

“Doxology”

Acts 16: 1-34

Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

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Each week, around the world, thousands of Christian congregations raise their voices in praise of God, until more recently:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise him all creatures here below.

Praise him above ye heavenly host: Praise father, son and holy ghost.

In countless languages this “Doxology” is treasured and sung. We have not sung the Doxology together since March, when this pandemic first hit our communities and we have been isolated and our worship together has been abbreviated. And I have missed singing it. Few of us know the story behind these words, first published in 1709, and still fewer know anything about the composer, Anglican Bishop Thomas Ken. Thomas Ken was orphaned in childhood. He was raised by his older sister and her husband. In 1651 Ken became a scholar of Winchester College and in 1661 earned a BA at New College, Oxford. Such Presbyterian schooling during times of political and religious turbulence only deepened his love for the Anglican heritage of his youth. He became a minister and held various church and academic positions, even serving as the chaplain to Princess Mary and Charles II. Ken published many devotional guides for his students as well as composing hymns. The “Doxology” was originally the closing stanzas of three separate hymns. The word “doxology” actually means “a liturgical formula for the praise of God”.

Many of the stories of the Bible are stories about people who are able to sing praises to God even in the midst of the most turbulent, violent, dangerous/threatening of times. This morning we will consider one such story – a story about how Paul and Silas were able to praise God in the inner regions of a prison.

Prayer for Understanding

Read Acts 16: 1-12

First, Paul chooses a new traveling companion as he sets out on this second missionary journey. Paul is accustomed to traveling with Barnabas but they have apparently had a parting of the ways – these things happen – and now Paul chooses Timothy, whose mother is Jewish but whose father is Greek and a Gentile, to travel with him. Was Paul doing something new and for a specific reason? Was Paul trying to wed Jewish tradition with openness to the Greek world? Was God about to do something new and needed new leadership? When the characters change in the Biblical narrative, it is usually because God is about to do a new thing.

Second, Paul has set his heart on returning to some of the churches he has already established. He wanted to re-visit the folks he's known and loved, to see for himself how they were doing. Paul wants to return to what is comfortable and familiar. And who can blame him? Twice Paul sets out to go in the direction of *his* choosing and twice the Spirit of God prevents him from returning to what to comfortable and known. Twice Paul gets an answer of "NO". God has a most annoying habit, when you read the stories of the Bible, of calling us into the unfamiliar, unpredictable future and blocking the road

which leads back into the past. We can nostalgically and fondly remember the past and build upon the lessons learned, but we can never re-create the past.

It's the same here at Peace Presbyterian Church. Many of us fondly remember the church of our past, but we cannot re-create that church. God is doing something altogether new here at Peace Presbyterian Church.

Remarkably, Paul is open to a new call and new traveling companions. Paul literally turns around and goes east instead of west, to Troas, a coastal town, to await God's direction. Troas was at the crossroads between the familiar roads he had traveled in the past and the uncharted roads to the east, in Macedonia. Wait, be open and listen for God's Spirit to direct you. When God says "no" to us, it is not because God is trying to be "mean." He is simply preparing us for something new – God's agenda, not ours.

Sure enough, God calls Paul to set sail from Troas to Samothrace, across waters that sailors feared because of the unpredictable currents. We seem to be navigating those turbulent waters these days. From Samothrace Paul will journey a short distance to Philippi, where he will found the first Christian Church on European soil. If Paul had not been open to God's agenda and switched directions, the gospel may not have spread into Europe.

Let's now continue the story of Paul's journey in Macedonia and see what amazing, unpredictable new things God will accomplish through him.

Read Acts 16: 13-34

Paul arrives in Philippi and some miraculous things do indeed happen. Paul and his traveling companions share the gospel story and three people also change direction in their lives.

The first is Lydia. A God fearing, good woman. She is highly respected by her community and an astute business woman – a woman of some material wealth and leadership skills. She opened her heart and her home to their preaching. You could say that she used who she was and what she had for the furtherance of God’s kingdom.

The second is the slave girl. She is possessed by demons or destructive voices that live inside her. In contemporary language – she suffered from some sort of mental illness. Paul, grown weary with her crazy rantings, orders the demons inside of her to come out and suddenly she is free.

But she has now lost her value for her owners – her infirmity was profitable for them. And so, they file a complaint with the town managers. Now I ask you what is wrong with this picture? Why are the owners of this slave girl not out rejoicing that a human being has been healed from a horrible mental illness and why don’t they give generously to the local Mental Health Association in celebration? Because Paul’s preaching and healing has gone to meddling when it suddenly affects their pocketbooks. A little religion is okay as long as it is kept in its place and does not disrupt the status quo.

So, Paul and Silas are thrown into the local jail; their feet fastened to a stake; their jailors are notorious for their savagery; the stench is unbearable and the darkness profound. Get the picture? And what do they do? They hold a revival meeting, singing and praying, glorifying God even in the worst possible of situations!

Every time I read this passage of scripture I am reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer - of one of the church’s greatest saints. Bonhoeffer was raised in Berlin, Germany, where he eventually studied theology and earned his doctorate at the age of 21. During World

War II, Bonhoeffer refused to pledge allegiance to Hitler, confessing that only Jesus Christ is Lord. He was arrested for disrupting the status quo and spent the duration of the war in concentration camps. In April of 1945, shortly before the Allied Troops liberated the concentration camps, Bonhoeffer was hung. He was 39 years old. Immediately before the guards came for him, Bonhoeffer led the prisoners in a service of worship. One of my favorite Bonhoeffer quotes is “We do not complain of what God does not give us. We rather thank God for what He does give us daily. At the threshold of a new day stands the Lord who made it.”

Do we sing our doxologies in every time and place?

We are all called to listen for God’s direction. To give thanks to God in all situations and trust God to do the leading. Not become impatient or discouraged. Paul and Silas were able to sing and pray during a long night in prison because they trusted God’s leading and knew, and knew, that with God all things are possible.

When demons threaten to consume us, when we are staked in the darkness of night, we pray to God and the earth heaves, the prison shakes, the doors fly open and everyone’s chains fall off. That is the power of God in our midst. And it is a life giving power which will not be contained! People of God, you have been given the gift to call upon the mighty power of God. Use the power wisely. Use the power for all God’s children, especially those imprisoned in one form or another.

The jailer, probably an ex-soldier, trained in the ways of the Roman Empire, is awed by the power of God, is shaken to the core, and wants to destroy himself. He has lost control and is thrown into chaos. Paul invites him to a new life; a life lived for God instead of self; a life with a new purpose – that purpose being God’s agenda not his own.

And that night he opened his heart to a new way of living – he let go and let God and his walls came tumbling down as well.

May we all thank God that Paul was willing to journey far from home, adjust his vision for Christ's church, shift his theological views and accept those who had previously been excluded from participation in the Body of Christ. Paul was willing to take a look at his life from God's perspective and adjust his sails to the direction the Spirit was blowing.