

# “Frail to Sing Thy Praises”

Acts 16:25-34

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

Memorial Day Weekend, May 30, 2022

A dialogue sermon

Written by Matt Matthews

Acts 16.25-34 25About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. 27When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. 28But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Matt: One of our friends told me this joke: A flight had just taken off from JFK, heading for London. The PA came on with this message. "Welcome aboard. This the first completely automated trans-Atlantic flight. There is no one in the cockpit. Just sit back and relax, as nothing can go wrong...go wrong...go wrong..."

Rachel: Paul and Silas were arrested and it doesn't look good for them.

M: They were dragged through the streets.

R: They were charged.

M: The magistrates had them stripped and beaten.

R: They were taken into jail and locked in stocks.

M: It's not a surprise to me that they prayed. That should not surprise any of us. People in foxhole circumstances like this often pray foxhole prayers—even if they don't believe in God.

M/R: *I'm in a tough spot, O God. Help me!*

M: Pray, yes. But sing? Paul and Silas sang praises? This comes as a bit of a shock

Paul and Silas could joke around that nothing can go wrong... (go wrong...go wrong...) But it would be simply that, a joke. Paul and Silas are in deep trouble. And at midnight, things don't look good when they think about morning.

\* \* \*

R: A lot goes wrong in this world—this beautiful world that God loves and has redeemed. A lot has gone wrong in our world in these last few weeks. In the midst of happy graduations, many are grieving. A lot of change has been good. But some has been devastating.

M: The day after the terrible shooting in Charleston in 2015, in a church, at a Bible study, Laurie Snyder shared these words with a group of us, also gathered in a church, with Bibles opened on our laps.

M/R:

*God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. (Psalm 46:1-3)*

M: These words moved us to tears and to silence.

R: And this is why Paul and Silas could sing. They sang with gladness and joy even though, for all they knew, this was the eve of their execution.

M: And they didn't sing, "Row-row-row your boat." They didn't sing just to lift their moods. They didn't sing to make noise.

M/R: They sang praises to God.

R: They sang praise to God because they knew they could trust God. They knew God would hear. They knew God could handle it. They knew God had them covered.

M: We are ancestors of Paul and Silas.

R: We are part of the church they helped form long ago in Jesus' name.

M: Church, be encouraged.

R: Have hope.

M: Hold fast in God.

R: Trust God's steadfast love to help, to heal, to transform.

M: In times of trouble, may we, like Paul and Silas, pray to God.

R: And might we, also, like Paul and Silas, raise songs of praise.

M: May we kneel down in times of desperation, when midnight casts long shadows chilled with doubt. Like Paul and Silas, might God remind us to trust God even when mercy seems to have run out.

R: By God's grace, might we pray. Might we sing.

M: We'd like to turn to the words of the Psalms for comfort today. We'd like to turn to these words, because Paul and Silas, both from the Jewish tradition, probably knew many of these very Psalms by heart.

R: So, listen. Listen to these gutsy prayers. Listen to this lament. Listen to this doubt, this confidence, this awe, this faith.

**Listen from Psalm 27:**

R: For [God] will hide me in his shelter  
in the day of trouble;  
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;  
he will set me high on a rock.

**Listen from Psalm 51:**

M: Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy,  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.

**Listen from Psalm 42:**

R: My soul is cast down within me;  
therefore I remember you  
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,  
from Mount Mizar.  
Deep calls to deep  
at the thunder of your cataracts;  
all your waves and your billows  
have gone over me.  
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,  
and at night his song is with me,  
a prayer to the God of my life.

**Listen from Psalm 49:**

M: So why should I fear in bad times,  
hemmed in by enemy malice,  
Shoved around by bullies,  
demeaned by the arrogant rich?

**Listen from Psalm 54:**

R: Save me, O God, by your name,  
and vindicate me by your might.  
Hear my prayer, O God;  
give ear to the words of my mouth.  
For the insolent have risen against me;  
the ruthless seek my life;

**Listen from Psalm 55:**

M: My heart is in anguish within me;  
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.  
Fear and trembling come upon me,  
and horror overwhelms me.

**Listen from Psalm 56:**

M/R: Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me;

R: all day long foes oppress me;  
my enemies trample on me all day long,  
for many fight against me.

M: O Most High, when I am afraid,  
I put my trust in you.

R: In God, whose word I praise,  
in God I trust; I am not afraid;  
what can flesh do to me?

**Listen from Psalm 57:**

M: I lie down among lions  
that greedily devour human prey;  
their teeth are spears and arrows,  
their tongues sharp swords.

**Listen from Psalm 59:**

R: Deliver me from my enemies, O my God;  
protect me from those who rise up against me.  
Deliver me from those who work evil;  
from the bloodthirsty, save me.

**Listen from Psalm 69:**

M/R: Save me, O God,  
R: for the waters have come up to my neck.  
M: I sink in deep mire,  
R: where there is no foothold;  
M: I have come into deep waters,  
and the flood sweeps over me.  
R: I am weary with my crying;  
my throat is parched.  
M/R: My eyes grow dim  
with waiting for my God.

**Listen from Psalm 62:**

M: For God alone my soul waits in silence;  
from him comes my salvation.  
God alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall never be shaken.

**Listen from Psalm 63:**

R: O God, you are my God; I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

**Listen from Psalm 57:**

M/R: Be merciful to me, O God;  
be merciful to me  
for in you my soul takes refuge;  
*in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,  
until the destroying storms pass by...*

M: *in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,  
until the destroying storms pass by...*

R: *in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,  
until the destroying storms pass by...*

## Frail to Sing Praises

tune: Finlandia/Jean Sibelius

text: Matt Matthews/*Acts 16*

A gift to our beloved  
Music Director Joe Grant  
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

Dragged through the streets,  
the marketplace grew quiet.  
Silas and Paul  
stood humbly and were charged.  
The magistrates  
had them stripped and beaten  
and locked in stocks  
in jail by faceless guards.  
Cut off from day,  
stone walls were their blanket,  
a starless night,  
and trembling, sighing hearts.

When midnight came,  
an airless wind was rising.  
So were their fears  
of what daylight might bring.  
They lifted prayers,  
and feeble lamentation,  
and kindled light  
when they began to sing:  
*"Praise be to God,  
Creator and Redeemer.  
Forgive them all,  
and may your peace we bring."*

May we kneel down  
in times of desperation,  
when midnight casts  
long shadows chilled with doubt.  
Like Paul and Silas  
help us to remember,  
to pray to you,  
when mercy has run out  
May we find voices  
frail to sing your praises  
And by your power,  
cast all our worry out.

—25 March 2020, *Sheltering In Place, Corona Spring*