

Joy in the jail

Reflections on Acts 16:25–34

Jennifer Davis Sensenig

Insomnia, earthquake, prison ministry, social chaos, job failure, attempted suicide, care for abuse victims, civil rights of prisoners, and conflict with government: these matters are as current in today's headlines as they were in the Aegean Christian mission circa AD 40. In fact, all these issues emerge in the account of the apostle Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail.

In scripture hardships associated with mission are contextualized according to a deeper joy, which stems from the good news of Christ's resurrection and the outbreak of the kingdom of God across the world.

Woven in and through the story found in Acts 16:25–40 we also notice the distinctive fibers of Christian faith: worship, salvation, compassion, hospitality, preaching, joy, shared meals, belief in Jesus Christ, and baptism.

Suffering in mission

A mission party of at least four—Paul, Silas, Timothy, and the unnamed narrator whom I'll call Luke—arrives in the city of Philippi, and in no time a couple of them get into holy trouble and land in jail. (From the perspective of the Philippian authorities, the men's infraction was creating an anti-Roman disturbance in the city. From the perspective of the Gospel narrator, their action, undertaken in the name of Jesus Christ, is a liberation from a triple-whammy of oppression: exploitation of a Greek oracular gift by Roman commerce, domination of a slave by her owner, and control of a single female by a group of males.)

While incarceration is rarely part of a church mission plan, it was not uncommon for and perhaps even expected by Paul. According to the timeline in Acts, by the time Paul reaches Philippi, he has already been driven out of Antioch of Pisidia, had fled Iconium when threatened with stoning, and has been stoned in Lystra, not to mention having been (temporarily) blinded by

the Lord himself! Additionally, Peter has been jailed twice in Jerusalem (Acts 4:3; 12:4) and John once (4:3), and John the Baptist and Jesus have both died in the jaws of a criminal justice system. Apparently having a record is not unusual for a prophet of God's kingdom.

After this episode in jail there will, of course, be more suffering. Paul boasts of his personal trials for the sake of the gospel (comparing himself favorably against the “super-apostles” influencing the Corinthian church) in this way:

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far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jew[ish leaders] the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:23–28, NRSV)

Nevertheless, in scripture hardships associated with mission are contextualized according to a deeper joy, which stems from the good news of Christ's resurrection and the outbreak of the kingdom of God across the world.

God's power—in prison

Human worship of God, such as the prayer and singing of Paul and Silas (Acts 16:25), both *originates* in God's joy and delight in humankind and *creates* joy in the life of the worshiper. This is not to discount the need for lament and petition when everything seems wrong in our own lives or the life of the world. Yet, as we see in the Hebrew worship book—the Psalms—through worship

the faithful are able to freely express pain and even despair, because in so doing transformation is already underway through the abiding presence and matchless power of God. Are we surprised that when we are in deep pain we crave both songs of aching lament and songs that lift our spirits with hope of “joy in the morning?”

We don’t know how inmates Paul and Silas prayed and sang in Philippi, but we know their standard prayers and songs from the Psalms. Perhaps a fitting psalm was 102, which reminds us of God’s attention to the cries of prisoners:

*Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD:
that he looked down from his holy height,
from heaven the LORD looked at the earth,
to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die;
so that the name of the LORD may be declared in Zion,
and [God’s] praise in Jerusalem,
when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the LORD. (Ps. 102:18–22)*

Another psalm they may have sung in such a time as this is Psalm 16:

*Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge . . .
I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.
I keep the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand,
I shall not be moved.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.
For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.
You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.
(Ps. 16:1, 7–11)*

This psalm was significant for Paul, who quoted it in Antioch of Pisidia (see Acts 13:35) when speaking about how God raised Jesus from the dead. Did these early followers of Jesus believe that God's saving power was also available to them in a prison cell? Though wounded, bleeding, and aching, through their worship and song prisoners Paul and Silas were turning toward joy. We glimpse in the story of Paul and Silas this arc of joy that begins long before any present suffering. Like a rainbow emerging after a thunderstorm, on the other side of the Philippian jail story is an outbreak of joy as a man believes and a household is saved (v. 34). Like the first century "prisoners [who] were listening" (v. 25), we contemporary readers of Acts, kept awake by thoughts of our own suffering, might consider songs and prayers rooted in joy as a way through our own dark nights.

