

“GOD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS:
I – THROUGH AN EARTHQUAKE!”

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Acts 16:16-34

John 17:20-26

This morning I'm starting a new sermon series, but ironically we're going right back to visit a character whose story we just talked about a few weeks ago – the Apostle Paul. In a sermon just two weeks ago entitled, “Most Likely to . . . Completely Change” we learned about Paul's incredible conversion from a man determined to wipe out the early Christian movement to the man most responsible for the widespread growth of the early church.

Today's lesson from Acts shows us just how far he's come. He and his helpers, like Silas, are traveling far and wide with the good news of Jesus Christ, and they are having an incredible effect on people. House churches are cropping up everywhere, lives are being won by Jesus. It seems that God could not have chosen a more effective leader for that day and time. This former protagonist turned evangelist was a powerful witness to what God could do in one's life, and his ministry was making a huge difference in the world.

So, for the most part, everything was going great, until we get to today's lesson. You heard what happened. Paul and Silas healed a slave girl who made money by telling fortunes. And that made her owners raging mad, because she had been making a lot of money for them. So they went after Paul and Silas, got them, beat them to a pulp, and then imprisoned them in a deep cell with their legs in shackles.

How could this happen, this sudden turn of events, this reversal of fortune? Everything had been going so well, and now, Paul and Silas have been silenced, locked away, no doubt wounded by their beatings, and defeated.

If they were any bit human, which, of course, they were, they must have wondered why this happened. Why – when they were only doing what God called them to do? Why – when they were being good people, doing good things, telling about a good God, inviting people to know the goodness of life God provides? Why? Why did they find themselves injured, imprisoned and immobilized by shackles?

Why? The big question all of us ask when bad things happen. Why? Weren't we doing what God asked us to do, living godly lives as best we could, coming to church, doing our best to serve him? Why? Why illness? Why loss of job? Why broken families? Why broken relationships? Why financial struggles? Why?

When bad things happen, we ask why? And we would have understood had Paul and Silas done the same thing. Yet, we don't learn that they do. Instead, we read of them singing and praying while imprisoned. They kept the faith. They kept doing what they had been doing, and they trusted God.

And did you hear that one little line thrown in there? "And the prisoners were listening to them." Even in prison, they were making a difference, they were making a witness to Jesus.

And then, something else happened. An earthquake struck! Can't you just imagine Paul and Silas looking at each other, and asking "What next? This is unbelievable. All that, and now an earthquake?"

From first appearances, it didn't exactly look like good news. The world was literally crumbling down around them. But then the prison doors burst open, and the shackles fell off of them, and in that moment, they knew that God had made a way. What looked like something incredibly bad, turned out to be something incredibly good – and it would get better still.

Because the jailer, the prison guard, when he saw that everyone had been freed, was about to take his own life for fear of retribution by his superiors. But Paul stopped him from harming himself, reassuring him that none of the prisoners had run off, and so profoundly moved was this man by the actions of these faith-filled men that he asked Paul what he had to do to be saved. If Paul and Silas and the others had that kind of faith in God, he wanted it too.

So they told him about Jesus, and he took them home, and the scripture says that he and his entire house were baptized that very night, and they cared for Paul and Silas, tending their wounds. And everyone rejoiced!

What a story! If you don't believe that God works in mysterious ways, then you weren't listening. First, he turns a sworn enemy into an incredible evangelist. Then he uses an earthquake as a tool for changing hearts and minds! All these things that looked so bad, God used for good, no, God turned to good.

My friends, this is a great Biblical story to turn to when things go bad in our lives – when earthquakes hit us, if you will. And I'll tell you why.

First, it reminds us that none of us is immune from hardship. Look, here one of God's most precious messengers, Paul, faces tremendous difficulties. If things can happen and do happen to Paul, they can and do happen to us, which we know all too well. Bad things just happen, they do

Which leads me to the second thing we can learn – and that is that even when bad things happen, God is still there. Paul and Silas trusted that – which is why in the middle of the night they still sang hymns and prayed prayers. Even when things were at their worst, when they were beaten and shackled, and when the world was crumbling around them, they trusted that God would make a way.

Which God did – and that's the third and most important thing we can take away from this story. God made a way through the tragedies – both human and environmental – and brought about incredible good.

Which God is in the business of doing. I don't know about you, but sometimes I'll look back on things that were struggles for me, and I'll discover how God made good things come through them.

Which brings me to the other scripture lesson we read this morning, the Gospel lesson from John, where Jesus prays for unity. I couldn't help but think about the United Methodist Church when I was reading that passage. Right now, in these days following the special session of General Conference back in February, I think it's safe to say that the larger denominational church is about as far from unified as you can get. We're still struggling to figure out if we can live together, and if we can't, how we will live in the future.

It's like an earthquake has hit us, and there is debris everywhere. So I find great hope in remembering the Paul and Silas story and how God worked in mysterious ways to bring about good. If God can do that, God can make a way for the United Methodist Church too. So we'll continue, like Paul and Silas, to sing hymns and pray prayers and trust that God will make the path clear for a new future for the greater United Methodist Church.

But I want to end, by making this story a more personal one, and say that if you have come here today and you're struggling, because something bad has happened, or you even feel like you've been in an earthquake and things are crumbling around you, please find hope and direction through Paul and Silas' story. Know that you're not alone, and that God can pick up the pieces and work in mysterious ways to bring about good. So sing the songs of faith, pray to the God who loves you and trust that he will make a way where you can't see it right now.

As you come forward for communion today, and take the bread and the cup, remember that they are symbols of something that looked incredibly bad – Jesus' death on a cross – that God turned into something incredibly good – new, eternal and abundant life through the resurrection of Christ from the grave. If God can do that, friends, God can do anything, for indeed he works in mysterious and wondrous ways. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Amen.