

“Not Boring”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
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Acts 16:16-35

I grew up Episcopalian. In those days at my church we had Morning Prayer every other week, so we only had Communion twice a month. It didn't matter much to us kids which service it was because we left at the Gospel procession and went to Sunday School where we learned some of the stories of the Bible. I remember learning about Moses, David and Goliath, Daniel and the lion's den, Jonah and the whale, and lots of stories about Jesus. We didn't learn to quote chapter and verse, like some of my friends in other denominations, but we were pretty familiar with the stories.

Somehow, though, as I grew older, I came to think of the Bible as boring. All the stories I learned in Sunday School were very familiar, but I'd heard them all before. I felt like I knew the parts that I needed to know and the rest was just boring and irrelevant. It never occurred to me to go to a Bible study; it just didn't sound interesting. Until I began thinking about going to seminary. I decided that if I was going to become a priest, I probably ought to read the Bible. Whenever I'd tried reading the whole thing before, you know starting at Genesis and ending at Revelation, I'd never gotten past the first half of Exodus. I kind of got lost with the Hebrew people in the wilderness and never made my way forward. This time I had a chart that had me reading about 4 chapters of the Bible a day from the Old and New Testaments and would help me complete the reading in a year.

It was amazing to read the whole thing. Yes, there are some parts of the Bible that are hard going, like the genealogies and the details of building the ark of the covenant. But our scriptures are also full of fascinating stories. Not just the familiar ones. Try reading the book of Judges sometime – you may be surprised at what you find. The book of Acts is also filled with fantastic stories, some of them high adventure. Like today’s lesson. Definitely not boring.

Our story opens with Paul still in Philippi. You may remember from last week’s reading that he had been preaching to the women there. One of them, Lydia, who was a dealer in purple cloth, had her whole household baptized and offered Paul and his companions a place to stay. This week they encounter a slave girl who has a spirit of divination and seems to be able to foretell the future. She must have been pretty good at it because her owners were making good money off her. She starts following Paul and his companions, shouting, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” She does this for days, until Paul gets so annoyed that he casts the spirit out of her.

When the girl’s owners find out that their source of income has dried up, they take Paul and Silas to the magistrates. They don’t complain that the men took away their means of making a living; instead they accuse them of being Jews and promoting anti-Roman customs. The story doesn’t say what these customs might have been. So the magistrates have them stripped and beaten and thrown into jail. Paul and Silas are not men who let being in prison get them down. They pray and sing until midnight when there is an earthquake violent enough to open all the doors and release all the chains.

The prisoners are free, but instead of escaping, they stay put. When the jailer realizes what has happened, he prepares to fall on his sword rather than face the consequences of a jail full of empty cells. But Paul stops him by telling him that the prisoners are all present. The jailer falls down before them and asks, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Now maybe he was just asking how he was going to get through the trouble that would surely come when it became known that the prisoners were set free. Whatever he meant by asking, Paul answered by telling him to believe in Jesus. The jailer took them to his house, washed their wounds, and they baptized him and his household.

So we’ve got a fortune teller, an exorcism, capture and torture of the heroes, praise music in prison, an earthquake, a dramatic release, and the conversion of the jailer, all ending with the baptism of a household. James Cameron may not want to make a movie out of this one, but it’s still pretty exciting. Definitely not boring. But how is it relevant? How do we, living in the 21st century, relate to this story of adventure in the 1st century in any kind of real way? We may find it interesting to read, but it still feels a little distant. What’s in it for us?

One way to identify with the scriptural stories is to put ourselves into them, to see which character resonates with us. I don’t know about you, but I frequently do that when I’m reading a novel or watching a movie. Most often, I identify with the hero. Of course. Don’t we all want to be the hero, the main character of the story? In this case the heroes would most likely be Paul and Silas. We’ve been reading a lot about Paul’s journeys in the book

of Acts. He and Silas and others are spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. They are the ones who are wrongly beaten and imprisoned. They are the ones who praise God even when they're in peril and who are ultimately vindicated and liberated when God acts to release them. Are we like them, speaking the truth of the gospel no matter what the cost and then singing praises to God when we are misunderstood or mistreated?

Maybe we're not like Paul and Silas. Maybe we'd like to be but we aren't. Maybe we're more like the jailer, imprisoned by our work or other obligation, bound by duty, unclear what it is we must do to be saved. Or are we like the slave girl, on the edge of the story, held captive by something that prevents us from being free, waiting to be healed? Some of us might relate to the magistrates, who, after all, are just trying to maintain order in their city and make sure that Roman ways are being followed and not overturned by some foreign rabble-rousers.

It doesn't really matter which character we relate to in the story. What matters is that when you go into the story and look a little more deeply, there is always something to be learned, and usually something that relates to us today. The Book of Acts tells the story of what happens when faithful people go out spreading the story of Jesus. It's what makes this book so exciting – God is busting out all over the place and everyone gets caught up in the story. Because Paul is out preaching the good news, he is able to baptize Lydia and her household, heal a slave girl from the spirit that is possessing her, teach a jailer what true salvation is and baptize him and his household, and stand up to authorities who wish to quell the power of change and transformation. All these people are swept up in God's drama.

As for us, sometimes we get so caught up in our own story that we forget we are living in God's. Among all the stories going on in our parish this week, we've had two people die. What gave us the strength to walk with them on their journey was the story of Jesus, the story that says, "Death is not the end." The story that sets the captive free. The story that promises deliverance. The story that shakes the supposed solidity of our reality and releases us from the shackles of fear and obligation. The story that saves us from hopelessness and delivers us to freedom. The story that leads us out of death, into life.

That is our story. It's not boring. Not boring at all.