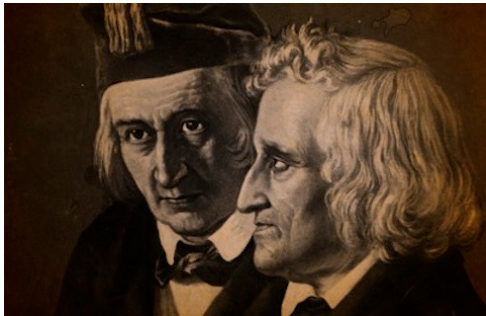


"The Story Never Ends"

Acts 16:16-38

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost; August 2, 2020

Fairy tales. When we first think of them, we conjure up images of pixie dust, fairy godmothers and magical mantras that instantly change a harrowing situation into a hallowed "happily ever after." But the most well-known editors of "fairy tales" were, in fact, well-named for their



chosen profession: a couple of brothers from Germany named Grimm. Grimm is the right name for the ancient folk tales they gathered from across Europe.

These stories weren't so much "fairy tales" as "scary tales." Do kids sleep better when they were told stories of small children being imprisoned by a witch who wants to fatten them up to eat them? Hansel and Gretel anyone? Or a charming tale of a grandma who is eaten up by a wolf and then the carnivore lays in wait for the granddaughter to appear? Little Red Riding Hood, anyone? More stay-awake than snooze-land stories.

So why do these tales of terror endure? Why are they passed on from generation to generation, even in our uptight culture that sweeps everything away that's the least bit offensive or politically incorrect?

Why? Because they tell truths. They reveal human fears and foibles. They unveil our greatest vulnerabilities and summon our greatest strengths. That's what the entire book of Acts does. Acts is a collection of "Grimm Tales" for the church. Except all the tales told in Acts are too true, too awe-filled, too amazing, too factual to be fiction. Luke's book of Acts is a collection of "stories," but they are stories that depicts in detail what 1st century Christians experienced and endured. These are not "fairy tales." These are faith tales. These are faith-filled and faith-fulfilled tales.

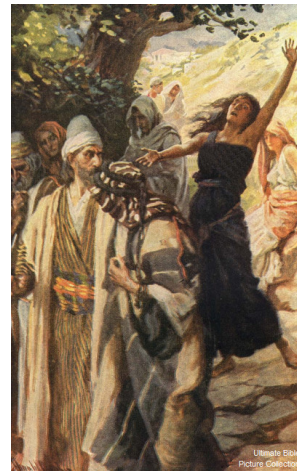
One such faith tale is Acts 16:16-38. It starts out simply enough. Paul, Silas, and some other disciples are traveling hither and yon, taking every opportunity to spread the good news of Jesus as the risen Christ and explaining the new life this new Messiah offered to all. But like all simple stories it gets complex and complicated, rather quickly.

Paul and his entourage wander into Philippi, where they find themselves hounded by an unexpected and unwanted associate. The stalker is a female slave belonging to some local family. She's reputed to have a "spirit of divination." That phrase "spirit of divination" literally translates as a "pythian spirit" — that is, a "seer" spirit from the cultic shrine of Delphi. These Delphic spirits were highly esteemed within pagan culture and were assumed to speak great truths. Have you ever heard of the "Delphic oracles?" But the "pythian" spirit was presumed to have descended from a dragon/serpent that was slain by a pagan deity named Apollo. This spirit was infamous for its dark pedigree. It was certainly not a trustworthy voice to proclaim any good news.

And yet this "pythian spirit," like other evil spirits that encountered Jesus, instantly recognized the presence of the one true God and the voice of the divine message. Isn't it ironic that diabolical entities are often better at recognizing the presence of Christ than many Christians? The "possessed" slave follows Paul and Silas proclaiming her "truth." And her oracle reveals that these men are speaking the truth. Paul and

Silas are indeed servants of the “Most High God.” They are offering “a way to salvation” that is worthy of consideration. So here again, not only does evil recognize the presence of the divine, but evil testifies to the truth of the divine.

So what’s the problem? The problem is that this creepy messenger is so tainted by iniquity and evil that it makes the message shady and suspect. For the pagan population listening to this possessed harangue, it’s difficult to distinguish Jesus’s salvation from other so-called “salvations” offered by any other pagan deity. It’s like buying nice fresh, crisp produce in the market, and then later finding out that it’s contaminated with e-coli and listeria. No matter how good it looks, it has to be thrown out lest it make you very sick. Disciples of Jesus can’t be nurtured with toxic produce taken from the demonic.



So despite the seemingly nice “sound bites” of the pythian spirit, Paul finally has enough. He turns and with words that are an exact mirroring of Jesus’ own prophetic exorcisms, Paul casts out the demonic

spirit that has invaded this girl. He cuts off the seemingly pious words that are rotten because of the sham and shame of their source.

Uh-oh. Paul's mention of the name of Jesus immediately conjures-up another monster, the most powerful hydra-heads of this world. They are the hydra-headed monsters of politics and economics who rise-up on the attack. The formerly possessed and no longer profitable slave girl is now "worthless" to the bottomline in her owners' pocketbooks — and they are really angry. Paul and Silas are dragged into the public square. This is the central hub of Philippi's politics and economics where a "kangaroo court" is convened.

