

BREAKING CHAINS

Pastor Alva Looze

Greetings. I am a jailer, and I can't wait to tell you the most amazing story! It's about some people who were in my jail. They ended up there through some confusion – seems they caused some fuss in town, and after one thing or another, they wound up in jail.

Let me tell you the story. There was a slave girl that had a spirit that was annoying to Paul and Silas as they were preaching about how God loves everybody. She made a great deal of money for her owners predicting the future. The girl followed Paul shouting, “ These men are the servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” She followed Paul for many days and finally he had had it and turned around and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!”

Can you imagine how angry the owners of the slave girl were when they realized that their hope of making money was gone? The slave owners brought Paul and Silas before the authorities. Their clothing was removed and they were beaten. Anyway, here they were in my jail. I put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. I was pretty certain that the jail was secure.

Now, all of the other people that come into my jail are a pretty gloomy lot, but not these two. Oh no, they sat there in the grimy mud, singing at the top of their lungs and praying! And not regular songs, either, but songs about God, and how much God loved them. And songs about someone called Jesus. Over and over again. And that's not the strangest thing.

One night there was a terrible earthquake, and the prison walls collapsed. I figured that all of the prisoners would have escaped, and that would have meant the end for me. I

was about to pull out my sword and kill myself. But no. This Paul shouts out, “It’s okay. We’re here. We haven’t run away.”

I was amazed! These prisoners weren’t thinking of themselves but they were thinking about me, my life would have been on line. They sacrificed physical freedom in the short run to save my life. I was about to take my own life but when I saw these prisoners I recognized them by their clothing. Even though they had been stripped of their outer garments, they still wore the love of Christ Jesus and it showed through Paul, Silas, and the other prisoners were still, and they stayed. How were they able to sing praises to their God when they were in jail? And why did they care so much about me that they didn’t want me harmed?

I looked at Paul, and I said, “I want what you have.” “We have Jesus as our friend,” Paul said to me. “And you can, too!” I wanted what they had and I asked them “What must I do to be saved.” I then freed Paul and Silas and took them to my house cleaned them up feed them and introduced my whole family. My family welcomed them and after they were cleaned up gave them clean clothes. They knew that I’d lose my job, and maybe even more, if they had escaped. They cared enough about me to stay in a jail without walls! I fell to my knees. What was it that made these fellows special?

We listened to their stories about God’s love. And we knew that we wanted to be friends of Jesus, too. I learned that freedom is a state of mind and that my newfound friends could be free anywhere they were, even in the physical confines of a jail cell. I learned that Christ sets us free in our hearts and minds. Only the body can be held prisoner.

Well, that jailer had quite a story to tell. You know, when you’re a friend of Jesus, even though life has its ups and downs, you know that you’ll be okay through it all. The power of God is great that even when a person is jailed and placed in the innermost cell of a prison, shackled, guarded, and watched – even while in the deepest part of night’s darkness, midnight – the power of God is able to release that prisoner and set him or her free.

The Biblical witness includes some big events to demonstrate God's might. There are plenty of small nudges included, as well, and perhaps countless others not recorded. Of course, we need to remember that we ought not attribute to God just any devastating tragedy. But in all things, we can look at ways in which we are awakened anew to God at work in our lives.

No prison can hold God, God's people, or the joy that comes in knowing to whom we belong. God inhabits the praises of the people. Those who are in jail, physically, emotionally, or psychologically can be set free from what is holding them, binding them, and keeping them from seeing the light of a better day. They can have a sure hope that when they pray and praise God in the midst of their circumstances, the power of God will be with them. This power has no jailor and will set them free in any way needed. It is a power available to each of us as a child of God.

God's promise of life is one that is filled with joy. No, this is not about happiness. Even Paul and Silas couldn't have been happy sitting there in prison. But they prayed and sang hymns to God. Theirs was a confidence in the presence of God. Theirs was a joy in the knowledge of God's presence with them.

That is why Paul and Silas were compelled to put a stop to fear, to turn the fear that the prison guard was feeling into a joy of his own. And this joy is something that becomes our own. God works in us and the Holy Spirit flows through us, and this is good. They stepped outside of themselves and thought of others. Love is a mark of a Christian. Love thy neighbor as thyself. Trust in God. God doesn't envision our lives to be lived in isolation. It is much more difficult to practice faith alone. God knows we need support. When those we live with also are in Christ, the support system is strengthened for all. This is how powerful God's love is. Praise God!

But there is one thing we absolutely cannot do without on our journey is Christ. Perhaps no one puts it better than Thomas a Kempis in his classic book, "Imitation of Christ." What can the world give you without Jesus? His absence is hell; his presence, paradise.

If Jesus is with you, no enemy can injure you. Whoever finds Jesus has discovered a great treasure, the best of all possible good. The loss of him is a tremendous misfortune, more than the loss of the entire world. Poverty is life without Jesus, but close friendship with him is incalculable wealth.”

Just like the airlines, the Christian life also has a policy about baggage. Leave behind resentment, hatred, anger, and failure. Carry with you the fellowship of other Christians, the word of God, and the sacraments. And never, ever journey without Christ.