

Easter 7C (5/8/2016)

Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

John 17:20-26

The stories we tell shape our lives. Narratives get into our bones and tell us where we come from, who we are, and where we're headed. And, those narratives often compete with each other. The story of the church's origin testifies to God's enduring power to give life in the face of powers that deal death. It tells of a transformative kind of love that liberates us from whatever holds us captive.

The scientific name for the human species reveals what we believe is unique about us. We are *Homo sapiens*, Latin for "wise person." In other words, humankind is a thinking species. More specifically, we are *Homo sapiens sapiens*, that is, we have the ability to think about thinking, we are self-aware. But Lutheran theologian, David Lose, insists that there is another trait that is fundamental to human identity. He calls us *Homo narrans*, or the species that tells stories.

And, our stories are not superfluous; they're not simply for amusement. The stories we tell shape our lives. Narratives get into our bones and tell us where we come from, who we are, and where we're headed. Family stories, for instance, tell us about our origins. We know the struggles and successes of our ancestors, we know their virtues and vices, and we receive that heritage as a blessing or a burden or both. Cultural legends tell us about our values. George Washington owned up to cutting down a cherry tree, and thus instilled the ideal of honesty in American children in every generation since. Histories, no matter how seemingly objective, are themselves narratives, told from a particular perspective to emphasize that which the historian deems most important.

And, our narratives often compete with each other. The rags-to-riches individual success story clashes with the I-could-never-have-made-it-on-my-own story. Depending on who you ask, the Civil War was either the war to end slavery or the “war of northern aggression.” And, dominant cultural narratives often conflict with the biblical narrative, the one that we claim as our guiding light, the story of God’s loving relationship to creation from the beginning to the end.

Among other narratives of faith, the Book of Acts is foundational for Christians. It’s the story of Jesus’ first followers as they continue his ministry to a beleaguered world, even in his earthly absence. The story of the church’s origin testifies to God’s enduring power to give life in the face of powers that deal death. It tells of a transformative kind of love that liberates us from whatever holds us captive. And in this way, it overturns competing stories about power, stories that emphasize domination and self-preservation.

The story in our first reading from Acts is a prime example. Walking the streets of Philippi, apostles Paul and Silas are pursued by a slave-girl with a spirit of divination, or fortune-telling. Her affliction is a source of income for her owners, that is until Paul exorcises her demon. And this is a financial loss they cannot abide. So, concealing their true motive for seizing Paul and Silas, the slave owners accuse them of deviancy: “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.” There is nothing quite like a threat to economic power to inspire political and religious persecution.

Paul and Silas are beaten and imprisoned on baseless charges, confined to the innermost cell of the prison, and shackled. **But this captivity, strangely similar to that of their Lord, cannot undermine the Spirit at work in Jesus' followers. They pray and sing aloud long into the night, defying the power that seeks to silence them. And, as if to vindicate them, an earthquake shakes the foundations of the prison, loosing their bonds and flinging wide their doors.**

Upon seeing this, the jailer despairs, knowing that the prisoners' escape would bring a wrath worse than death. But Paul and Silas and the others preempt his suicide by voluntarily remaining in their cells, looking to his interests at the expense of their own.¹ **The jailer is immediately converted. He falls down at the apostles' feet and pleads for the same salvation that he perceives in their faithfulness and love. "Trust in the Lord Jesus," they tell him. Taking them into his own home, he washes their wounds and feeds them, and they baptize his entire household.**

Sometime before morning, Paul and Silas return to the prison, and promptly win their freedom as well as an apology from the Roman officials who had wrongly imprisoned them.²

What a story! It would be a mistake to underestimate the significance of this episode, as if it were nothing more than a charming folktale. This story is a building block of the church's identity. It's a rousing narrative of hope in a context of hopelessness, like the story of the resurrection itself. The competing story insists that wealth is power, and power corrupts, and anyone who resists the status quo is

¹ Philippians 2:4.

² See vv.35-40.

subject to punishment. The failure to maintain this system by force – to keep the inmates locked up, so to speak – is a cause for even worse punishment.

But God confronts the dominant story with a surprising alternative. **In God's story, an exploited slave-girl is freed from her exploitation, captives rescue their captor from death, a jailer becomes a gracious host, and entire households are welcomed into the community of faith, the family of God. This is what salvation looks like. This is an exemplar of Paul's assertion that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."**³

Dear church, which story will lead us? Will it be the narrative of abusive power, captivity, and fear? That story, common as it may be, undermines hope and provokes us only to bitterness or indifference. But there is another possibility. **We may be led instead by the narrative of the Spirit's power, freedom, and fearless love. That story makes us "partners in an earthquake of liberation,"**⁴ to borrow Brian McLaren's words. **That story sweeps us up into what God is still up to in the world.** So, which will it be?

³ 2 Corinthians 3:17.

⁴ *We Make the Road by Walking*, 190.