



northminster presbyterian church

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roswell, georgia 30076

13-May-2007 Easter 6

**SCRIPTURE:** Acts 16:16-34 John 17:17-26

**SERMON:** Big Trouble In Little Philippi (Rev. Jim Simpson)

The Book of Acts' record of Paul's stay in Philippi would make a great movie: *Big Trouble in Little Philippi*. It would be an action-packed thriller, with at least two big stars playing the roles of Paul and Silas; lots of special effects... for the fights and the earthquake scene; a new starlet looking winsome and vulnerable in the role of the demon-possessed fortune teller; and an aging star on hand to play the part of the jailer.

Our screenplay would capture the various overlapping and intertwined levels of the story. Maybe there would be some use of split screens. Twists and turns just keep on coming. It is like going round and round on a NASCAR track! We meet the slave-girl, and yes, she has green eyes! There is taunting – don't think Holy Grail, think Hannibal Lecter - persistent, chilling, personal, direct; then there is the dramatic exorcism of the source of those green eyes – the "python spirit"; the loud, angry accusations from the owners displeased that their "Ripleys: Believe it or not" attraction, their Philippian Idol, their big earner has been snatched from them. The quick, over-the-top response of the Roman police indicates that more than a little bribery has been going on! It hasn't only been the owners who have been profiting from the poor girl. Then with a scene lit by the angled sun shining through the bars, with dust a-plenty in the air, we find ourselves in the dungeon. Huge, bearded, violent prisoners glare from other cells at Paul and Silas who are in chains, as they sing. But then, this movie really gets going as with blinding lights and crashing music and we see God's miraculous intervention which leads to the conversion of the jailer. Oh yes this is a great movie – not too far fetched either- and through all the shifts and turns, at all levels of the story God's power is seen.

The literal translation of the phrase rendered in the NRSV as "spirit of divination is "python spirit." The python was intimately connected with the Oracle at Delphi as the guard or keeper of the oracle, until, according to myth, Apollo killed this python. The Oracle at Delphi, which became the most prominent Greek oracle, had many adherents, those who believed that it was powerful enough to tame all the disorderly aspects of the cosmos. Some of these followers lived in Philippi, explaining why the "snake" girl immediately recognized the power of the Most High God in Paul & Silas.

As she follows the missionaries, she continues to cry out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She spoke the truth, of course, but Paul gets annoyed for two reasons. First, he does not want to be perceived as working in conjunction with other gods and powers. This had previously landed him in a heap of trouble when he had stopped in Lystra. Second, he has care and concern for the young woman being abused and demeaned by her handlers.

The freeing of the girl led to the imprisonment of Paul and Silas. Their later freedom, in the middle of the night, made the sleeping jailer face the grim reality that he would find himself imprisoned for his dereliction of duty. However, in reaching out to his two most infamous prisoners, this jailer finds his complete freedom as he asks, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" The jailer's freedom is emphasized and extended as he ministers to Paul and Silas, tending to their wounds and breaking bread with them. Not the Good Samaritan of Jesus' parable, *but the good Philippian!*

I ask you to notice the ways in which the elements of our inner, devotional, so called “spiritual” life – like worship and prayer - inevitably lead us into engagement with the world. And in turn how that engagement with the world leads us back to worship and prayer. Paul and Silas are minding their own business, walking to the place of prayer, but their faith and love, their experience of God’s grace compels them to help the young woman, even though they know trouble will result. That night as they sit in jail as punishment for their ministry of social care and justice, they return to prayer and worship. It is those very prayers and hymns that in time lead to their release but when their jail door swings open, instead of simply taking advantage of the opportunity to escape, they find themselves confronted with still another opportunity for social engagement by staying in jail, they prevent the jailer from being imprisoned, and at the same time they are able to share the good news about Jesus with the jailer.

The elements of the spiritual life, like worship and prayer, and the need to seek social justice can never be separated in the Christian tradition. In Jesus, we see both aspects lived and practiced, each is dependant on the other. And this is the model, we who trust in Jesus, must follow. Sure, it is a challenge to reclaim and retain this connection.

It can be difficult for us to talk together in church about “bread and butter” issues, within the atmosphere of worship and prayer, because the church is not a safe place for all of us, or because we fear bringing into our congregation the partisan poison of the current political process. But, it is also true that we shy away from the claims of justice and peace because we get used to, *and indeed we benefit from*, the status quo. Assessing that we are doing pretty good, thank you very much, we are reluctant to put our own wealth, prosperity and power under the microscope of our faith.

