

## 6-1-25 Sermon: “God’s Time” – Acts 16:16-34

Sing it with me, if you know it.

*Paul and Silas, bound in jail,  
Had no money for to go their bail.  
Keep your eyes on the prize – hold on.  
Hold on, hold on!  
Keep your eyes on the prize; hold on.*

*Paul and Silas though they was lost,  
Dungeon shook and the chains come off  
Keep your eyes on the prize – hold on.  
Hold on, hold on!  
Keep your eyes on the prize; hold on.*

Much of what happens in the story of Paul and Silas in prison seems out of place. Or maybe the better way to say it is that the right things happen at the wrong times. There are places in the story that seem out of order, and I wonder, if we dig into them a little, if they might teach us something about *God’s time*.

Now. A word of caution. Hear what I said – God’s *time*, not God’s *timing*. Let us be careful here. For truly, there is nothing good to say about people who purport to know things that the rest of us do not about “God’s timing.”

You know the type I’m talking about. Those folks who try to comfort you when something bad happens – when someone you love dies or an unspeakable tragedy takes place – by saying, “It was God’s timing,” or “It must have been their time,” or “God needed another angel.” Seriously?

Friends, do not listen to these people! They know *nothing* about God’s timing, nor do they apparently know anything about compassion or basic social skills!

What I’m talking about is God’s time – sacred time – which, theologians have come to believe, does not run in a linear direction, like our lives – a timeline, start to finish. There is something, it seems, more cyclical about God’s time, and sometimes things happen in ways that seem...out of order. Sort of like the events in this story.

For example. After casting out a demon, Paul and Silas get dragged before the authorities, stripped and beaten in the public square, bound and thrown in prison. And, the narrator tells us, they begin to sing hymns of praise to God.

Now, singing hymns is a great thing to do, and there are several times in this story when that would be a natural thing to do – after the earthquake, for example! – but right after they’re thrown in prison is not one of them! And yet Paul and Silas’ songs begin in chains. At midnight, even – literally their darkest hour. This is when these apostles start singing their praises to God.

And it’s not just Paul and Silas. People of faith have a long history of singing when things are at their worst.

Think of the Jewish psalms written during the Babylonian exile. Of the African American spirituals, sung by people who were forcibly enslaved while they did work that was back-breaking and often deeply inhumane. Think of the songs of the Civil Rights movement, sung by

protesters as they marched, and they stood. As they were beaten and spat on and had the dogs and hoses turned on them. And yet, God's people kept singing.

There's something about singing that has the power to transcend time and space. It opens the window to salvation – even a salvation that has not yet taken place.

And I'll tell you, (for me at least) it is the singing itself that does it. If you *tell me* to look on the bright side or trust in God's salvation, I'm gonna give you the same look I gave that fool over there going around telling people about God's timing! But start singing the story of God's salvation and the people around you can't *help* but join in.

I wonder if singing praises puts us, just for a moment, on God's time. God's time, which reaches into the future, grabs ahold of salvation, and brings it back so that we can taste it, even in our present suffering.

*I'm gonna board that big greyhound,  
Carry the love from town to town,  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on  
Hold on, hold on!  
Keep your eyes on the prize; hold on.*

There's something else that happens out of order in this story.

The jailer falls on his knees and asks Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" They answer, "Trust in the Lord Jesus," they speak the Word of the Lord to him, and then the jailer and his whole family are baptized.

We've seen this pattern before in recent weeks: it's what happened with Cornelius; it's what happened with Lydia. But in the jailer's story, something interrupts this process. Did you notice?

Paul and Silas preach the Word, the jailer believes, but before he and his family are baptized, the jailer stops and washes Paul and Silas' wounds.

The gesture is so simple. So tender, so intimate. And it is so necessary. Before salvation can come, there are wounds that must be tended. There is the more pressing matter of compassion and basic human need.

"What must we do to be saved?" Indeed, friends, we are *desperate* for salvation! But we are also wounded people. Bleeding from our bodies, or our souls. And when people are wounded, God's time reaches into the past – it pauses right in the middle of the salvation story – to wash and tend to those wounds. Prayer, confession, baptism – all that can wait, while we find warm water, a cloth, and someone with a gentle hand.

*Well, the only chains we can stand  
Are the chains of hand in hand  
Keep your eyes on the prize – hold on.  
Hold on, hold on!  
Keep your eyes on the prize; hold on.*

The last – and perhaps most startling 'out of order' moment in this story – comes after the earthquake. The foundations of the earth shake; the jail doors are opened, the chains fall from the prisoners' hands and feet...and the prisoners stay put? They don't run! And it's not just Paul and Silas who stick around – it's everybody! Paul calls out to the jailer, "We're all still here!"

What?! This little detail in the story is not just out of order, it is utterly non-sensical! But perhaps, once again, the story is operating on God's time. In God's time, where no one is free until everyone is free.

Paul and Silas' chains have dropped, but the jailer is still bound to the dark and sinful systems of world that detains innocent people in jail. We are too, it turns out. Our tax dollars are paying for the chains!

But Paul and Silas are on God's time. They stay in the darkness until every person in this story is set free from whatever binds them. And perhaps in doing so, they set us an example of what it looks like to keep our eyes on the prize and live in God's time.

*We'll meet jail and violence too,  
But God's love is gonna carry us through;  
Keep your eyes on the prize – hold on.  
Hold on, hold on!  
Keep your eyes on the prize; hold on.  
Hold on, hold on!  
Keep your eyes on the prize; hold on.*

Amen.