

How Can I Keep From Singing?

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Text: Acts 16:16-34

An extraordinary talent may be a gift or a curse. Look at all the incredibly talented athletes and entertainers for whom, it seems, the world should be their oyster, and yet they've somehow managed to make a total and very public hash of their lives. Perhaps the curse of their unusual abilities is a nagging insecurity about whether they're loved for themselves or for the wealth and notoriety their skills have brought them. Perhaps that's why so many of them act out in sometimes bizarre ways. Looking at you, Aaron Rodgers.

Today's New Testament lesson from the Book of Acts begins with the sad case of a girl who had the ability to foretell the future. I think we could have a pretty interesting discussion about whether that ability would be a gift or a curse. Would you *really* want to know the future? Such knowledge could be a burden, don't you think? The girl in today's lesson was a slave, a slave not only to her owners, who reaped the benefits of her clairvoyance, but also a slave to the terrible knowledge to which she had unique access.

Paul and his companion Silas decided to free this girl from her gift of fortune-telling, perhaps with the hope that her owners, no longer able to profit from her ESP, would then free her from slavery. Not surprisingly, the girl's owners weren't

at all pleased by this turn of events. They'd lost a reliable source of income, so they had these two followers of Jesus hauled into court. The magistrates, egged on by a hostile crowd, ordered them to be beaten severely and then thrown into jail where they were chained to the wall.

There, in prison, they held choir practice. They sang and prayed long into the night, until an earthquake ended their incarceration. There's a whole string of interesting events after that, but I want to focus this morning on the hymn-singing. While it's true that Paul and Silas were released from prison by the fortuitous, or providential, occurrence of an earth tremor, these men had already been freed by their faith. Their freedom was an integral part of their identity as followers of Jesus. Through him, they had an inner freedom that could not be taken away by prison bars and manacles, a freedom that prompted them to sing in captivity, to sing songs that were heard by their captors and their fellow inmates.

There's something about hymn-singing. A little over two years ago, we stopped singing hymns aloud in our church. Before we knew much about how the virus was transmitted—back when we washed our groceries and our mail—Pat and I attended a clandestine organ practice in the First Congregational UCC Church in Rhinelander, at the invitation of the organist there, Marilyn Norden. I used to be the pastor there. It's a wonderful organ, and Marilyn is a gifted organist, and she had promised to play one of my favorite Bach compositions, a fugue based on St. Anne, the tune of "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past." There were only a few other people there, all of us locked in and deliberately widely scattered well apart in that large sanctuary. After Marilyn played the Bach, she invited us all to join in singing a hymn, which we did with enthusiasm. About a week later, we learned that singing was one of the most efficient ways to transmit Covid. We were shocked, and appalled, and embarrassed, and, for a time, pretty nervous.

And I was angry. It was the first time I got really angry at the pandemic, not the policies imposed to restrict its transmission, but at the pandemic itself. It seemed to me to be the ultimate indignity. We can't sing? What surprised me as time rolled on, was that so many others had that same feeling of deprivation.

Now, let me digress a bit to explain why I was surprised that others felt as strongly as I about not being able to sing hymns. For a pastor, hymns in worship can be a real battleground. I remember one parishioner in another church who would very loudly slam his hymnal shut after the singing of a hymn he didn't like. He would wait until it was really quiet before he slammed his hymnal, so that his displeasure would be noted. Hymn selection can be fraught.

But during the pandemic, I and others really missed the hymns. That was brought home to me when I led worship here on All Saints Sunday this past fall, the Sunday before Pastor Tim arrived. It was the first Sunday in some time when we actually sang a hymn in the sanctuary—masked, of course, but we sang our muffled song to the Lord. We had sung in a few services when we could meet outdoors, most memorably on a frigid Christmas Eve, when we stood around bonfires on our property across the street singing carols. But that was pretty much it. So, as the virus seemed to be waning a bit last fall, I argued that we couldn't do an All Saints' service without singing "For All the Saints." And so, with the Church Council's approval, and duly masked, we sang. What struck me after that service was that instead of the usual polite, but I hope sincere, nice comments about my sermon, nearly everybody as they greeted me after church said, "Thanks for the hymn. I really miss singing hymns." Who knew?

But there *is* something about hymns. It's not just the words, as inspiring as those words may be. If you read the words of any good hymn, they make a fine, often deeply meaningful, poem. In fact some hymns are based on poems. But what gives

hymns their power, what enables us to remember them so readily, what makes them available to us when we need them, is the combination of the words with music, melodies that we remember, which help us to remember the words.

