

“What do you See?” A Sermon for FBC Worcester on Acts 16:16-34
By Rev. Natalie Webb, 6/2/19

What do you see, when you hear this text from Acts? *Who* do you see? If you read it quickly, with the training you’ve received in Sunday School to look for the miraculous, to trust the disciples, to keep your eye on the end of the story, you will probably see Paul, pastor-extraordinaire, innocent man of God, miraculously heal a little girl, then be unjustly accused by greedy pagans, beaten, and thrown in jail (poor Paul). You’ll see Paul’s strong faith that kept him singing in the dark cell and the miraculous rescue by earthquake – God shaking the very foundations of the world to unlock Paul’s chains. You’ll see the grand conversion of a jailer on the verge of suicide, and the vindication of Paul and Silas and the other disciples who were with them. It’s a beautiful story, of God’s power and liberation, right?

Except that, when you read it more closely. When you slow down and take in the scenery, you might notice that not everyone in this story is set free. Not everyone has a happy ending. It’s easy to rush past the slave-girl in this story as a narrative device, a plot point that gives the story a problem to be solved, an obstacle for our protagonist, Paul, to overcome. She disappears from the narrative as quickly as she entered it. She’s unnamed, she’s young, she’s at the bottom of the oppressive world she lives in, and honestly, it is easier for everyone if we just blow right on past her. But that would be a mistake. The same mistake Paul makes, I think.

What happens if we slow down, ask some questions, pay attention to the slave-girl? What if we put her at the center of our reading, what do we see? Does the story look different? Paul and the other disciples are headed to the place of prayer down by the river again, the place they met their most recent convert, Lydia – you remember, woman-of-means, dealer-in-purple-cloth, Lydia – who persuaded them to stick around in Philippi. And today, on their way to the river, Paul meets another woman – one who could not be *less* like Lydia. Instead of a well-to-do business woman, she’s an enslaved young girl with a “spirit of divination.”

Notice that it’s not an evil spirit or a demon (though there are plenty of those in Acts), but a “spirit of divination,” which is actually a pretty bland English translation for the Greek phrase: “python spirit.” It’s a connection, a comparison to the famous Oracle of Delphi, the place emperors, kings, and commoners alike travelled to hear divine utterances from the priestesses who received their power from the spirit of Apollo’s python (which is a whole other story, but reeealllly interesting if you’re into that kind of thing). This slave-girl is not demon possessed, she’s not a fortune-teller, she’s an oracle. She’s believed, in her culture and religious world, to be a mouthpiece for the divine. And unsurprisingly, her enslavers cash in on this skill, this gift, and make bank.

The mantic prophetess slave-girl follows Paul and the others around day after day proclaiming, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!” Sounds like a pretty good confession of faith, to me! And what better advertisement? “These men are slaves of the Most High God, proclaiming salvation!” But it turns out that today, Paul’s openness only goes so far. Lydia, an upstanding woman, a God-fearer who listened to them and opened her heart and her home was one thing. But this girl? This slave-girl? This pagan Python-spirited slave-girl? Nope.

Acts tells us that Paul was “very much annoyed.” But why? Was she just too loud, was she calling too much attention? Was Paul offended at being called a slave, being relegated to

the same status the girl herself held? Was it that a woman was speaking with divine authority instead of listening quietly, a divine authority that Paul did not understand or authorize? Was she telling a truth that Paul himself was not quite ready to accept? Whatever the reason, it was from a place not of healing or comfort or compassion, but *annoyance* that Paul ordered the spirit out of the slave-girl, in Jesus' name. But what spirit did he order out? This prophet girl was confessing salvation from the Most High God. So where exactly is God's spirit in this story? Did Paul just cast her out?

Wait a second, can you cast out the spirit of God in Jesus' name? Just ask any little girl who's been told *in Jesus' name* to be silent in church, ask any woman who *in Jesus name* has been commanded to forgive her abuser, to keep quiet and protect him. Ask any queer kid who's been sent to conversion therapy, who has been taught, *in Jesus' name*, to pray-the-gay-away. Our world pits God against God all the time. Our churches pit God against God all the time. How often we use our God-given authority to miss, to cast out, the spirit of God that's right in front of our faces. Are we sending her to the nursery or Sunday School, the farthest corners of the building, because the spirit of God in our children is too loud and distracting? Are we sending her to a different kind of church because ours is much too serious, too reverent for her unruly worship? Are we casting God's own Spirit out of our holy space because she doesn't meet our standards of excellence? (Our incredibly white, heteropatriarchal standards of excellence, by the way?)