Kangaroo courts will usually use some sort of "bait and switch" technique, which is what the slave girl's owners do. Their accusations against Paul and Silas go from whining about their "cash-cow" being taken away, to a religious/political diatribe: "These men...are throwing our city into and uproar! They are Jews, and they are teaching customs which it's illegal for us Romans to accept or practice" (v.21). Arguments such as this are made not to get to the core issue, but to deflect the matter by steering-up emotions. It was a purposely articulated argument

designed to make the village crowd as fearful and panicked as possible. And, of course, it works. The crowd reacts on cue and the magistrates immediately pander to them. Paul and Silas are arrested and condemned. They are stripped naked for a punishment even worse than being whipped: being beaten with rods.

“Beaten with rods” was a punishment usually reserved for those charged with sedition. It was meted-out only to those who posed the most active threats against the political power of the state. It was so severe that it often ended in death. The only “wrong” that the slave girl’s owners had to gripe about was loss of profit. Back in 1st century, as well as today, money considerations made the best arguments, appeals, and assaults.

It’s amazing that Paul doesn’t flash his “get-out-of-jail-free” card. He could have claimed entitlement as a Roman citizen. Why didn’t he? Maybe because saving his own skin would have left his companion Silas accused and alone. Maybe because Paul himself wasn’t overly impressed with his Roman citizenship. Did he consider his allegiance to

another kingdom higher than Rome? Whatever the reason, Paul keeps solidarity with Silas and God’s kingdom.

That beating with the rods broke bones — broken elbows, broken ribs, broken collarbones, broken knee-caps, broken this, broken that, broken fingers from fending off the blows. For most victims such a beating would have caused internal injuries and hemorrhaging, and a lingering painful death.

And yet, the story continues — beyond the “Grimm” part. Locked-up in the innermost cells and locked-down by their swollen ankles in stocks, both Paul and Silas refuse to be silent. Instead of preaching out in the public square, they sing and pray with God and for their fellow prisoners. And the songs shake the foundations and loose the chains.

Sound can shatter things. Frequencies are waves, “sonic” vibrations. Such waves can shatter not only fine crystal when shrieked



by a diva, but waves can also bring down walls — like the walls of Jericho.

Remember that story? Joshua marched his

horn-blowing troops around Jericho. The walls shattered from the sound waves of those trumpets as surely as many bridges have shattered from the sound waves of the wind. Even today troops will march across bridges “break-step” so as to break the cadence of footsteps which produce a resonating frequency that could bring down any bridge whether made of stone, steel, timber or fiber. The power is more often in the invisible more than the visible.



Singing songs, chanting psalms and other prayers can produce powerful frequencies that can shake foundations and break chains. It’s in the power of the faith that produces those songs and chants. Paul and Silas together, with song and faith, draw upon God’s power to bring down the prison doors and break-free the shackles. It’s a faith-tale miracle.

Another miracle still awaits. The jailor, the middle management guy charged with keeping these seditious threats to the empire secluded and secured, finds his now freed prisoners still present and accounted

for. Paul’s shout stops him just as he’s about to cut himself open with his own sword. Instead he falls down in front of Paul and Silas begging, “How can I get out of this mess?” — of despair and dread? In the surprise ending to the faith-tale, the jailor frees Paul and Silas and cleans their wounds. His entire family is baptized in the name of Jesus and together they eat a meal with their new Christian brethren. But still the specter of death hangs over the celebration.



Paul and Silas are still prisoners of the state. The jailor released them on his own authority. Sitting at table together, celebrating and praising God, everyone dines with a death sentence hanging over their heads. And they still rejoice. And they still celebrate their freedom in Christ. Bleak circumstances are transformed by the power of God. New citizens are enrolled in God’s kingdom — the jailer’s and his entire household. But the possible consequences of this “break-out” linger and will be faced.

And then. But God. And then the magistrates took stock of the dire situation *they* were faced with. They had allowed Roman citizen

Paul to be publicly beaten which ironically turned into their humiliation. To add to their shame, Paul broke free from a mighty Roman prison. To add still more to their shame, Paul stayed put singing those songs. After serious consideration, the magistrates decided that was much better to cut their losses both politically and personally. Just get those annoying men out of here!

So is this why Paul didn't play his "get-out-of-jail-free" card when he was first arrested for sedition? Was it because we wanted to bring these magistrates down all the while protecting those he and Silas were leaving behind? After all, the magistrates did indeed arrest, strip naked, beat, and imprison a Roman citizen. Uh-oh. That could easily be the death-knell of any political career for whoever was involved. Even though Paul didn't press any charges, everyone now knew who he was and had quite an impression of the shaking he could conjure up.

No wonder those money-grubbing magistrates were so anxious to get Paul and Silas down the road and out of town. If they're not in "our" town, no one will remember them. Or so they thought.

What happened to the girl who was once enslaved? What happened to the jailer and his family? We're not told, so we don't know.

Most fairy tales will end with “and they all lived happily ever after” and that's that. Time to close the book and go to bed. But a faith tale continues and goes on up the peaks and through the valleys and on to “Zion, Zion, the beautiful city of God” (“Marching to Zion, *UMH* #733). A faith tale ends with no ending...but “We must look ahead, to Jesus. He is the one who carved out the path for faith, and he's the one who brought it to completion. He knew that there was joy spread out and waiting for him. That's why he endured the cross, making light of its shame, and has now taken his seat at the right hand of God's throne” (Hebrews 12:2, *Kingdom New Testament*).

All of our stories belong ultimately to God — the slave girl's, the jailer and his family's, Paul's, Silas's — yours, mine, everyone's.



As her husband Ron lay dying of cancer, Natalie Sleeth sang various hymns to him along with one of her own that she was composing as a prayer: “In our end is our beginning, in our time, infinity; in our

doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity. In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see” (“Hymn of Promise,” *UMH* #707).

The story never ends. Amen.