Suicide prevention

Whether or not Paul and Silas' midnight worship provokes the earthquake, the miracle of this story is an "act of God" in our modern sense. An earthquake renders the prison facility useless, and social chaos is about to ensue. At this point we are reintroduced to the dutiful jailer we met in verses 23–24.

A recent study in the state where I live (Virginia) indicates that suicide rates are increasing, especially among older men.

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Recently in our area Mennonite Central Committee sponsored a storytelling tour for the prevention of gun violence. I learned that the majority of deaths by handguns in the United States are not homicides but suicides. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention break down death by firearms into four categories: homicide, suicide, accidental death, and legal intervention.¹

The heart of this salvation story from Acts is suicide prevention and the resulting joy of literally saving a man's life, saving a family, and saving a community from the devastation of suicide. While we may not teach and preach extensively on suicide prevention each year in our churches, it is vitally important that our leaders demonstrate a capacity for addressing this issue, lest the church

fail to be a trustworthy source of hope when faced with the trauma of attempted or completed suicides in our communities.² While mental illness can be a factor in suicide attempts, it isn't always. The jailer in Acts 16 attempts suicide not after a long struggle with depression but rather in a moment of extreme fear. He has failed in his job and anticipates the loss of his employment or—more likely—his life. In teaching and preaching with this text in view, it is helpful to name the kinds of failures and losses that trigger self-harming behaviors and suicide attempts.

This text also lends itself to a discussion of the availability of lethal weapons and the risk this access entails for people who, in a moment of crisis, literally cannot see other options. As if to emphasize the blind terror of the jailer, his call for lights (v. 29) makes readers realize how dark his present moment has become.

Joy released

The liberating tremor of the earthquake has multiple effects. The foundations of the prison (architecturally and sociologically) are shaken by this act of God. Additionally, not just our heroes Paul and Silas but also all the other prisoners are freed. Finally, the earthquake has a ripple effect in the jailer's own body as "he [falls] down trembling before Paul and Silas" (v. 29). With their jailer cowering before them, Paul and Silas may seem to have the upper hand in this moment; they appear to be in league with the god of earthquakes.

But we do well to remember that prior to their imprisonment the mission workers were stripped and beaten with rods. Their feet were shackled in the jail. It may be that the missionary prisoners are unable to walk. The text describes how the jailer "*brought them outside*" (v. 30) "*took them and washed their wounds,*" (v. 33), and ultimately "*brought them up into the house and set food before them*" (v. 34). Stripped of his power over the prisoners, the jailer is himself lowered to a point of vulnerability and asks: "What must I do to be saved?" (v. 31).

From a contemporary vantage point, the response "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved—you and your household" (v. 31) may seem pat or pious. Out of context we hear this response from a powerful successful church leader (Paul) with impeccable credentials. But in context, we hear these words from

beaten men whose future seems as precarious as that of the trembling jailer.

While we don't know what "word of the Lord" (v. 32) Paul and Silas spoke to the jailer and his family, Psalm 16 would have been a fitting place to begin. The interior verses (omitted in the earlier quotation) read:

*I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you."*

*As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble,
in whom is all my delight.*

*Those who choose another god multiply their sorrow;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names upon my lips.*

*The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.*

*The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage. (Ps. 16:2–6)*

Paul and Silas do not rely on a bloodthirsty god who forces the hand of a failed jailer to raise a sword against his own body. The rejoicing in the jailer's home that night celebrates salvation for the jailer and his family, the sparing of his life, and the protection of Silas and Paul. It also celebrates a possible new direction for the people of Philippi.

Without erasing the pain we experience in life, joy redeems it. I recently met a woman who has made relating to victims of trauma her life's work. I had read about her ministry and expected to find a sober, even broken woman. What I noticed in her, however, was her profound joy in life. Many of us have experienced financially impoverished communities in which there is nevertheless joy in life shared.

Canonical healing

This episode in Acts is not only a story of joyful redemption for Paul, Silas, the jailer, and his family. I also understand this account as a joyful redemption of a previous and parallel account in the book of Acts. Recall the episode in Peter's ministry (Acts 12) when he is liberated from jail by an angelic break-in (and break

out!). Like Paul's imprisonment in chapter 16, Peter's imprisonment in this case is brief. Peter's jailbreak is all the more memorable because of the confident servant girl, Rhoda. She is, of course, the sole member of Mary's good-news house who believes that the community's prayers for Peter have been answered, and she recognizes his voice at the outer door. She is "overjoyed" at her discovery (12:14). Thus, elements that create a link between these two stories include the two apostles (Peter and Paul), a short imprisonment, a miraculous release, arrival at a (safe) house, and an outbreak of joy.

