

# When the Foundations Shake

sermon digest

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Acts 16:16-34

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We have been on a roller coaster this week. I suspect none of us has been immune to turning on the news or checking the news round up on our computers throughout the day to catch up on the events unfolding on Wall Street. The huge drops took our breath away, and the surges of seeming recovery left us somewhat consoled but uncertain about what to expect next. The foundations of Wall Street were shaking and with them, the seeming foundations of financial security not just of our nation, but of our world.

A couple of weeks ago, I came across a lively discussion among some of our members about debate over the debt ceiling in Washington. Our service that morning had focused on Peter encountering in Cornelius' living room the God "who shows no partiality", and we had talked about what Peter's experience says to us about our walls of prejudice. "Do we have to embrace members of the Tea Party?" one of our members asked with a laugh of frustration. Another member resorted to scripture, quoting the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not resist evil." The sense of frustration they were voicing with respect to the debate in Washington was real, and I appreciated the sense of concern they were expressing for our nation and world that went beyond the usual rancor that stops short of solutions by merely finding someone to blame.

The Bible and the experience of the church through the centuries are not unfamiliar with times in which the foundations of the world are shaking. And, if we are honest, and it's good to be honest in church, we are not unfamiliar in our personal lives with the shaking of the foundations. Although it is not a situation we would wish upon ourselves or the world, the question that matters is the question of what we will do with it. How will we meet the challenge? How will we tap into a strength that is more than a Pollyanna denial of the situation on the one side or a giving in to despair and cynicism on the other? Where, in other words, do we find strength to face the challenge?

**Midnight comes.** It had been a significant moment. As a matter of fact, it had been monumental. Paul's going over to Macedonia to preach the gospel had marked the first time the Christian mission had set foot on European soil. This moment in the book of Acts also marks the first time the writer begins using the word "we" to tell the early church's story, as if for the first time, the writer himself was a part of the action. It marks the first time the gospel is preached in a town lacking a significant Jewish presence. Apparently, there are not enough Jewish men (ten) to constitute a synagogue, for we encounter only a small gathering of Jews in "a place of prayer" outside the city. It also marks the first time a convert (the jailer) is baptized into the church with seemingly no connection to the Jewish faith at all. It was a monumental moment that took a radical turn when Paul took the unnecessary step of noticing the plight of one whose plight was best left unnoticed.

More than just a slave, the writer of Acts indicates she was also just a child. Like those possessed of spirits on Jesus' visit to Capernaum (Luke 4:41), she alone seems to recognize something of the preachers' identity. Possessed of "a spirit of the Python," the serpent associated with the oracle at Delphi, the girl loudly touted Paul and Silas as "slaves of the Most High God", terminology used not just by Israel's prophets, but by devotees to Zeus as well. Paul's freeing the girl from her spirit, however, did not free her from her owners. As a matter of fact, it infuriated them. On the order of the irate herdsmen whose swine were destroyed when they plunged over a cliff after Jesus exorcized spirits from the demoniac and much like the silversmiths incensed when people in response to Paul's preaching in Ephesus ceased purchasing idols, the owners of the girl exploded with anger. This message of Jesus had become too costly. More than a safe, personal elixir to detract people from the hard realities around them, this so-called gospel was having a dramatic impact upon people's livelihoods. When preaching begins tampering with property, when it undercuts the institutions of slavery, child labor and a reasonable level of impoverishment that we can all be comfortable with, it has left the safe parameters of religion and gone to meddling.

Dragging Paul and Silas before the magistrates, the girl's owners loudly made their case: "These men are disturbing our city [this despite the fact that no one seemed upset until the owners came on the scene]; they are Jews [and *everyone* knows what they are like!] and [they] are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans [never mind the fact that the law did not support their claim]." "Nation, race, tradition," William Willimon observes, tongue in cheek, were "all stepping into line behind the dollar" [*Interpretation: Acts*, 139]. Recognizing moneyed interests at stake, the authorities responded accordingly. They threw the book at them. Turning the mob loose to participate in the melee, the magistrates ordered Paul and Silas publicly stripped and flogged and had them thrown into the innermost, darkest prison cell of the city to rot in chains.

The venture to extend the gospel of Christ, which had begun with such promise, came to what seemed like a crushing defeat. It was midnight for Paul and for Silas and seemingly for the good news of Jesus. Hope was

buried in the depths of the earth.

**And so does hope.** Buried in the depths of a Roman prison, it is figuratively and it is literally midnight. And then the praying and the singing begin.

