

Sermon by Rev. Anthony Weisman – June 1, 2025
Acts 16: 16-34
Sing Your Way To Freedom

This is the third *prison break* in the Book of Acts. As the apostles preach and serve the poor, they attract the attention – and the ire – of the authorities. Too many slaves are being freed, too many women are being encouraged to speak their truths. Too many wealthy and well-positioned Christians are welcoming too many needy neighbors into their homes, and having their hearts broken open by the stories of suffering they hear, and determining to do something to help. Too many ideas are being put into the heads of too many people who have previously been docile and exploitable. “These men,” one of those who later brings charges against the apostles will declare, “are turning the whole world upside down!”

The accusation, the pretense of an accusation, is that these Christians are menaces to the public order and disturbers of the peace. (“We don’t have trouble, just trouble-makers.”) The truth is that those who are profiting off the status quo don’t want to see it challenged. Like: In the morning’s scripture reading, Paul casts out a demon from a slave girl who has been following him around shouting at him and annoying him.

We’ll save for another sermon the question of demons – you know, what are they? are they real? -- for now, I’ll just say that we don’t call them demons anymore, but many, many people *do* find themselves overpowered by forces beyond what they can control. We’ll also save for another sermon the question of Paul’s casting out the demon *not* because he saw it was destroying the slave girl and took pity on her, but because it was loud and bothersome and he couldn’t stand it anymore; that is, we’ll save for another sermon the question of whether it’s “enough” to do the right thing begrudgingly (yes) or to the right thing for the wrong reason (also yes).

Anyway, Paul casts out a demon from a slave girl who had made her owners wealthy men. By conjuring the dark spirit inside of her, she could tell fortunes and charge for it. But now, no more demon, no more money. The ones who had grown rich exploiting the slave girl, enraged to see their gravy train leave the station, have Paul arrested.

As I said, this is the third time something like this happens in the Book of Acts. This is the third time an apostle is arrested and then “busted out of the clink.” This is the third *prison break*. One way to find meaning in bible stories which maybe aren’t believable or don’t make much sense if you take them literally is to channel your high school English teacher and see what’s going on with different literary devices, with allusions, and metaphors, with the symbolism and structure.

In this case, think about the literary “rule of threes,” the pattern of storytelling you see in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* or *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* or *The Three Little Pigs*. The same basic thing happens three times, with the first two times being foils or set-ups for the third. There is usually a kind of negative progression or an intensification from the first to the second, and then a positive reveal or reversal with the third. The Big Bad Wolf huffs and puffs and blows down a house of straw, then huffs and puffs a little harder and blows down a house of sticks – stronger than straw, but not strong enough, then huffs and puffs, huffs and puffs until blue in the face, but can’t blow down a house of bricks.

In the first story of a *prison break* in the Book of Acts, the apostles are jailed and an angel unlocks their cell door and leads them out. Easy peasy. In the second story, Peter is jailed, and bound with chains; guards are stationed nearby. An angel appears, a bright light flashes, his shackles fall from his wrists, and the angel leads him out, as if in jest, right past the still-sleeping, snoring guards. In this third story, Paul and Silas are beaten and jailed, held in the “innermost cell” now, and have their feet clamped into the stocks.

Again, they are freed, but, in this third story, not by an angel. There is no angel. There is singing – singing that is so strong and so defiant as to shake the foundations of the earth. The iron doors spring open all on their own, but Paul and Silas do not leave the prison. They convert the jailer and dine in his home. There is an arc in these stories, a movement from the less to the more miraculous: each iteration of the same basic *prison break* story is more intense than the last. The deliverance of the apostles from captivity is increasingly dramatic and astounding: first an angel, then an angel in a flash of blinding, otherworldly light, frees the apostles, first from their cell, then from their cell and from their shackles.

And all that is a foil, a set-up for this third story of a *prison-break*, in which – in what is to be the climax, the dramatic finish, the reveal and reversal, the biggest miracle of them all – it is singing, ordinary hymn-singing, that sets the prisoner free. Singing, singing hymns, is set alongside, in contrast to, the wonder-working power of angelic liberators descended from realms of light.

I take the meaning of this sequence of stories to be: Have you ever felt trapped, felt stuck, felt held down, felt bound, felt like there was no way out? Don’t sit waiting for God to send an angel. Sing. Sing your way to freedom. The miracle – in fact, the most miraculous of all miracles – will not be the clouds parting as light pours down into your darkness from the throne room of God and heavenly hosts swoop in to save the day; it will be the song in your heart, the hymn you sing in the night. Singing is freeing. In the strongest possible sense, it is true: singing is freeing.

