collective fear of the crowd has revealed our collective vulnerability. And we just don't know what to do.

But Dr. Jennings gave us hope when he took his discussion a step further said that “a **congregation** is a crowd that has been disciplined and shrunk in size by the reality of faith.” And that leads us out of the rabbit hole and back to Paul. Friends, from the introduction of sin in creation, slavery has been a way of life. Not just in the deep South in the days of Abraham Lincoln but throughout the Old and New Testaments and the writings of other faiths. And whether we call it slavery or not, we continue to enslave others today when we put economic needs over the care of people. And that is counterintuitive to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The owners of the Macedonian slave did not care about the quality of her life. They did not care about the truth that Paul preached. They did not even care **if** he went to prison or not. They only cared about the coins that were not jingling in their pockets. Perhaps the economic inequalities of COVID 19 and the murder of George Floyd have brought some hidden fears out into the open.

And I imagine that God is hoping, praying that we, as God's children, will finally realize that the care of people must become the context within which we think the of economy, rather than the care of the economy being the context in which we think about people. (3)

The true miracle in this story is that when fear left Paul with nothing to see but four prison walls, he relied on his faith. And he was freed. Not just from slavery, but freedom from fear as well. And freedom to live in the fulfillment of the Spirit.

This is because he knew too well that, just a few years before, another man was faced with the collective fear of a crowd. And that fear turned to anger. And *that* man ended up on a cross so that *we* could be free from slavery and oppression. In these times of turmoil, may the faith that the cross gives us be our freedom from fear. And may we live in the fulfillment of the Spirit. Amen.

- (1) Willie Jennings, Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 2017, pg. 189.
- (2) Yale Center for Faith and Couture, a podcast between Miroslav Volf and Willie Jennings, 2020.
- (3) Ibid.