From What and For What
First Reading - Psalm 2:1-8
Second Reading - Acts 16:16-34

So, according to the NRSV, Luke tells us that Paul is *"very much* annoyed." *The Message* translation says Paul *"was finally fed up."* The King James offered that Paul *"was grieved."* Have you ever been annoyed? The preacher you've met 50 times and he still can't remember your name (My apologies). The maddening tick of the grandfather clock every interminable, sleepless night. The smallest little fragment of gravel wedged between your heel and your insole (That'll send a runner into therapy - mental not physical). The Groundhog Day colleague who is as predictable as low tide — *If she says 'Well, duh' one more time…* Annoyed.

Have you ever been annoyed? Mark, my next door neighbor in the freshman dorm, possessed that unabashedly confident naivety common among small town youth who've never ventured far from their hometown except for those school bus rides to away football games and class trips to the state capital. The kind for whom college was this wild new world of unrestricted adventure. He was planning to major in physical therapy like any number of former athletes who endured long rehabs following injury. A

compassionate physical therapist has a way of inspiring injured athletes to follow her path.

Mark was generally in a good mood and his voice seemed to always be set at 7 or 8 on the volume dial, and unfortunately, he possessed but one album for his Radio Shack stereo. He may have owned other records, but I wouldn't know, because he only played one album over, and over, and over; back to back to back. It wasn't an ear worm. It was more like that sound torture they use in enhanced interrogation.

So, you'll have to forgive me if I exhibit a nervous shuddering tic when the mall Muzak offers up a selection from the *High Infidelity* album of R.E.O. Speedwagon. I'm not going to *take it on the run, baby.* I'm going to leave it behind and run away as fast as I can before the first guitar lick. My great fear is that my neighbor at the nursing home will be playing *Keep on Loving You* on a continual loop because he's forgotten how to turn off Spotify on his iPhone. Annoyed.

Paul wasn't just annoyed, he was very much annoyed. I can't blame him, really. It has literally been a long road to get to this place in his ministry where he is actually beginning to live into his call to share the good

news of Jesus Christ. As we discovered a few weeks ago, Paul's journey to Philippi was one monster hike, without so much as a Schwinn to help get him there. Think Chacos without the cushioned soles … for 1,200 miles … plus a long boat ride across the Aegean Sea; and as we learned, for most of those miles, Paul wasn't even allowed to do what he felt called to do.

Can you imagine? You know you are called to accomplish something, become something, complete something, be something, but all you keep experiencing is … Nope! … Not now … Not you … Not this … Not yet.

Finally, in Philippi Paul was able to begin his work, only now, he would be undermined by the additional distraction of a brain scrambling repetitive soundtrack offered by the shrill voice of a troubled, and subjugated servant, who is probably scaring the children and shooing off potential listeners with her mind-numbing infomercial — *"she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.'"* Over and over and over.

Now, it is important to point out that what she is crying out is not wrong. Paul is a servant of the Most High God who is out there to proclaim a way of salvation. It is not so much what she is saying that is a problem.

Rather, the problem here is perhaps more about how she says it, or that she is the one saying it. Could it be that she is mocking Paul? — *Away to salvation? Ha!* Or might it be that the tone, pitch, and endless repetition have a fingers-on-chalkboard impact, driving away potential new disciples — *a way to salvation, a way to salvation…* — the broken record effect. Or, as this is already her established target market, and her *Ouija Board* act is already well-known around town, could her presence make Paul's message suspect? *Well, if she's the one selling salvation, I'm not buying it.* Lord knows I worry about guilt by association in a culture saturated with all manner of dubious Jesus peddlers constantly on the con, pursuing profit and political power.

So, Luke tells us that after many days of this for profit prophet's harassment, Paul can't take it anymore. Luke says, *"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."* Thus, finally, after the ultramarathon of hiking, and the snake-oil sideshow, Paul can actually begin his mission unfettered, right? Um, not so much.

Paul had managed to silence the irritating infomercial only to fire up the protest of the poor woman's slaveholding entrepreneurs along with the local Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club. As Luke describes it — *"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. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.'"*

Now, remember, this is all taking place in Greece, right? And, Greece, like Israel, Egypt, France, and even ol' Britannia were at that time ruled by the occupying force of Rome; and being under the thumb of Roman rule probably made the Philippians less than conducive to a united spirit of patriotism.

In freeing the servant of the demon, Paul has unwittingly put a dent in Philippi's soothsaying business. When their agenda, their moneymaking schemes are threatened, these unethical proprietors of prophecy all of a sudden become ardent patriots, safeguarding the honor and integrity of Rome. Sound familiar? Patriots, really? Listen, here's a good rule of thumb,

when you hear politicians, pundits, and podcasters shout the words — *They hate America* — you can pretty much ignore everything else the speaker says. Self-interest cloaked in the thinnest veil of patriotism is as old and empty as it was when the golden calf was fashioned in the shadow of Sinai.

