



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A Song As Deep As Peace and As Rich As Joy

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

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Easter 7 (Year C)

Acts 16:16-34

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One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "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." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Here's how a friend of mine once described a dream that a friend of his had one night: "(My friend) dreamed that he was sitting in the sanctuary of a church, and that a

number of people were sitting in the pews. The service was to begin soon, but the worship leaders hadn't come out yet. Then, all of a sudden, everyone heard pouring through the room the most hauntingly beautiful music. It was coming from the organ, but no one was at the organ bench playing it. So one by one, the people got up and came over to the instrument to find where this beautiful music was coming from. They were so curious about this that they began pulling the organ apart, until they completely dismantled it. And, when they had finished destroying it, the music stopped. So they all went back to their pews—some of them feeling sort of sad that the music was gone; some of them feeling a little relieved by the silence. But all of them suddenly amazed to hear rising from the piano the most hauntingly beautiful music. No one there, but the music came back. It came back."

Just as it happened in that dream, there's something that keeps trying to stop the music that we have gathered to make—and that we will be sent to offer in our individual lives following the service today. And by music I don't mean just the literal songs and melodies and anthems and hymns that we offer. I mean music as a metaphor for all of our praise and gladness, all of our passion and hope, all of the gifts we bring in love for God, all that we offer as signs of our praise of and love for the God to whom we belong.

But there's something afoot that doesn't like or understand the music of the church. There are forces in the world, and in the church, and even inside of each one of us that would dismantle our music and shut up the praise that we were born to live making.

Perhaps it was the day you walked into your office ready for another day's work only to find a letter thanking you for your service, but that your position is no longer needed.

Or maybe it was the day you sat in stunned silence as the doctor shared what had been found in your most recent MRI.

Or maybe your music was dismantled when you realized that no matter how much effort you were putting in, there was no way you could possibly save whatever it was that you were trying so hard to hold onto—whether it was your marriage, or your child, or even your faith.

We were born to make music—to offer our very lives as a living song of praise to our God—but, in so many ways, there are forces out there by countless names who keep trying to dismantle the music of our lives.

Which is why it's a bit surprising that the music keeps rising. It keeps coming back again and again, and I'm convinced that the reason this is so is somewhere in this powerful story about two people who were in big trouble: Paul and Silas.

At first, things seemed OK. Paul and Silas were going about teaching and preaching, bearing witness to Christ's work in their lives. They were out in the streets, offering their song of faith and inviting others to sing and to find freedom in Christ. And that song finally cost them their own freedom. As you remember, they called the demon out of the

slave-girl, and when they did, her owners had no more way of making money off of her ability to tell fortunes. And they seized Paul and Silas and they were beaten severely by the crowds.

After they had been beaten, they were thrown into prison. Luke says it was the inner-most prison; a small place where no light ever got in; no fresh air ever got in. To add to their torture, their feet were wrenched widely apart and locked into wooden stocks. Here are two of God's children in real agony—cracked bones, bleeding wounds, unable to move, locked in a painful posture; and in a darkness so thick they can't even see each other's faces."

"So would it surprise you to hear rising out of that dark and terrible place the sound of singing? Surprising or not, that's what they did. Paul and Silas began praying and singing."

One of my Music City buddies once told me that he thought their song was surely one of the great duets in history, only he didn't believe it sounded anything like Pavarotti and Domingo, but probably that their song sounded more like Garth Brooks and Willie Nelson."

Can you hear them singing? "The music rose out of the dark. It had some pain in it—but it had something underneath the pain that was lifting it until it soared up into huge praise. It sounded as rich as joy, and as deep as love, and it rang in the night—sounding like freedom."

"And the situation that these two were singing from is everybody's situation, really. Every person I know lives inside some kind of constraints. Each of us is closed up inside some limits that we'd run from if we could but we can't. Each of us is pressed by some memories that we wish we didn't have but we do. There is light that each of us wishes we had, but we don't."

So what do we do? Well, we could beat our fists against the limits—as so many people do. We could curse what hems us in. We could sit in a pile of pity and live a bitter little lifetime. In other words, we could take on the role of victim.

Or, we could just try to forget our limits and our dreams and spend our lives amusing ourselves, but to choose that response would be to choose the way of the foolish.

Or, we could, right from the place where we are—the place with its limits—start to sing. We could pour out our hope, our passion, our joy, our gifts, our very lives that we have to God.

Of course, let me be clear about what I'm not suggesting we do. I'm not suggesting that we just pretend that our life is somehow absolutely perfect in ways that's it's not. After all, I suspect Paul and Silas weren't singing "Every Day with Jesus Is Sweeter Than the Day Before," because I'm fairly certain that particular day didn't feel so sweet.

So what were they singing, do you think? It surely couldn't have been some syrupy sweet song, because Paul and Silas surely remembered the proverbial wisdom of the sages, who once wrote: "Singing cheerful songs to a person with a heavy heart is like tak-

ing someone's coat in cold weather or pouring vinegar in a wound."

No, it had to be a song that echoed with hope even while singing of the hard places.

Here's what I think: I suspect they were singing a psalm, and if they were, my best guess is that they were singing Psalm 139. In that psalm, the psalmist is describing how there is nowhere that he could go that God would not hold him fast—from the highest heavens to the depths of Sheol to the farthest limits of the sea. And then Paul and Silas—in the darkness of their cell—would have gotten to the place in the psalm were they sang this:

*"If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."*

Or, if they had our hymnals, maybe they would have sung number 280: "Through many dangers, toils, and snares, we have already come. 'Tis grace that brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home."

Or, just maybe they would have sung the hymn we will soon sing, "What, though my joys and comforts die, the Lord, my savior liveth. What though the darkness gather 'round? Songs in the night, he giveth. No storm can shake my in-most calm, while to that rock I'm clinging. Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, How can I keep from singing?"

That's where the music comes from, isn't it? It lives in the memory of how far God's grace has already brought us. And it comes from the hope that this same grace is even now powerfully at work to lead us through whatever comes in this day and the ones which follow.

Our task, then, is to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ—to trust him with praises, and with all our hopes. To trust him with every gift that it's in our power to bring. To acknowledge the limits inside which we're living, and then from within them, to lift our hearts, to lift our voices, to lift our lives.

This is the music we make for God. God hears it. God loves it. And God tunes it to the opening of doors for our best freedom, and for the freedom of others too. You see, the song which Paul and Silas sang could be heard by others, and Luke makes it clear that the one thing missing at the beginning of the story is there at the end: salvation has come to the jailer and his household—all because the music—the passion, the gifts, the praise and gladness—all of it has sounded so deeply that others wanted to learn to sing as well—to sing the song of life in Christ.

And now, let us stand to offer our music together, as we say what we believe:

We believe there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus; for we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. We are convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

(My thanks to Steve Hancock, whose insights and beautiful words shaped this sermon immeasurably.)