Paul misses the spirit of God in this girl because he can't let a voice *that* different, *that* loud, *that* persistent, *that* unexpected speak truth to him. He just will not see God's spirit there. He will not hear her confession. So he does what we tend to do when we are confronted by truth that is too loud, too persistent, too annoying, too unexpected for us to see or hear. He goes in for the quick fix. What will shut her up and leave him looking like a hero? What we might *want* to see as an exorcism for the girl's own good, for her healing, is actually Paul rushing in unthinkingly to fix the wrong problem. He fixes the thing that he is uncomfortable with (no more mantic prophesies), and he misses the real source of oppression at play.

We are reminded of that oppression when the girl's enslavers suddenly appear. You probably imagine them storming in from some other place, some evil place where slave owners and oppressors spend their days, but do you really think they'd have let their prize-possession run around following strange men for days on end? Do you think they'd let this girl out of their sight? It seems more likely to me that the enslavers have been there all along, following Paul, listening curiously. Maybe they're the reason the girl is present in the first place. Were they God-fearers like Lydia, on the verge of conversion until, all of a sudden, it cost them too much?

Oppressors are hardly ever sniveling villains in dark lairs, they're church-goers, y'all. They're us. Oppression lives here in our vocations, in our obsession with profit over people, in our pews and in our hearts and in our history. We are happy to sit quietly, curiously, supportively even, until our source of income, our source of self-importance, our source of power and security is threatened. Then we react as violently as the girl's enslavers, who in a rage, drag Paul and Silas to the authorities, accuse them of heresy and lawlessness, of breaking Roman customs – "That's not the way we do things around here!" They rile up an angry mob to beat them, strip them, and have them thrown in jail. Are Paul and Silas our brave and suffering heroes here? Or are they getting a little taste, a reminder, of the kind of oppression and bondage the slave-girl has likely dealt with her whole life?

We can only imagine what happens to *her* next. If her enslavers reacted this violently to Paul, it's likely that they reacted even more violently against the girl. The prophetic gift that made her highly valued by her enslavers was suddenly gone, and that meant that her already oppressive situation was now even more precarious, more uncertain, more hopeless. You can probably guess at what tasks an un-gifted slave girl might be required to perform.

But the story moves on: During the night, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, when suddenly there was an earthquake that shook the very foundations of the prison and "immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened." *But what about the slave-girl? What about her chains? Were they broken open, too? What about the doors that should have opened for her? As far as we know, she remains firmly in bondage, passed by, forgotten, as the rest of the story miraculously works itself out.*

Does that sit well with you? Is that all there is? Is that as good as it gets? It's past time that we start listening to the slave girl. And to all the people we have silenced and rushed past for years, for centuries, for millennia. Does that mean we kick Paul and our traditional heroes to the curb? No, of course not. But it does mean that sometimes, as with all of our ancestors of the faith and of the flesh, we have to learn from their mistakes.

So church, I want to ask you, what do you see? Who are we listening to? Could it be that we are missing the Spirit of God right in front of our face because the truth she tells is just so annoying? Where is God's Spirit? Is it always with the preachers and teachers and faithful practitioners? The Spirit's reconciliation in our church and in our world has everything to do with what we are willing to see, who we are willing to hear – in our sacred texts, in our churches, in our communities.

Church, what is the real problem, the real oppression that we are missing in our attempts at quick fixes? As we soothe our consciences by writing checks or posting "woke" positions on social media or boycotting chicken joints, what actual source of oppression are we completely missing? As in our story today, where there is suffering, there is profit. Follow the money and you'll find the system of oppression. Follow mass incarceration to the prison industrial complex, to rhetoric of law and order that is racist all the way down. Follow the opioid crisis in our own city to the incredible financial stakes of big pharma. Follow the almost weekly mass shootings in our country to the massively lucrative gun industry. Follow eating disorders to the impossible standards set and held in place to maximize profit for the beauty industry. The list could go on and on.

Dealing with the actual sources of oppression in our world would be as difficult for us as it would have been for Paul, so we continue to write checks, meticulously craft our posts for the world to see, we take a stand that helps to quiet the voices of the oppressed in our ear that are just so loud and annoying, without really costing us anything. Is this as good as it gets? In our story today, Paul needed an education. One that he was unwilling to get. He needed to listen, but it made him too uncomfortable. Church, if we want something more than this, we need an education, we need to listen, we need to de-center ourselves and learn from the voices crying out the truth to us, even and *especially* when that truth is uncomfortable.

What do you see, church? Is this as good as it gets? If we want there to be more, if we are asking the Spirit to persuade us, to change us, to move among and through us, we have to listen to her. Church, are you listening?