**Acts 16:24-34**; 1 Peter 2:9-12; Is 58:5-9; Mt 5:13-20 February 5, 2017

Many years ago, a former teacher to my wife got cancer in the mouth. Now that is a disease one can fear. Imagine the potential disfigurement, the pain. It was caught fairly early, so she had a good prognosis – if she underwent the treatment. I have never experienced cancer treatment, but we have all heard from friends or family that it is more than unpleasant. It can be downright painful, physically exhausting, psychologically demanding. Add to this that this widow had to travel several hundred miles, leaving family and friends behind for a couple months. She could dread the months of pain, exhaustion and loneliness. Instead, she got up every day and visited her fellow patients. She asked how they were doing, encouraged them. By not thinking of only herself, she saw and seized the opportunities God had given her. She encouraged others while bringing glory to God.

She did what we are told by positive thinkers to do: “Don’t look difficulties as problems, but as opportunities.” Wise words. Very difficult words! In today’s reading, we see men who lived this out. I hope that their attitude and actions encourage you to…

**Seize the Opportunities God Gives You**

**I. Opportunities to Draw Close to God**

**II. Opportunities to Draw Others Close to God**

**I.** While we are encouraged to opportunity in place of problems, Paul and Silas seemed to be oblivious of any negative at all! Here they are in prison…

But let’s first talk about how they got to prison. Paul had come to the city of Philippi to start a church, as he had done in so many other cities. The beginnings of this church were more humble than most. At first, they didn’t even have a house to worship in. Instead, they worshiped at a nearby river. Every day Paul made the trip through the market to the river. After a little while a certain slave girl noticed of them. Every day as they walked through the market she would shout out, *“These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved”* (17). Good publicity, right? Paul didn’t think so. This slave girl happened to be demon-possessed, and many people regarded her as a fortune-teller. Imagine a deranged woman standing out in the road every Sunday morning yelling “This Lutheran church will tell you about the real God.” We might let her be for a week or two but we would soon try to find ways to stop this. Paul, too. One day, when this girl shouted her usual words, instead of continuing on his way, Paul stopped, turned around and said to the evil spirit in the girl, *“In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!”* It worked!

Great, right? Remember, this girl was a slave. Her owners were not impressed. They had made a lot of money off this slave girl’s reputation as a fortune-teller. Without the evil spirit, she was just as worthless as any other slave. Money gone, they stirred up the crowds against Paul and Silas. *“The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten.”* And these Romans knew how to beat a person. They did not just use a whip, in this case they beat them with an iron bar. OW! *“…After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders,* ***he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks”*** (22-24). Bruised, almost naked and bloody, these men were not just tied up, they were put into stocks. This would not have been one the best day of my life.

What can a bloodied, bruised person tied up in a prison do? He could curse his persecutors. After all, greed had motivated the slave owners. He could complain about the wounds. Ribs broken. Wide gashes caked with dried blood. He could bemoan the injustice. The judges had given legal sanction to the injustice! What would you do? I have to admit: if I were asked whether this was an opportunity or a problem, I would have said, “Um, this is definitively a problem.” Apparently these crazy apostles thought it was a blessing!

***“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them”*** (25). Paul and Silas thought it was time to sing a song of praise. (That is what the Greek word here, , is! – a hymn of praise!) “Hey, Silas, I know, let’s sing ‘Nobody Knows the Troubles I’ve seen.” “Naw, Paul. Let’s sing ‘Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow.” “Great idea!”

Could you do that? Could you praise God when you have been stripped naked, beaten and thrown into prison for no reason – and all of it justified by the authorities of the land? I am not saying that you should rejoice when personal tragedy strikes. But notice that they saw great suffering as a time to draw close to God. Like these apostles, let us go to God in troubles. And maybe you will be given the measure of faith that you can even rejoice knowing that God’s good, gracious and wise will has been done.

How can you do this?

Have you ever noticed how often people, even Christians, turn away from God in times of trouble? Most of that is because in the good times people, Christians, have not been training themselves for the bad times. Where do you think those disciples got those hymns? Just made them up? Probably not. They had the habit of worshiping with the Psalms and New Testament hymns. They read and meditated on God’s word often. When it came to troubles, they were prepared.

