**Acts 16:25-34** January 10, 2021

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*Acts 16:25About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 26Suddenly 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. 27The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. 28But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”*

*29The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. 30He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” 31They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” 32Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. 33At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. 34The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

After the “Why?” stage, it’s the “How do you do that…” stage. Little children want to be like their amazing moms, so they ask mom, “How do you…” It is a question we never stop asking. We want to know how to do the things other people are doing. We want to have the things that other people have (and here I don’t mean in a selfish way.) It is empowering to ask. “How do you…?”

Sometimes the questions are really not all that important. “How do you make awesome home-made waffles?” Well, the Betty Crocker recipe book from quite a while ago directs you to substitute bacon fat for butter. That will give you really good waffles!

That “How do you...” question, however, is hardly a vital life skill question.

How do you stay out of poverty? Now there’s a question about something that matters. Two years ago a well-docemunted study advised three simple things – admittedly tougher than adding bacon fat to waffle batter – but three simple things: 1) graduate from high school (don’t worry about the honor roll, just graduate); 2) wait to get married until 21 years of age, and don’t have children until after marriage; and 3) get a full-time job—not a great job, just a full-time job. 98% of people who do these three things live above the poverty line. 74% of people who break all three rules live below it. Forget the exceptional stories of exceptional people doing exceptional things and stick with three ordinary things that ordinary people can do. *(https://www.jacksonville.com/article/20120127/OPINION/801258741)*

There are even bigger “How do you…” questions than that. One of the biggest, maybe even *the* biggest “how to” question of all time was asked in our reading. A strong, trembling, armed man on his knees asked this all-important question of bloodied men in rags,

**“What must I do to be saved?”**

**I. Led to Ask the Big Question**

How did it come to that? Why is this jailer, reduced to fearfully trembling and begging his prisoners to tell him how to be saved?

We don’t know all that happened, but let’s go over what the Bible does tell us. On the day of these events the Apostle Paul had gotten some people in the city of Philippi pretty riled up by his Christian convictions. Those people spread some libel and convinced the authorities to publicly flog Paul and his travelling companion Silas. After being flogged, Paul and Silas were remanded to the jail with a special command to the jailer that he keep his eye on these sinister fellows. So he confined them to the most secure cell in the jail, and then, to be extra sure, locked them in wooden stocks.

So there you have Paul and Silas, wounds still oozing blood, no medical attention, bent into a pretzels, clothing in tatters. The first verse of our reading tells us that in the middle of that night after the worst day of their lives, ***“they were praying and singing hymns of praise to God.”*** Wow! There is a sermon all its own in there! Did you hear that? ***“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”***

Then there was an earthquake, then the doors opened and the bonds fell off. The jailer came in, thought they’d escaped, had his sword drawn to end his own life. Paul told him, “Don’t do it!” At first the jailer bowed at their feet, then he took the two of them outside to ask them the question, ***“What must I do to be saved?”***

I think we miss the irony of that question. I know I always have until studying this sermon text this past week. This man *had just been saved*. He *had* nearly died by killing himself, but *had* survived. He had felt the cold steal against his flesh and those thoughts were now far from him. The danger was past, yet he is still asking, *“How can I be saved?”* It’s like a woman rescued from a burning building, sitting on the bumper of the fire truck, asking when she is going to be rescued. It’s obvious she has been traumatized. The fireman tells her, “You’re safe now, miss. All your family is out. Your house might be a loss, but you were all saved.” But she keeps insisting, “Am I going to be rescued?”

Do you know what we would probably do? We would probably tell the jailer, “Don’t worry about it, man. You’re safe!” Or, “Let’s go get a drink and forget about what happened.” And you know what happens? He goes and gets the drink and forgets about what happened. He laughs it off and thinks, “That was crazy! I was actually thinking about handing my life over to God there for a moment. Isn’t that crazy? Thanks, brother, for talking some sense into me!”

That’s what often happens. People find themselves in a crisis, a divorce, a car accident, a victim of crime, a perpetrator of crime, a bankruptcy. They start to ask themselves the big questions of life that draw them relentlessly toward God. And *with our assistance* they drown out that moment of spiritual receptivity with the things of this world, whether booze or friends or shopping or sex or food or social media. We think we are doing them a service by getting their minds off of those big important questions.

But not the Apostle Paul. No, Paul heard this man in anguish of spirit and he knew what to do. He knew that trying to pooh-pooh his troubled thoughts, would be to miss the one chance this man might have of hearing words that could save his soul for eternity. Paul knew that this was a time for The Means of Grace.

