

Sermon 1623

Acts 16.25-34

January 7, 2018

Things become a lot clearer when a life is on the line. You pay attention as the car spins out and starts to imitate a toboggan going down a snow-covered mountain embankment. You sort of focus when your wife says the baby is coming, only you are not in the hospital. You see clearly when an earthquake breaks your prison apart like a rotten melon and, because Roman law says your life for the lives of any and all prisoners who have escaped under your watch, it's a choice between execution which means your family will suffer the loss of all their possessions, or your suicide which will let them keep the money.

In the adventures of the Apostle Paul, a man found himself in just that no win situation. But he came out with

A Baptism for Life.

1. Not an escape, salvation (25-30).
2. Not giddiness, joy (31-34).

“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 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. The 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 (25-27).”

This is an account of a baptism for life. Because of their preaching a baptism for life in the Roman colony of Philippi, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison. The darkest, deepest depth of that prison. Because of a baptism for life which they had received, Paul and Silas, although they had been severely flogged, a punishment that could cripple a lesser man, had not given up hope, but were spending the night singing prayers to God. Because of the preaching of a baptism for life their fellow prisoners were listening to them, straining to catch their words as they drifted through the putrid, greasy halls of the prison. That's why they did not escape from the prison when a violent earthquake ripped the prison apart and miraculously opened every door, opened every gate.

The jailer did not yet know this baptism for life. As I said before, he thought he had only two choices, execution or suicide and he was not going to leave his family high and dry. He was about to launch himself into the afterlife, which, for a Roman, meant a life in perpetual darkness and despair, with not a love requited, not a desire even recognized. The gods lived in heaven. Every one born of woman went to hell.

“But Paul shouted, ‘Don't harm yourself! We are all here!’ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved (28-30)?’”

“What must I do to be saved?” He was not asking how to escape the jam he was in. He was not looking for a quick way around some temporary difficulties. He was looking for a real salvation, an answer to the hell he had almost jumped into.

What does a baptism for life mean to us? The devil wants us water down our expectations. Baptism becomes a word on a door mat, a bumper sticker slogan. Baptism means you expect to be cleaned up a little, not transformed to your very core. Baptism is sort of like the Monopoly “Get Out of Jail” card. It is so convenient to have. So the devil purrs and the world nods in eager agreement.

The baptism for life in the Bible is much different. When the chips are down and there is no escape, a baptism for life promises a different deliverance. It promises what money cannot buy, what medicine cannot deliver. It promises salvation. It promises that we will not stay dead. As we rise from the waters of baptism with a new life, a life of faith in the work of our Savior, Jesus Christ, we will also rise from the dead one day, united to him in his resurrection. As the waters of baptism in the Word flow over us and put to death our sinful human nature, so it clears us of all charges, all condemnation. Who executes people who are already dead? Why would God punish sin that has been washed away? We rise from a baptism for life to live a new life, free from the hold of the devil. No longer can he just put a word in our mouth, dangle a vision before our eyes, and we are jumping like puppets on his strings. That’s what the jailer was looking for. And that is what he found.

“They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.’ Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The 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 (31-35).”

For the first time in his life the jailer heard someone loved him enough to actually do something for him. God had sent his one and only Son to save him and his family. All the circles and aimless lines he had drawn in his life had led to this point, this night, this earthquake and the miracle of the prisoners, gifted for once with God’s good sense, realizing it would be better for them to stay put rather than to escape and be hunted down like dogs, it had all led him to this chance to hear the Gospel of God’s undeserved love towards him.

That baptism for life showed itself once again. The Holy Spirit created faith in the man’s heart. He believed, as did his whole family. His faith immediately starts to go to work. He takes Paul and Silas into his own home. He washes the wounds of the apostles. He sets a meal before them, though it is well after midnight. He and his family, we don’t know how old the children were. It only matters to those who want to fight over words and cause divisions among God’s people where none should be. Shouldn’t the Lord’s words, “Go and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them,” be enough? How much clearer can “all” be? He and his whole family were baptized and filled with joy.

When they received this baptism for life, they were filled with joy. Not giddiness. Joy. We’ve seen the sports fan’s “hop around like you are crazy” giddiness over championships won. We have seen the open mouthed giddiness of game show contestants claiming the grand prize. They are not so giddy when they find out gifts are taxed by the government, and at a higher rate than wages. They are not so giddy when half the coaching staff is being hired away and all their free agents sign with the Yankees. Joy. Joy lasts. Let one of Jesus’ disciples tell you about this joy.

“Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1.8-9).”

Words do not do this joy justice. By his deeds, tenderly washing their wounds, showing hospitality in ushering them into his home, giving them respect by making sure all his family got up and heard what he was hearing, thoughtfully giving them a proper meal, the jailer’s joy was showing through. His deeds speak joy.

It is a glorious joy. Forget about the hard days ahead, the arrangements for the prisoners until the jail could be repaired, the investigations and being known as a Christian in a town founded by Roman army veterans who thought Caesar was as close to a Savior as a man needed. This joy was worth all that and more.

A baptism for life works a similar joy in us. We don’t find a rose-colored, romantically fuzzed at the edges of the picture kind of life in our baptism. Our baptism made us Christians, imitators of our Lord in a life subjected to slurs and slights, a life prone to trouble, a life of dying to temptation. And as our baptism has put on us the hardships he faced, so it puts on us the glory that awaited him in heaven. A baptism for life offers a joy that cannot be dampened, a joy that totally fills us. Through this baptism for life rejoice! God is yours and you are his. Through this baptism for life rejoice! Christ has clothed you with his righteousness. Through this baptism rejoice! The Holy Spirit guides our every step.

#### A Baptism for Life

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Do you and I have to wait for that time when a life is on the line before we clarify our vision? God wants to make things easy for us. Through what was written, we can learn, take it to heart and follow the path of salvation and joy, so that by patient perseverance we may keep the faith and enter into eternal life. Share that focus with me in 2018 and for every year we are blessed to walk together on this beautiful world.