Not long ago, I was in conversation with some members of our congregation when someone mentioned the importance of our Wednesday night fellowship. Someone laughed and suggested that although we preachers might have a different idea, it might well be our fellowship that holds us together as a church. I laughed, too, because I know the importance of our strong bond of friendship, and I value it as much as anyone. Without that bond, without the joy that we take in one another and in who we are together, we would not be much of a church. We discussed an article on signs of a healthy church one Wednesday evening very early in our time together as a church. One of the top signs the article noted was the amount of laughter experienced in a church; and gauging our health on that basis, I have no doubt we are doing well. On our web site, however, I have said something I also believe to be true: "Worship is central to who we are at Grace Covenant Church." As we have said thousands of times since we have been together, it is not about "walking in lockstep or wearing a theological uniform." It is about being "an unfinished people of faith." We are on pilgrimage together, celebrating the grace and love we have identified of God in Christ, and daily seeking to know more about what that means in terms of how we live our lives. Every Sunday morning we come here not to participate in empty ritual, but to probe through our prayer, meditation, songs and words the depths of who we are. Meeting in this hour, we seek again to identify the foundations of all that is or will be. In this place we speak of those foundations in terms of the God we know in Christ not because it is the only way to God, but it is for us the way that has been opened to God, and we are grateful from the tips of our toes to the tops of our heads as we seek to live from that earth shaking and earth shaping knowledge.

Paul and Silas prayed and sang; and as they worshiped, the foundations of the prison were shaken. For them, that shaking seemed to open the door to freedom. For their jailer, it seemed nothing short of a death sentence; and he prepared to take his own life rather than face up to certain death at the hands of the authorities at whose pleasure he held his position. The magistrates who consigned Paul and Silas to prison would not be too far behind. Learning the next morning that they had without a trial instigated a public flogging of none other than Roman citizens, they knew that they thereby had subjected themselves to being sentenced to execution, and they quickly and earnestly apologized. Strange, isn't it, William Willimon observes, that those who at first appear in the story to be free (the girl's owners, the judges and the jailer) end up being those who are in reality enslaved; and those who seemed most enslaved (the girl, Paul and Silas) are free. "Having the key to someone else's cell," Willimon observes, "does not make you free. Iron bars do not a prison make" [p. 140].

**We are called to strength in the midst of chaos.** Are we free? Better yet, are we ready to withstand the shaking of the foundations and more than just to survive, to stand and contribute to bringing sense out of chaos? Writing in the aftermath of World War II, the great theologian and preacher, Paul Tillich, reflected upon the words of the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah as he spoke in eloquent and memorable terms of a world shaken by the European catastrophe. Caught up in the pangs of warfare, the world was no longer able to distract itself with the reassurances of the false prophets of the past who had cried, "Progress, infinite progress! Peace, universal peace! Happiness, happiness for everyone!" Shaken to its foundations, the world was at a point of recognizing false promises for what they were. Shaken to its foundations, the world's people knew themselves called to shoulder the responsibility of seeing the world as it was and having seen it, to seek with everything within them to right it.

Our situation is more like that of Paul than we might imagine. We may well lament the fact that prison doors are not miraculously shaken open in our experience. If we are honest, we may read of Paul and Silas's experience and dismiss it. Be sure to take note, however, of Paul's limitations. "Paul," Stephen Phelps, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church, Buffalo, New York, observes, "does not, and presumably cannot, command the spirit of Mammon to come out of the [girl's] masters in the name of Jesus and leave him to his mission" [*Interpretation*, April 2007, 206]. The power of Paul's prayer, just like the power of our prayer, is quite limited. "With a few exceptions, hard physical matter does not jump at the command of the apostles in Acts. Likewise, once a hardened heart commits . . . to concrete action, it . . . is not deflected from its aim by so subtle a power as prayer" [Phelps]. "Prayer, as the old saying goes, "changes things," but more often than not the "thing" is our ability to see and hear, our ability to get back in touch with the foundations of our lives that matter most and give us the direction and the strength to act.

Minimizing the economic crisis before us is not helpful. Quieting our nerves through prayer is not enough. Failure to be in touch with the crises that afflict the world in which we live is not an indication that we are

superior beings, inhabiting the joy and peace of the spiritual world by being cut off from the pain and suffering of our neighbors. Honest and open prayer before God does not and should not anesthetize us to workers in our society who labor for ever shrinking wages. Prayer before the God of love and compassion does not close us off to the desperation of the long term unemployed or to the frighteningly widening gap between rich and poor. Prayer before the God of love and compassion we know in Jesus Christ does not put us above the fray. Nor does it fill us with hate for those with whom we disagree. Worship and prayer before the God we know in Christ lifts us just enough out of the crisis to give us insight and courage and the heart to get back in the struggle to find hope and resolution for those who suffer in our midst.

“May we *not*,” Paul Tillich urges, “turn our eyes away; may we not close our ears and our mouths! But may we rather see, through the crumbling of a world, the rock of eternity and the salvation which has no end!”

[*Shaking of the Foundations*, 11].

Amen and amen.