**II. The Answer to the Big Question: the Means of Grace**

Here I want to take us on a bit of a tangent to our reading, but it is an important tangent. It is called The Means of Grace.

“How do you get saved?” Just in case you are forgetting, let me give you a clue. The answer the jailer was searching for is right in front of you every time you sit in that pew. Whenever your mind wanders during a sermon or the liturgy, and your eyes naturally move to the brightest and most colorful part of the sanctuary. You are staring at the answer.

“How do you get saved?” Look to the front of this church and there it is in that great big cross. There Jesus took the guilt of all our sins, the sins of the world, the sins of jailers and murderers and tax cheats and fathers and mothers and decrepit grandmothers and rolly-polly cute little babies, and he suffered and died for their sin.

But for the person who is really serious about this question, there is still the question – “But how does that get to be mine? How does what Jesus did so long ago, so far away, do me any good? ***“What must I do to be saved?”***

Right here in front of this church, in a glowing circle around the cross is the answer to that question as well. You see no words. The answer is written like some sort of *National Treasure* riddle—remember that movie? Look at the pictures at the four corners of the cross. Do you know what those four pictures mean? These windows picture one of the more important core concepts of our faith. Our catechism students have learned to call it The Means of Grace. It’s how Jesus’ work of salvation becomes ours.

What is grace? That’s a word every Christian should know be able to define: Grace is God’s undeserved love, especially the forgiveness of sins. The Means of Grace are the answer to the question of how you get that grace, forgiveness won on the cross of Christ, to us. Forgiveness gets from the cross to us the same way you get water from the water tower to your kitchen sink – through a pipeline. The pipeline for God’s grace, forgiveness, is called the Means of Grace.

So let’s look at those pictures.

In the bottom left you have a picture of a dove. That dove represents the Holy Spirit who, at Jesus’ baptism, descended from heaven in the physical form of a dove. God the Father is the Creator. Jesus is our Redeemer. And the Holy Spirit is the one who makes us holy, who works in our hearts. The bottom left window tells us *who* makes Christ’s forgiveness our forgiveness: the Holy Spirit. The other three windows are the *tools* the Holy Spirit uses to do so. These are the Means of Grace.

Next, in the bottom right corner is a book. As you would guess, it symbolizes the Bible. Apart from the Bible, there is no true knowledge of who God is, who our Savior is, or even, in a sense, who we are. Only in the Word of God in the Bible are we connected with Jesus’ forgiveness. You can’t read it in the sunset. You can’t hear it whispering on the breeze. It is only in the Bible.

In the top left is a seashell. Now this one is a little misleading, because a seashell is not a necessary part of what it represents: baptism. The necessary parts are only water and God’s word. Then why the seashell? It seems that fairly early after Bible times, Christians in some places baptized by pouring water from a seashell. But the water and the Word combined in baptism are powerful. When one man in Acts 22 was invited to be baptized, God’s prophet said, *“Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away.”* You see, Baptism isn’t just a symbol, it actually removes sin. Baptism isn’t something I do, but something God does, as 1 Peter 3 says, *“[Baptism] now saves you.”* Baptism is a Means of Grace, a way that Christ’s forgiveness comes to us.

Finally, in the upper right corner is a cup with a few stalks of wheat. More obviously, this is a symbol of Holy Communion, where Jesus gives us his body and blood in communion with the bread and wine *“for the forgiveness of sins.”* This too, according to Jesus’ own words, is a Means of Grace.

These are the Means of Grace, the ways that the Holy Spirit brings God’s forgiveness to us. He does so through the Word of God, through Holy Baptism and Holy Communion; or, as the catechism kids memorize: “The Means of Grace are the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.”

**III. Applying the Means of Grace**

And the Apostle Paul knew that. So he didn’t invite the jailer down to the bar, to get a drink, and to just forget the evening. Paul didn’t tell the jailer of the many different things he could do to be saved—because he couldn’t do anything to save himself. And he also didn’t even try to point out to the jailer why his question was the wrong question, as if he needed to argue him to a different perspective. Paul simply dropped the Means of Grace in front of the jailer of Philippi, or maybe I should say that he laid it on his heart and told him, ***“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”***

And the jailer believed. And then Paul and Silas told him more, and they told it to his entire household. And then Paul utilized another of the Means of Grace, and the entire household was baptized, the same sacrament that Jesus underwent in our Gospel reading at the beginning of his ministry, and that he commanded for all people after he had completed his work of salvation. They were bathed in the forgiveness Jesus won on the cross.

How glad we can be that the Holy Spirit has used the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, to save us out of our sins, to bring us to faith in Christ Jesus. Let us continue to stay close to those Means of Grace that our faith may be strengthened. Amen.