

May 8, 2022 Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 16:16-34

“You and Your Household”

1. This Sunday we continue our theme of origin stories.
 - a. We have been looking at the origin story of the Christian church, which will also have us pondering the origin story of our own personal faith.
 - b. In this morning’s story, notice the question the jailer asked: What must I do to be saved?
 - c. I wonder if that’s a question you have ever pondered in your journey of faith.
 - d. In a conversation with our Confirmation class last week, I told them that I grew up Presbyterian, and that in fact I am fourth generation Presbyterian.
 - i. My family went to church every Sunday.
 - ii. My mom and dad were and are my faith role models.
 - iii. Growing up I had never NOT been a part of the church.
 - iv. And yet, there was something which made me feel like I didn’t fit even back then.
 - v. Among my friends in the church youth group there was always the conversation of when we had been saved.
 - vi. What they meant by that referred to when we had each accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.
 - vii. They were speaking of the moment when it dawned on them that God was saving them from their sins and they had then taken action to say: I want that!
 - viii. For some of them, they had experienced that moment of being saved when they had been at a summer church camp, perhaps, when during a revival or a worship service they had come to the life-changing realization that they needed Jesus at the center of their lives.
 - ix. Me? I had always known faith,
 1. I had been baptized as an infant,
 2. my parents had always spoken of God being at the center of our lives,
 3. I DID go through confirmation in 6th grade or so and stood before the congregation and answered the same questions which my parents answered twelve or so years earlier when I was baptized: did I reject evil and did I turn to Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior? Yes, I did.
 4. Yet somehow, in the view of my friends, it was not quite the same thing
 - e. Looking back at my journey of faith, I felt less connected to the story of the jailer in Acts (with a big event awakening him to the need for change leading to a big decision) and I felt more like his family (where they as a whole household are making a shift).
2. Our passage today offers us three very different stories of liberation, of being saved, though they each have different contexts and repercussions.
 - a. Let’s start with the one in the middle: The jailer
 - i. He is awakened by an earthquake along with the creaking of jail doors swinging open and the rattling of chains falling to the ground.
 - ii. His next thought was a logical conclusion: all the prisoners must have escaped

- iii. Considering the punishment from the brutal Roman empire who hired him to torture prisoners, rather than give it the opportunity to make him pay on his own flesh for his failure to do his job, he got his sword out to swiftly end his life.
- iv. But Paul, who had earlier been singing church songs in spite of the terrible beating by the guards, prevented him from killing himself by telling him ALL the prisoners were still there.
- v. Shocked, the jailer asks: what must I do to be saved?
- vi. And so it is a question with more than one meaning, really: In church language we might think “saved from sin” but doesn’t it also make you think “saved from the danger of execution” or “freed from this sadistic profession” even “liberated from this kind of slavery”?
- vii. “Believe in Jesus” Paul says
- viii. Paul’s answer and God’s grace does indeed liberate him enough to take the risk of inviting these two prisoners to his home, to meet his family, to tend to their wounds
- ix. The jailer is transformed by the moment. He is a changed man.
- b. Which brings us to the story of the jailer’s family. A whole household is liberated
 - i. Paul had said: Believe in Jesus and you and your whole household will be saved.
 - ii. That’s odd, isn’t it? Well, maybe not as much as it might appear.
 - iii. The head of the household had a responsibility for the wellbeing of all those people (family and servants)
 - iv. If the jailer had found a way of liberation, then it’s a package deal: we’re all saved
 - v. They all got baptized. They all started over.
 - vi. And it’s probably a good thing they all did, because now they’d need each other and their new community, because being liberated also meant they were on the outside looking in at a society which rejected followers of Jesus.
 - vii. Becoming a Christian wasn’t about joining the “in” crowd: it was electing to be in the minority, in a movement where people could accuse you of random things and you’d end up in jail
- c. Which brings us to the first story, which we absolutely cannot overlook: the slave-girl
 - i. She didn’t ask to be saved.
 - ii. The way the story is presented it is as though the spirit which possessed her was trying to get Paul in trouble by “outing” him
 - iii. I’m bothered that the exorcism left this already vulnerable girl even more vulnerable in the hands of the men who possessed her
 - iv. Her story goes quiet abruptly, and I worry about her
 - v. She fades into the background as two groups of men fight about her without her input. That’s shameful.
 - vi. I hope that unfinished business was getting picked up by the community of believers who could foster a fuller sense of liberation and safety for her
- 3. What liberation we seek may depend on our circumstances.
 - a. What I can say is that with God at the center, liberation is possible.

- b. And I don't just want to mean it in a spiritual sense of sins being forgiven and waiting until heaven to escape pain and suffering here on earth.
- c. I mean discovering true freedom – the loose ends of the slave girl's story
- d. "When 19th-century British missionaries arrived in the Caribbean to convert enslaved Africans, they came armed with a heavily edited version of the Bible. Any passage that might incite rebellion was removed; gone, for instance, were references to the exodus of enslaved Israelites from Egypt.... A typical Protestant edition of the Bible contains 66 books ... By comparison, the astoundingly reduced Slave Bible contains only parts of 14 books." <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/heavily-abridged-slave-bible-removed-passages-might-encourage-uprisings-180970989/#:~:text=When%2019th%2Dcentury%20British%20missionaries,of%20enslaved%20Israelites%20from%20Egypt.>
- e. In other words: there is power of liberation throughout the scriptures, which makes people in power nervous,
 - i. so be suspicious of anyone who says that the Bible is just spiritual, or that the example of Jesus is just about getting you to heaven
 - ii. that sounds like somewhere, somehow, someone is trying to tame the words of liberation in there, or edit them out altogether, or is trying to shame anyone who dares to see the political repercussions of the Gospel
 - iii. For example, I'd argue the Bible speaks of freedom, of liberation for women from under structures which misuse power to control their lives unilaterally and uniquely.
 - iv. This kind of liberation the Gospel speaks of is one which rattles power structures.
 - v. Consider that the message of Jesus equalized people, highlighted the power of God among those pushed to the edges of society, and as the Christian church was in its infancy, it was a radical movement which brought together people across otherwise uncrossable barriers of gender, of race, of nationality, of status, of financial means, of education, etc.
 - f. Saying that loud enough then meant getting put in jail.
 - g. Saying that loud enough today means being accused of twisting Jesus' words, or being accused of not even being a true Christian.
- 4. We honor the households of faith where we grew up and where we now belong, the communities where mothers of the faith embrace and nurture us, where they open our eyes to the true liberation which Jesus offers, where they make sure our life story isn't overlooked or forgotten as unfinished business.

Reflection Questions

1. Share a story of when you felt freed / liberated from something which you felt was holding you back / holding you down.
2. How do you relate to the stories of liberation / salvation in the passage (Acts 16:16-34)? Which one, if any, feels closest to your faith journey?
3. In the context of church, what does it mean to you to "be saved" ? How has that meaning evolved in your journey?