So, inspired by today's reading from the Book of Acts, I want you to ponder a question. What hymn would you take with you to prison? Even if you haven't been beaten and thrown into prison as Paul and Silas were, perhaps you've felt beaten down by life's experiences, or perhaps you feel imprisoned—yes, as we were by a pandemic, but also maybe by a situation in life, or an addiction from which it's really hard to escape, imprisoned until there's an earthquake in our lives. But in the meantime, before that earthquake, what hymns would you take with you to your own prison?

After all, the followers of Jesus have been singing hymns from the very beginning of Christian history. The Psalms, remember, are hymns. Both Matthew and Mark tell us that on the night of his betrayal, "Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn, and went out to the Mount of Olives." At this most portentous moment in a week of triumph, betrayal, suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn, a psalm.

This morning I'm going to exert my blessedly temporary pastoral privilege and share a few of my choices of hymns as companions in both good and bad times, with the hope that you will think about what yours might be. And maybe tell Pastor Tim or Lori. While I most assuredly would want to have a Bible with me behind bars, my second choice would probably be a hymnal. Like I say, I love hymns. So I've chosen a few for this morning's worship, both because of the hymns themselves and the stories behind them.

Our opening hymn, “God of Grace and God of Glory,” was one that was sung often in my former church home in New York City, The Riverside Church, so it brings back fond memories. The words were written by the first pastor of that church, Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick was an unlikely choice to be the first pastor of a cathedral-like church that had been richly endowed by a someone who might be described as a robber baron, John D. Rockefeller. Fosdick preached a compassionate and open-minded Christianity at a time of rising fundamentalism. He was also a pacifist during World War II—controversial, to say the least. His hymn spoke of “warring madness” and of a society that was “rich in things and poor in soul.” These are sentiments that span the years. And another phrase from that hymn has come to my mind as we flail about in seemingly helpless response to the recurring gun massacres in our country, “Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore.”

Another of my favorite hymns is “Abide with Me,” which has comforted so many, including me, in times of grief. It was written by a Scottish Presbyterian minister, Henry Lyte. Lyte was afflicted by tuberculosis, an almost always fatal disease in the mid-nineteenth century. He wrote this hymn three weeks before his death, after he had delivered his final sermon to his congregation, a sermon about the inevitability and the blessing of death, God’s accompaniment in both life and death. We’ll sing it as we prepare of our morning prayers.

And then there is the hymn that inspired the title for today’s sermon. The origin of both the words and the melody is uncertain, but it is attributed to a mid-nineteenth century American Baptist pastor, Robert Lowery. The version in our hymnal is one of several that have come down to us. It has turned out to be an adaptable hymn, made popular in more recent years by Pete Seeger, who scrubbed it of Christian references in his popular version, but also added another verse, written by the Quaker Doris Plenn during the McCarthy era. This added verse, not in our

hymnal, reflects an important aspect of hymn-singing—defiance. I think that’s one of the emotions we felt when we sang around our Christmas Eve bonfires or on our folding chairs on the lot across the street those fall mornings when it was still warm enough to worship outside, but dangerous to worship inside. Listen to the resonance and the defiance of the words added to a beloved hymn.

*When tyrants tremble, sick with fear,
And hear their death-knell ringing,
When friends rejoice both far and near,
How can I keep from singing?
In prison cell and dungeon vile
Our thoughts to them go winging,
When friends by shame are undefiled,
How can I keep from singing?*

There are, of course, lots of other favorites. Lots of them. There are hymns of joy, like “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee,” set to music from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony; and hymns celebrating God’s creation, like “For the Beauty of the Earth.” There are spirituals, songs of suffering and hope, and the longing for liberation. Another of my favorite hymns isn’t usually acknowledged as such, but is found in our hymnal, “America, the Beautiful,” written by Katherine Bates. The daughter of a Congregational Minister, Bates was an English professor in Wellesley College, and she wrote her hymn after a cross-country tour with her female partner, a trip that took them from “sea to shining sea.” “God shed his grace on thee,” she prayed in her hymn. “God mend thy every flaw.”

What song will you sing? You see, you don’t have to be a good singer to sing a hymn well. All it takes to sing a hymn well is to have a vibrant faith and an open heart, and maybe a little courage. Look at all the people who were blessed by

Paul's and Silas' choir practice: Paul and Silas themselves, to be sure, and the other prisoners, but ultimately also their jailer, who had been a prisoner in his own right. Even in the darkness of our prisons, including the prisons of our own making, how can we keep from singing? And why should we try? Amen.