Another element linking these two stories is much more troubling. At the end of the account of Peter's jailbreak in Acts 12, his former guards are executed at King Herod's command. As a whole, the story of Peter's escape doesn't make the New Revised Common Lectionary cut and thus many of our churches are at risk of forgetting it altogether.³ But it deserves our attention, especially noting the parallel to the miraculous escape by Paul and Silas in Acts 16. In my most recent read-through of Acts, my excitement about Peter's liberation and my joy in the character of Rhoda were tempered when I remembered that while Peter is spared (at least for the present), the lives of the jailers-guards are capriciously extinguished. What does it mean to live according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, when the preservation of our own lives rests not exclusively but at least in part on the loss of other lives?

While I will not weigh in on the historical debate about whether the author of Luke-Acts was a physician, I am confident that this writer had a genuine interest in healing the historical wounds of the Christian movement, and that he offered his writing, in some cases, as a balm for a wounded church. Might these two parallel stories be included, among other reasons, to redeem a history in which Peter's life was saved at others' expense? Might Paul's intervention in behalf of a jailer's life increase the church's care for any and every life, even the lives of people who carry out evil orders, whether or not those orders are legally sanctioned?

Household joy

Of the three stories of redemption set in Philippi (Acts 16)—featuring Lydia, the slave girl, and the jailer—two of the people

involved certainly become believers: Lydia and the jailer. It is not clear what direction the life of the slave girl takes when her oracular power dries up and she (presumably) regains her own voice. Likewise, it is not clear whether other women at the riverside synagogue agree with Lydia about the good news of Jesus Christ preached by Paul. But at the least, Lydia, the jailer, and the jailer's family become the nucleus of the Christian outpost in

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Philippi. Among the characteristics of this church emerging from the founding conversion stories, we find the leadership of women (Acts 16:15, 40), healing (16:18), concern for economic justice (16:16), vital worship and prayer (16:13, 25), and joy (16:34). If the timeline in Acts is accurate, the author of Luke-Acts was present in Philippi not only during the short period of initial conversions but also for the next three years, until rejoining Paul (Acts 20:5) Thus, we are not surprised to see these same themes (women

leaders, healing, justice, worship, joy) emerging as distinctive emphases of Luke's Gospel.

This logic might be circular, as Luke is the presumed author of both the Gospel and Acts. But our New Testament also includes a letter from Paul to the church in Philippi. And this letter also includes the themes of women leaders, healing, justice, worship, and joy. As a result, I imagine Luke in the city of Philippi, participating in the newly planted church for some years and being schooled—perhaps for the first time—in congregational life. These gospel emphases would be his frame of reference for further research into the good news when he eventually traveled to Jerusalem (Acts 21:17) and had the opportunity to begin his careful investigation and “orderly account” of the gospel (Luke 1:1–3).

Are we then not surprised to find that Luke's Gospel is studded with outbreaks of joy—from heavenly messengers (“I am bringing you good news of great joy . . .” [2:10]), to a parabolic parent (“But we had to celebrate and rejoice . . .” [15:32]), to Jesus himself (“he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit” [10:21]), to all who witness with the blessing of the risen Lord (24:52)?

Notes

¹ I would make a different distinction between categories 1 and 4, referring to them (respectively) instead as “illegal homicide” and “legal homicide.”

² When we speak of suicide, we need compassionate language that ministers to families and friends of victims. For example, when addressing these issues in general, I avoid referring to “successful suicide,” as certainly no suicide is a success.

³ For the text of a short three-person drama based on the Acts 12 story, contact the author at cmc_jennifer@ntelos.net. Characters are Luke the evangelist visiting in Jerusalem, Mary (mother of John Mark) the house-church leader in Jerusalem, and Rhoda.

About the author

Jennifer Davis Sensenig is a graduate of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Sseminary (Elkhart, Indiana) and also recommends travelling (by boat) in the Mediterranean through the BLESS program of Eastern Mennonite Seminary to understand the context for the New Testament writings from Acts-Revelation. She has served congregations in Iowa and California and as a preacher/teacher in various churchwide settings. She and her spouse, Kent, live and garden in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where she commutes by bicycle to serve as lead pastor of Community Mennonite Church.