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Easter 7 c

Many people like stories. That's why there are so many mysteries, dramas, and comedies on television and in movies. They especially like stories that have surprises.

The Bible is full of stories with strange turns. Today's first lesson is an example of that. So, let's take a look and see where this story leads us.

We begin by meeting a slave girl who predicted the future. Her owners probably took good enough care of her, just as farmers would take good enough care of their oxen. But they controlled her, and they took whatever money she made.

If this girl really was accurate about the future, I imagine that she made her owners rich. But unlike prophets of God, she got her predictions from a demonic spirit.

The action in this story starts when this slave distracted Paul and Silas as they were going to the synagogue. She kept pestering them for several days, shouting, "These men are servants of the most high God, who are telling you the way to be saved." Just as demons were the first to say that Jesus is the "holy one of God," so the demon in this girl kept advertising what Paul and Silas had to offer, as though she were drumming up business for them.

How does that make sense? I have two ideas. The first has to do with what people believed back there and then. They thought that knowing a person's name and purpose gave you power over him or her. With all this shouting, the demonic spirit was trying to gain control over Paul and Silas. No wonder Paul was so

irritated. My second idea is that the demon wanted to get Paul and Silas in trouble, which is what exactly what did happen.

When Paul finally lost his temper, he did a quick exorcism. In the name of Jesus, he cast out this demon. Doing this also put the owners of the slave girl out business.

Enraged, these owners told lies in order to stir up the crowd against these exorcists and to take them to the authorities. Paul and Silas were beaten, stripped, and jailed.

One demon may have been lost, but two apostles were tortured and put in prison. It looks like the bad guys won that skirmish.

This is an example of how “no good deed goes unpunished.” Of course, sometimes we get in trouble for doing the wrong thing. Other times, we get in trouble for doing the right thing. Those who fight against the forces of evil often suffer from a horrible counterattack. That should be no surprise to us, since we follow a savior who died on a cross.

While in jail, Paul and Silas prayed to God and sang hymns as fellow prisoners listened. Even though they suffered greatly for following Jesus, they believed that their savior was worth their sacrifice.

Then God made his first countermove. A great earthquake opened the doors of the jail. The prisoners' chains came loose, and they could just walk out free.

Now watch for God's second countermove. Realizing his total failure to do his duty, the jailer was about to commit suicide. But Paul stopped him, saying that nobody had escaped. Something more important than physical freedom was happening.

When the jailer saw that Paul and Silas were staying in jail voluntarily, he figured out that God was at work. So, he asked Paul and Silas how he could be saved. 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.

After this, the jailer took care of Paul and Silas. He washed their wounds, fed them, and took them to his own home. He and all his household were baptized.

God's second countermove saved a whole family. The next day, the magistrate released Paul and Silas.

So, what's the take-away for us?

First, following Jesus really can get us into painful trouble. When we're on the right path, there will be all sorts of distractions, obstacles, and hostile reactions. When Jesus talked about us taking up our crosses, he was talking about far more than necklaces and lapel pins. We just have to figure out the differences between getting in trouble for following Jesus and getting into trouble for our own bad stuff.

Second, believers keep the faith even when we suffer for it. Clearly, we need God's help to do this. That's why Word, Sacrament, prayer, and other disciplines are so important. They are big ways that God strengthens our faith during painful times.

Remarkably, it was the persistent faith of Paul and Silas that brought the jailer into their fellowship. He chose to join them even though they had been tortured and imprisoned the night before. Keeping the faith matters.

Finally, God is stronger than evil and death. For reasons we may not understand, he picks his own times and ways to demonstrate divine power. Many

times, God gets the most done through the suffering of his followers, as we see in today's first lesson. Amazingly, God acts through ordinary and flawed people like us, whom he chooses as his agents.

Regardless of how much righteous trouble we get into, God shall win in the end. That promise is guaranteed by Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost. That promise gathers us around pulpits, baptismal fonts, and altars.

We don't need a fortune telling demon to know that promise. We just need the Word of God, the Sacraments, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and a community of fellow disciples as God uses these blessings to give us new life.

Then who knows how many battles against evil and death that God may choose to win through us, as we follow Jesus in our daily lives? Then some small way, even our stories may be like the story of Paul and Silas.

Amen

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