*Today* is the day to prepare for those troubles. The hymns you sing today, the sermon you hear, the Bible study after the service, God gives you all of these today to prepare you for troubled times. Listen today. Sing today. Let God’s Holy Spirit enter your heart and mind so that in the time of testing you will not run away from God but seize the opportunity to draw close to God.

**II.** So, the apostles were singing hymns of praise in prison into the night. ***“Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody’s chains came loose”*** (26). This was no ordinary earthquake. Not only did the earth shake, but the ***“prison doors flew open, and everybody’s chains came loose.”*** God did this, but why? If we aren’t careful here we will miss the point. Why did God open those doors and unlock those chains? If God did this so that Paul and Silas could escape from wrongful imprisonment, then it was a failure. Paul and Silas did not run out into the night, into the arms of freedom.

Then why the earthquake, the open doors, the loosened chains? It was not for Paul and Silas’ freedom, but for the jailer’s.

The earthquake woke the jailer. He thought, “I’d better check to be sure everything is ok in the prison.” So he got out of bed, went to look – and to his horror all the doors were open. Open! The prisoners gone! In the ancient world, if a prisoner escaped, a guard was often given the punishment of the escaped prisoner. (1 Kg 20:38-40) This jailer knew that Roman justice would find him guilty and likely give him the death sentence. He would die without honor. So ***“he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped.”*** (27)

***“Paul shouted, ‘Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”*** (28). Paul saw an opportunity to bring someone else close to God. “Great!” you say. But you don’t understand. Paul sacrificed so much when he said those words.

Paul and Silas had been wrongfully beaten, imprisoned, put in stocks. Then the doors flew open, the chains came off. Freedom was theirs. Only one obstacle stood before them: the jailer. But the jailer was about to kill himself – then they would be free. Freedom which they deserved would be theirs. Yet Paul did not think like other men. He thought: “It is better for me to remain in this prison. I need to save that man. He is going to kill himself and then face eternal punishment… ***‘Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!’”***

Then jailer asked, ***“What must I do to be saved?”*** Somehow by hearing Paul and Silas’ singing and prayers – or maybe hearing one of Paul’s sermons on another better day – somehow this prison guard had learned of his sin, that he really did have a sin problem with God. ***“What must I do to be saved?”*** To this man Paul answered, ***“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”*** That’s all. Trust in Jesus as your Savior. Paul, in the middle of great trouble and suffering, in temptation to help himself, Paul brought this man close to God.

What would you do? Would you be quiet? Would you run? I don’t ask what you would do if you were in prison and an earthquake rattles open all the doors and the prison guard has a sword to his belly. That won’t happen to you. But you do see people killing themselves every day and what do you do? People who live in the sin of adultery. People who swim in the sin of alcoholism. People who pile up the sins of gossip, jealousy and greed. You also see nice decent people, maybe nicer than you are, claiming that they need no Savior. Do you watch from the shadows as they disembowel themselves, ruining their lives and eternity? Or do you speak up?

That is what saved people do. They speak up to save co-workers, parents, children, husbands, neighbors. They tell people they know about their sin, so that like the jailer they ask or at least think, “What must I do to be saved?” Then we can answer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus.”

“But,” we think, “if I speak up, they will get annoyed…mentioning Jesus will make me look like a fool.” Maybe. But if you are quiet, is there any chance for that person to be saved? When you refuse to speak, the person drifts ever further from God. Troubled times are great times to seize the opportunity to draw people close to God. Let us stay close to Jesus today, so that in our day of trouble we forget not our God, and so that we are ready to draw others close to God.

How often, over the years, have I seen men and women whom I knew who *used to be* members, or are members in name only. I have stopped to greet them. But do I ask them if they are going to return to God? Sometimes, but often, no. My excuses could be many, but the fact is that I was quiet and they were left at a distance from God. This distresses me, because it is sin.

It is that very consciousness of my own sin and my own need for my Savior Jesus, it is this awareness that my Savior treats me better than I deserve, that reminds me that others need this same Savior. May we ever seize opportunities to draw people closer to God.

We have a fine sounding theme and parts in this sermon. Seize the opporutinities God gives, to draw close to God, to draw others close to God. Fine words, but without deeds, they are meaningless. May God’s Spirit work in us, so that once, just once in this week we may seize an opportunity to draw others closer to God, to speak the word, so that God can work in their heart. Amen.