

“SINGING AT MIDNIGHT”

Sterling UMC
Acts 16:22-34
November 13, 2011

God's question to us this morning is, can we sing at midnight? You see it's easy to sing, "Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above" from our United Methodist hymnals in the sanctuary of Sterling United Methodist church on this beautiful Sunday morning. It's easy to sing in the morning, but can you sing at night? It's easy to sing in the sanctuary with the brightness and joy of all the people of God, but can you sing on the street? Can you sing in society? It's easy to sing on Sunday, the Lord's Day, but can you sing on Monday, the workday? Can we sing at midnight? Can we sing in trouble? Can we sing in pain?

In our New Testament text, Acts 16:22-25, Paul and Silas were in trouble. They had been whipped and jailed. And yet it says that at midnight Paul and Silas were singing and praising God.

How in the world can you continue to sing at midnight? The world curses the darkness, but the Christian sings at midnight. How in the world can you sing when your back is bleeding, when your locked up, your down in a hole in the earth, you're in enemy territory, and it's dark, and it's dirty, and it's gloomy? How in the world can you continue to sing? How can you do it?

Anybody can sing when your healthy, when your young, when your powerful, when your wealthy, when your kids are all okay, when you make straight A's, when your car is not broken down, when your team is winning, when the fish are biting. It's easy to sing. But how about when everything goes awry? How can we continue to sing at midnight?

First we can sing at midnight when we remember that we never sing alone. Don't you enjoy the congregational singing of this church? It's a wonderful experience to join our voices together in a hymn. But how many of you would want to stand right where you are and sing a solo? We love to sing as a group because we can camouflage it. We can hide in the masses. But when you sing a solo that's tough.

But I've got wonderful news for you this morning. God will never ask you to be a solo. When you come to Christ you join a chorus. You join a choir called the church. You never have to laugh by yourself as a Christian, and thank God you never have to weep alone as a Christian. God will always send someone to you. We never have to sing alone, we have the presence of other people.

In our New Testament text, there was not just one single solitary Christian in that Philippian jail. It was not just Paul. It was not just Silas. Thank God for that little three-letter conjunction AND. Paul AND Silas. And at midnight Paul AND Silas prayed together, and they sang praises unto God together. And the prisoners heard them. Them, not him, them.

One of the saddest verses in the whole New Testament is 2 Tim 4:10, "Demus has forsaken me." He let me down. He walked out on me and left me alone. But listen to the next verse, one of the gladdest verses in the New Testament, 2 Tim 4:11, "Luke is with me." In life you're going to meet some Demuses. They're going to throw you away. They're going to waste you and then they're going to dispose of you and wash their

hands of you. But thank God there's always Luke. God will send someone into your life that you will never have to sing or suffer alone. We have the presence of other people and also we have the presence of the Holy Other One. A Christian can never be alone.

You can never get away from the presence of Jesus. You turn around He's there. You look up He's there. You look down He's there. You look around He's there. As a Christian you are never, ever alone.

In the Psalms over and over again we find the words "I am with you". These old reliable promises of God. And when Paul and Silas sang hymns and songs in that Philippian jail they were singing 1000-year-old words. And every time you and I read or sing a Psalm, we are hearing a 3000-year-old classic in which God promises Himself.

Psalm 7:1 "O Lord my God in thee do I put my trust. Save me from all them that persecute me and deliver me". Don't you know Paul and Silas knew the 23rd Psalm? It was 1000 years old. And there in that Philippian jail, I can hear Paul and Silas singing, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He leads me. He restores me. And even if we die in this Philippian jail, yea though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil for Thou art with me".

Listen to this one Silas, "The Lord is my light. Right here in the middle of this darkness; right in the middle of this dark hole. The Lord is my light and my salvation, in whom shall I fear? Right in the middle of our weakness and pain the Lord is our strength, of whom shall we be afraid?" Well, Paul, how about this one? "Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth." And how about Psalm 130, "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord. O lord hear my voice, and incline thine ear to the voice of my supplications". They knew those Psalms and they could sing at midnight because they knew that they were not alone. That the same Jesus that was there in Jerusalem with them, was the same Jesus who was in Ephesus, and the same Jesus who is in Philippi, and He's the same Jesus who is here with us this morning in Sterling. That we cannot flee from His presence, and oh what comfort. We are never alone.

Secondly, we can sing at midnight because we sing by heart. A song does not begin in the mouth. A song does not begin in the larynx. A song begins in the heart. And I don't mean just memorization. I don't mean just rote memory of a song. When we sing by heart we mean its part of us, it's who we are. You've heard people say, "I did it but my heart just wasn't in it". As Christians we sing by heart. As followers of Jesus we don't curse the darkness, we don't just whistle a happy tune, we sing by heart, we sing from the heart. Paul wrote Eph 5:19, "Speaking to yourselves in songs, and hymns, and spiritual songs. Making melody where? In your heart to the Lord." We don't sing for an audience, we don't sing for our supper, we sing in our heart unto the Lord. We sing deep down inside of us, from the heart.

