

## “Between Text and Sermon”

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On Acts 16: 16-34 (35-40)

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Luke packs this story like a set of *matryoshka*, with powers nested in powers. The difference is that while those dolls delight in the revealing of every tinier form, this story reveals each power by covering it—by showing what surrounds it and exceeds it and sustains it. Jesus’ claim on Pilate vibrates throughout this account: “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.” (John 19:11)

The tiniest, weakest creature is the slave girl, naturally. She is not even a slave (Gk. *doulos*) but only a *paidiske*, a Greek diminutive derived from words for “child.” She is in bondage not only to her owners but also to a spirit of divination. Paul’s liberating command, spoken in the name of Jesus Christ, frees her from the spirit, but not from her owners.

Once the girl is freed from her demon, the masters (*kurios*, the word also used of Jesus as “Lord”) show up immediately. Money is the matter. Money makes the slave relation and destroys the human relation wherever it is first in order. Power flows around money as coercion. It emboldens the masters to drag Paul and Silas to the marketplace. Can they resist? At any rate, they do not. The continual threat of physical and material harm is thematic for the evangelist. It is the basic principle of power in what Walter Wink has called “the domination system.” It battens off money. Its minions become besotted in the belief that domination is the highest law.

Paul does not, and presumably cannot, command the spirit of Mammon to come out of the masters in the name of Jesus and leave Paul to his mission. The power of his prayer is quite limited, just as we experience ours to be. Here is a matter for theological reflection which the church ought not glide past. With a few exceptions, hard physical matter does not jump at the command of the apostles in *Acts*. Likewise, once a hardened heart commits its intention to concrete action, its ill will is not deflected from its aim by so subtle a power as prayer. *Acts* is/are not magic. This is hardly news, but many modern Christians need to see how their religion engages in “two way traffic” with the world as science sees it, as James Gustafson argues in *An Examined Faith*. Here is a crossroad.

The masters drag Paul and Silas before the magistrates with the claim that Rome’s very laws and customs are troubled by the words these evangelists speak. Now the crowd attacks them too. The power of the owners to drag the apostles to the square is nested within the power of the magistrates to inflict pain—which is nested within the power of the crowd to sustain or destroy the state. Here, in one or two sentences of scripture, is a summary of the necessary conflict between human power and the power of the Word. Servants of the gospel are committed to the possibility that human power relations may be transformed in terms of Christ’s peace and justice at any time. Naturally, those committed to existing power relations resist transforming power with all the power they can muster. However, all the power they can muster is rooted in an assumption that humans will do anything to avoid pain and seek pleasure. Wherever speakers of the Word sense their freedom from the fears on which the domination system depends, human powers clash with divine in ways that show up as history.

The violence escalates. The magistrates have the apostles stripped, beaten, and thrown into

prison. The dungeon's unyielding stone and cold black iron, cast in the shadow of death, are the ultimate contraction of the system's desire for control. However, its reliance on terror is now revealed as a tragic flaw, for just as gross matter was insensible to the power of prayer, so the spirit of the apostles is insensible to the system's tools of terror. Far from suffering, the apostles are singing now. Can this passage not have inspired Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1944, whose relations with the state as well as with fellow prisoners and guards bore the same imprint?

Now comes the earthquake. Many Biblical writers (and readers) filter wondrous happenings through the assumption that God has decided that now is the time for a miracle, but here God is not identified as the efficient cause of the disaster. By holding silence on this question, Luke is not distracted from continuing to reveal powers nested within greater powers. For Luke, earthmoving is by no means the greatest show on earth; it is only a reminder that the powers of domination are paltry. Why, the grandest bomb of human arts is fireworks to the force that uncapped Mt. St. Helens.

In ordinary struggles for human rights, weakness in the enemy is opportunity for oneself. When the prison doors are burst, it's time to go. What action pic hero has not sprung aggressively into . . . well, action, when his fetters fail? Not Paul and Silas. The apostles's confidence reveals a new paradigm of power, for though their iron bonds are broken, they are not free of the bonds of love, even love for the enemy. They are still "slaves of the Most High God," to quote a certain slave-girl. In the extraordinary struggle for divine righteousness and divine freedom, the apostles swing boldly into action: they do not move, because they are free.

Not knowing this, the jailer, unwilling to be fed into the jaws of the system which has fed him, sets the point of his sword at his heart. At this point, the logic of power achieved through terror is revealed as pathetic evil, which the power of love is able to enclose and even foreclose by moving swiftly to save the wretched by not moving at all to save itself. The word of God now surrounds its enemy. The jailer's query about his own salvation carries an obvious double meaning. On the one hand, he is overwhelmed by the strange powers plainly present, which have removed from him the fatal consequences of his dealings in the domination system. He is already saved. On the other hand, the query drives home the evangelist's feeling for the concreteness of salvation in Christ as renewal of life when the old life is past and gone.

The word is preached, wounds are washed, food is taken at table, and the household is baptized, all by night, in a tableau of the church engaged with all its primary rituals to celebrate the new life of salvation. The summary statement that the jailer has become a "believer in God" draws the curtain on the story a bit abruptly. Luke's use of a word for "believer" (*pepisteukos*) which occurs nowhere else in the New Testament may be a sign that he was eager to get on with the story, which belongs to Paul. Cutting the reading short here, however, will distort Luke's narrative of power.

"When morning came, the magistrates sent the police . . ." The final passage mirrors Easter morning resurrection not with a repetition, but with a demonstration of Christ's new life. Again messengers go to the dark place of death. Again the stone is rolled away. This tomb is not empty, however, but full and vital and angry. Where the apostles' confidence had led to life and freedom for one man in the night, now, their confidence demands life for all citizens oppressed by the system

of state terror. Given the recent decision of the U.S. President and Congress to permit citizens as well as foreigners to be labeled “enemy combatants” and then to be taken deep into prison labyrinths for the rest of their lives, with no recourse to the law to determine guilt, every preacher might feel the strange pull of God’s Word while deciding whether or not to interpret this whole text for the people. For here, at last, God has politics surrounded.

There will be sequels to this conflict, of course, but the pattern is plain. Whatever personal or public prisons Christians are found in, they must not abandon them at first liberty while others are held there by terror and injustice. Christians have already died and are already free in Christ. Through their acts, God can reveal the power surrounding all the world’s stage of good and evil. ■