One of the messages I find here in Acts is that God is always coming to us to shake our foundations, to change the way that things are. Whether we view this as good news or bad news doesn’t matter. It is coming. This is God’s plan, *so be ready!*

If our interest is in maintaining the status quo because we find ourselves benefiting at the expense of others, this story will serve as a *threat*. If instead our highest goal is to work for a world where all people have the opportunity to enjoy the life that God intends, then we will eagerly anticipate the eventual shaking of the incorrect foundations, and the growth of God’s New Day, *God’s Kingdom of Love and Peace*.

The Christian faith can never be reduced to an entirely interior, spiritual matter. Christianity must involve concern for the community, respect for all of creation, a bias to the poor and the weak. Such attitudes expressed in action are not optional extras when we have done everything else, read every book, attended every Sunday School Class, memorized passages from the Bible. As Christians, in the name of Jesus Christ, we are to engage the corrupt, evil powers in the society around us, not to destroy *but to redeem*, looking to free all held in the grip of fear or abuse or poverty or injustice.

In 1965, just two weeks after Bloody Sunday, that extremely brutal and deadly day in Selma, Alabama, when many supporters of civil rights were brutally assaulted, the then thirty-one-year-old pastor of a Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, preached a sermon he would come to regret. He told his congregation: “Believing the Bible as I do, I would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else - including the fighting of communism, or participating in civil rights reforms. As a God-called preacher, I find that there is no time left after I give the proper time and attention to winning people to Christ. Preachers are not called to be politicians, but to be soul winners.” That preacher was and is, Reverend Jerry Falwell, horribly reducing and wholly abandoning the true essence of the Christian faith at a time when Christians across the land needed to band together to stand against segregation and in support of equality for all races.

Since our text took us to prison today, consider some of what we could be doing in relation to those in and passing through the penal system. Ever since the visit to Northminster last Fall by the Atlanta Transitional Center's Choir, several of you have shared with me things you could offer or asked about how you can get more involved. In my sermon back on March 4, I mentioned that 195 people across the USA had been released from wrongful imprisonment thanks to the work of the Innocence project using DNA evidence. As of today that number had already climbed to 200!

If the Innocence Project is mainly inspired by the need for social justice, Prison Fellowship founded by Chuck Colson, imprisoned for his part in the Watergate debacle, has its origin in a different sector of the church. But it has an important message about faith in action, justice as the expression of the spiritual life. Currently Mark Earley, president of Prison Fellowship, offered some very powerful and challenging thoughts in these words: "What if instead of spending billions of dollars building more prisons to warehouse offenders, Christian men and women around the country rolled up their sleeves, moved out of their comfort zones, and began going behind bars to teach and mentor inmates? What if instead of seeing the revolving door herd hundreds of thousands of re-offenders back to prison each year, the church opened its arms to embrace the returning prisoner with the gospel and with life-on-life discipleship? And what if Christians just like you began to have such an impact on the culture around us that broken families, violence and poverty, all of which fuel crime, began to disappear? Yes, sin and crime will be with us until Christ returns, but what if we made such an impact that prisons were forced to start shutting down?"

I like the vision and admire the commitment of the Innocence Project and Prison Fellowship. I like the vision of seeing prisons closing down because there aren't enough inmates. Such talk is *kingdom talk*; nurtured by prayer and worship and our relationship with Christ, expressed in might acts of love and mercy!

My friends, it will never be easy or comfortable to live out all the elements of our faith within our society. Our attention both, to God and to the needs of those who are hurting, need to be honored. And when we do this, we will discover that we need to pray if we are to work to make a difference; *and we need to work to make a difference if we plan to keep on praying and worshipping.*

It won't be easy, but it will offer us a life challenge We will find ourselves in some strange places and we will be tested. But the Kingdom of God, to which we must point and for which we devote our lives, means and is worth so much more than anything else in this world. Big trouble in little Philippi – Big trouble in North Fulton County – Big Trouble for all that stands in the way of bringing God's love and grace to the world. *Big trouble as we pray, as we worship, as we serve! Amen.*

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**Acts 16:16-34**

16One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. 17While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." 18She 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. 19But 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. 20When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews 21and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." 22The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. 25About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26Suddenly 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.

27When 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. 28But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34He 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.

#### **John 17:17-26**

17Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. 20I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

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