I once heard someone tell a story about Dr. J. C. Mcpheeters, a former president of Asbury Seminary. They were talking about what a booming singing voice he had. Dr. Mcpheeters could just blare out like a trumpet and wake you up. But near the end of his life, after he suffered a stroke he could not speak. And that beautiful vibrant voice, that powerful voice of that man of God was silent, and he could not speak. And as people would come to visit Dr. Mcpheeters in the hospital they would try to make him talk. "Dr. Mcpheeters, How are you?" He couldn't speak. "Dr. Mcpheeters, are you okay?" He couldn't speak. But one day by accident as someone was leaving, they began to sing;

“Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me”. And all of the sudden Dr. Mcpheeters joined in. “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” And they found out that he couldn’t speak, but he could sing. What a phenomenon. And even after he quit singing he still couldn’t speak. He couldn’t talk, but he could sing.

Somehow that part of his brain that had been handicapped by the stroke, the speech part, was destroyed. But the singing part wasn’t touched. And he sang. How could he sing? Because he sang by heart. It was who he was. It was part of him.

Listen to Psalm 57:7, “My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed, I will sing and give praise.” Even at midnight, Paul and Silas were singing and making music. And you see Paul did not say to Silas, “Si, would you please take your United Methodist Hymnal, turn to page 140, and let us stand and sing, “Great is Thy Faithfulness”. They were the hymnal. And besides it was dark in that dungeon and they could not have read the words or the notes anyway. And where do you think that music came from? It didn’t come out of a book. It came out of the heart. Out of the heart they sang unto God. Dear friends we can sing at midnight because we never sing alone. And we can sing at midnight because we sing by heart.

And finally, we can sing at midnight because we sing all of the verses. I’m sure the hymnists role over in their grave when we unsuspectingly say, “Let’s sing the first and last, or three-fourths or five-sixths of any given hymn.” And we do it all the time don’t we? We alter their work. But do you know how many verses there are to “*O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing*”? There are 18 verses to that hymn. We have only 7 in our hymnal. But you see the songs not over after just seven verses. And it’s interesting, Acts 16:25 says “At midnight”, which literally translated means in the middle of the night, “Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises unto God.” That is the song was not over. And they knew that even though they were bleeding and suffering the song was not over. The final word was not in yet. Those weren’t all the verses.

Now the first beginning verses were rough. Verse 1 was rejection and arrest. Verse 2 was being whipped and beaten. And verse 3, the inner dungeon, being locked up in stocks. But at midnight, in the middle of the night, after the first three verses, Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises unto God. They praised God with bleeding backs. And God added some great verses to that sad song. Verse 4, the other prisoners heard them. Verse 5, the Philippian jailer came in, and about to kill himself Paul says “Stop’ we’re all here.” “Sirs, What must I do to be saved?” Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.” What a wonderful verse 5 is, and the jailer was converted. Verse 6, the jailer’s entire family came to Christ. Verse 7, the Church at Philippi was established. And years later Paul wrote another verse, verse 8. It is called the letter to the Philippians. And all of that came out of that midnight experience.

It’s a horrible song those first three verses, but there are 8 verses. Then in about 1739, God added another verse. The wonderful hymn “And Can It Be That I Should Gain”, the inspiration of that song is in this story. Verse 4 says, “Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature’s night”. That song came out of this story. That’s the 9th verse God added about 250 years ago. And wouldn’t it be awful if that hymn ended on that fourth verse there in the middle? But the rest of the song says, “Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, my dungeon flamed with light. My chains feel off my heart was free, I rose went forth and followed thee”. The song is not over, and you can

sing at midnight when you realize that its not the final verse.

Aren't you glad God keeps adding new verses? "Old things have passed away, behold all things become new." And those of you who have been through sickness, aren't you glad God's not through with you? And those of you who have been through the pain of broken relationships, aren't you glad God's not through with you? And those of you who have experienced failure, aren't you glad God's not through with you? Aren't you glad He's adding new verses and new verses and new verses? And the music is not over and there's good news?

In the Apostles Creed, aren't you glad it doesn't stop in the middle, "Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilot, was crucified, dead, and buried"? Wouldn't be awful if that's where the Apostles Creed ended right there in the middle? But God added another verse, "The third day He arose from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." God's always adding new verses.

How many of you know that great old hymn, "I heard the Voice of Jesus Say"? There's something that happens in that hymn. There is a change that we can feel and hear. But unless you are a musician you may not understand why it takes place. The tune is so sad in the beginning. It goes, "I heard the voice of Jesus say, 'Come unto me and rest; Lay down thou weary one lay down thy head upon my breast'. Hear that note, "Breast"? But something happens, because after that it goes, 'I came to Jesus as I was, weary and worn and sad; I found in him a resting place and he has made me glad'. Hear that word, "glad"? Then, "Breast". What happens there in between?

The first part of the song is written in a minor key. A minor key has a somber mood. It is dull, heavy, gloomy, melancholy darkness. But the second half of that hymn is written in major key. That means bright, happy, joyous, light. In other words when you come to Christ you get out of the doldrums and into abundant life. We may not know what to call it musically, but our hearts echo that song that you come to Jesus and you find a resting place and he makes you glad.

This morning are you in the middle of a bad song? This morning do you feel like your stuck on that third verse and you're in minor key? There's wonderful news, God is writing new verses. That weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. And today if you're in the dark night of the soul, there's wonderful news for you. God can turn your morning into dancing. He can take off your sackcloth and gird you with gladness. Because he's not through with you. He's writing new verses. And he's going from minor key to major key. And he's giving you life.