The slaveholders' may have claimed Paul was a threat to Rome, but the reason for their protest was that Paul was a threat to their bottom line. The old patriotism ploy works, the mob mentality blossoms, and after a severe beating, Paul's entourage is thrown into the deepest, dankest innermost cell of the local lockup.

So, to recount, Paul has hiked over a thousand miles without the chance to begin his work; he crosses the sea to Greece, and just as soon as he starts to do what the Lord has called him to do, he is harassed by a demon-possessed prophet, and thrown into deepest recesses of Philippi's supermax prison. You would imagine this might be the time Paul would be thinking he should have stuck with the family tent business back in Tarsus because the folks a REI seem to be making a killing, while he's one step away from being killed.

Yet, instead of weeping and gnashing of teeth, what is it we hear? Hymns? Singing? Psalms? Praying? Understand, this is not just some happy singalong with the gang. When I was a kid my parents had an album by Mitch Miller, who was a conductor/promoter of singalongs. Remember? Archaeologists will tell you there was a time when people would just gather around the piano or record player and sing all manner of quirky and corny songs.

Remember Mitch Miller? As a kid I thought it was hilarious — *By the light of the silvery moon …* or who could forget … *Drunk last night, drunk the night before, gonna get drunk tonight like I never got drunk before.* As a ten-year-old, you know I was singing that at the most inappropriate times just to embarrass my parents.

But Paul and his gang were not singing a happy tune. No, when life grows hard, when burdens weigh heavy, when today looks bleak and tomorrow is iffy, the words of a hymn, the memory of its tune can be that small comfort in the storm, that light in the darkness. Sure, many folks won't resonate with the music of it, couldn't sing in tune with it, but most folks can read the words, and I'm telling you those words can mean the

difference between light and dark, hope and despair, strength and fragility — *Until with Thee, I will one will, To do and to endure … And with words that help and heal; Would Thy life in mine reveal … Love so amazing, so divine; Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Words that bring us back to the center, back to the source; words that can hold us when even friends and loved ones can't break through. In my mother-in-law's last weeks when her mind could no longer form words of coherent thought, joy was still present in the words of long-cherished hymns she sang with her daughters. As one old hymn suggests – *Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life.*

*"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them."* Read those hymns and psalms now, learn them, because there will be moments when you can't look them up, can't hold a hymnal or read, and those words will sustain you.

Well, before they got to the fourth verse, the earth quaked, the walls shook, the gates popped open, and the chains fell off — a welcome surprise for Paul and the prisoners; a horror movie moment for the guard. Logic and reason won't protect the guard from the wrath of his superiors when it is

revealed that it was under his watch that the prisoners were set loose. In that environment, that political climate, suicide looked preferable to a personnel review.

Yet, for Paul this is the moment to which he had been called … In spite of all the miles traveled, all the delays encountered, all the obstacles faced, this is the moment to which Paul was called — *"But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas … They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He 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.*

Sometimes, in the midst of a project, an assignment, a relationship, a career, a life, factors including exhaustion, annoyance, conflicts, and roadblocks combine to make you question the value of it all, but then a moment arrives when you are suddenly aware that your presence makes a difference in the equation of the consequential. You know, you just know

that you needed to be in that place in that moment for that purpose. Jeremiah understood that — *“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”* Esther was made aware of this by Mordecai when her people were in danger — *““Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”*

For such a time as this. Think about this encounter. Paul and company at table, sharing food and fellowship with the jailer and his family, celebrating new friendships, rejoicing in their mutual inclusion in this new creation called the body of Christ. The setting could have easily been very different; family members traumatized by the news a father will not be coming home, the fear of Rome’s unforgiving brutality that had made suicide preferable to violent pain, the mother who will face tomorrow without her best friend, her life partner, and that her family will have no means of support.

You never know what your presence will mean at any particular moment when you are called to stand in as the instrument of God's peace. Paul had endured so much, only to land in a dark and dank prison cell far from home, with no guarantee of tomorrow. But he kept on singing, he kept on praying, and though the journey seemed alternately prolonged or adrift, there came a moment, a place, and a person to which and for whom Paul had been called to be the instrument of God's peace.

Sometimes you'll be weary. Sometimes the way forward looks bleary. Sometimes you'll wonder if there is any reason to keep going, but you have to keep on singing, keep on praying even when you can't see the value of it, because, by the grace of God, you too, have been called for such a time as this. Amen.