The Civil Rights Movement comes to mind. It would not be much of an overstatement to describe many of the great marches of the 1960s as hymn-sings. As they were spit on and beaten bloody and attacked by dogs, the protesters sang, sang the old spirituals, the slave songs, the plaintive hymns of the plantations (in which this morning’s scripture reading often makes an appearance: “*Paul and Silas bound in jail, had nobody for to go their bail; keep your eyes on the prize – hold on*”).

The so-called “Singing Revolution” in Estonia comes to mind. Over the course of several years in the 1980s, hundreds of thousands of people gathered in open fields to sing freedom songs. They sang until Moscow could take it no more, and the Soviet Union granted the Baltic states their independence with not one shot fired. Singing is freeing. The hymn “My Life Flows On in Endless Song” is sometimes sung with this verse added: “*When tyrants tremble, sick with fear, and hear their death-knell ringing, in prison cell or dungeon vile – how can I keep from singing?*”

And not only in this strong sense, but in another, spiritual sense, too: singing is freeing. I don’t have an especially good singing voice. Nobody looks on, like, rapt and transported when I do

“Take Me Home, Country Roads” at karaoke. But singing hymns in church is, far and away, the most deeply spiritual experience I have all week.

I sing as loudly as I possibly can, and I try not to wuss out and drop out on the high notes. I’m just going to go for them, going to hit them. Not to be crass, but I once overheard a choir director (not John) telling his singers to “pinch a dime between your butt cheeks” on the high notes. Which is to say, when I come to church and sing in church, I want it to be the most full-bodied expression of praise I can offer.

I think of little kids: when they sing, essentially, when they sing, they just shout – they shout-sing, until they grow up a bit, become more self-conscious, and then only sing in whispers. Almost all day, every day other than the one hour I’m in here, I move through the world like a self-conscious little kid, thinking, you know, “Oh, I wish I hadn’t said that,” or “God, I need a breath mint,” and wondering whether my best is good enough, in my work, as husband, as a human being, wondering whether my best is good enough.

I’m not going to praise God like that. I’m just not. I’m not going to praise God with self-conscious, self-critical, worrying whispers. When a church full of people sings in whispers, everyone under their breath, it’s one of the saddest sounds you’ll ever hear. But when the whole congregation sings, really sings – when we all sing terribly together, it’s a miracle. Singing is always a kind of miracle. Maybe you aren’t anxious and a prisoner of your own mind. (Must be nice!) But I am, and when I sing, I am freed.

When I sing, I descend from my head to my heart. And when I sing hymns, I descend farther still, from my heart to my gut. When I sing hymns, I get in touch with the deepest, deepest parts of me. I find that I know things that I couldn’t possibly know: about God, about life and death, about hope. I find that I believe things I actually would have told you I don’t believe. While singing the words of some of these hymns, my mind says, “Huh?”, my mind says, “No.” But a “yes,” an “amen” rises up from someplace deep in me like a run of goosebumps. It’s like it’s not so much me singing the hymns as the hymns singing me.

When I sing, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,” when I sing, “Riches I need not, nor vain, empty praise,” when I sing, “Holy, holy, holy” – and rest in the split-second pause between each “holy” as all the beauty and the mystery of that word reverberates in me, when I sing, “’Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee,” when I sing, “Still all my song shall be, nearer my God to Thee,” when I sing, “Be still, my soul, the Lord is on thy side,” at a funeral, when I sing, “When we’ve been there ten-thousand years,” when I sing, “How great thou art,” when I sing, “It is well with my soul,” when I sing these hymns, Truths, the highest, truest Truths, are singing themselves into me.

I promise I am normal and listen to other stuff, too, but I listen to hymns throughout the week; I have playlists on YouTube and Spotify. And I find that even when I am alone listening to these hymns, I am not alone. When I listen to them – which is basically how I pray – I feel the church with me and the community with me. And I am strengthened. I think about you singing the hymns; I see you singing the hymns, and I pray for you. I want you to have a relationship with this music.

I want you to have a hymnal in your heart – songs, lines, truths, fragments of texts and tunes, to turn to in the dark times. Not to embarrass him, but Ryan Griswold is, I think, a totally normal, smart, funny, successful person (which is to say: this isn't only a weird-minister thing); and he told me once that he keeps a list in his phone of hymns that he hears in church and likes. He shared some with me, some that I think of as kind of deep cuts, actually, some that I love and loved to think of him loving, too.

Maybe try that. John and I are were talking about sending the Sunday hymns out in Thursday's Flash with videos so you can hear them and let them sink in and look forward to them.... Officially, as Protestants, we acknowledge two sacraments: baptism and communion. But unofficially, music is a third sacrament. We meet God and God's presence is made real in and through music every bit as much as in and through the bread of Christ's table, around which we gather....