

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA January 11, 2015

When the Ground Starts Shaking...

1. **Take note of the jailor,**
2. **But take to heart Paul's words!**

Hymns: 80 – 709 – 89 – Closing 299

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Acts 16:25-34 –

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. 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?"

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.

It's been a shaky start to the year in Dallas, TX! This past week, nine earthquakes rattled north Texas on Tuesday and Wednesday. The earthquakes ranged in severity from 1.6 to 3.6 on the Richter Scale. These latest quakes make

a total of 26 earthquakes in the Dallas area since October!

What's happening? It appears that fracking is taking its toll underneath the ground. (Yes, "fracking") Fracking is a process where water and chemicals are pumped under the ground to lubricate fault lines and release the natural gas that can be harvested and used. Some experts are worried that the process is compromising the stability of the ground, evidenced by all the recent earthquakes!

How do you think people are reacting to all the new earthquake activity? Can you imagine? One Dallas resident said, "It was real scary... Everybody was sitting in their chair. All of a sudden, you start swaying backwards and forward. And, you know, for people here, that's the first time being in one. So that kind of freaked everybody out a little bit."

It comes as no surprise that when the very ground shakes underneath one's feet, fear and trembling result. One of the most steady things that can be relied upon is proven to be unsteady and unreliable!

Today we are focusing on the 2nd reading, which told us of another earthquake that happened long ago in the Roman city of Philippi. **Let's look a little deeper into what happened at midnight two millennia ago, and learn a lesson about an epiphany that God worked through it!**

1. Take note of the jailor

We read in Acts 16: "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. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

Let's set the scene of what led up to this midnight account. If you're familiar with the ministry of the Apostle Paul, he was on his 2nd missionary trip through the Mediterranean

world. He had traveled through Asia Minor and strengthened the churches that God had allowed him to found, and then he had gone farther. He had crossed the Aegean Sea and entered Greece for the first time, after God gave him a vision at night leading him in that direction. One of the first cities he came to was Philippi. With the believing woman named Lydia and some other women they met at the river outside the city, the church there was formed.

Soon after that, when Paul and his partner Silas were headed back to the place of prayer by the river, they were followed by a slave girl who was possessed by a demon. The demon caused her to repeatedly shout out to all who would hear that they were servants of the Most High God. That's not an objectionable thing to shout, but it went on for days. Finally, Paul turned around and cast her demon out in the name of Jesus Christ.

The slave girls' owners were furious. They had used this girl for much profit as a fortune teller. So they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them to the marketplace. Then they lied about them and said, *"These men are... throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."* They were stripped, beaten, and severely flogged. You probably remember what flogging was, as we remember Jesus' own suffering at the hands of the Roman soldiers. Then the jailer put them into the inner cell – maximum security – and fastened their feet in the stocks. This very likely involved stretching their legs in an extremely uncomfortable position. Then the jailer went to bed.

With that unpleasant introduction come the events of our reading. About midnight the Lord shook the foundations of the prison with a violent earthquake. It was so severe that prison doors flew open and stocks and chains fell off of the prisoners.

The jailer's reaction was dramatic. I think the word that catches his reaction the most concisely is "trembling." It's a very vivid word in the original account. The Greek word for "tremble with fear, be terrified" is used, along

with a prefix that intensifies the meaning. Have you ever seen someone physically trembling with fear? Here we see a grown man trembling. We see a tough jailer trembling. Why was he so afraid?

First, of course, was the earthquake. But the results of the quake were more prominent in his mind now. He saw the cell doors open and presumed that his prisoners were gone. Do you know what happened when a jailer lost his prisoners? If you don't, read the account in Acts 12 where Peter is freed from prison by an angel. Read how the guards were executed the next day. This man stood on the brink of eternity. His very life hung in the balance because his prisoners were gone.

Therefore, he viewed suicide as the best option. He unsheathed his sword and prepared to run himself through. He was on the brink of eternity. He was going to meet his Maker, whoever that might be. His world was crumbling beneath him, and he would choose his own crack to perish in. We hear that he had a household, later in this text. His despair was so deep that he viewed leaving his wife a widow and his children fatherless as his best option that night.

When Paul tells him the unbelievable news that the prisoners have not escaped but are still there, his reaction is not to slam their doors shut again and go on, but to fall at their feet. *"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?'"* He asked the burning question that was on his mind as he had just stood on the brink of eternity: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" He had heard them singing their hymns. He probably knew what their basic crime was when they were admitted to his prison. And he asks these religious men the enduring question of the ages as he trembles with fear.

Let's pause here to identify why he did not know the answer. **He was operating with what we call the "natural knowledge" of God.** Where does natural knowledge get you? Natural knowledge is twofold: It is the finger-

print of God in our creation. *"The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the works of his hands" (Psalm 19)* We all can see the handiwork of the Maker in nature around us and in our fearfully and wonderfully made bodies. Secondly, natural knowledge is the voice implanted inside every human being that tells them when they do right or wrong, and informs them that they will have to answer for their deeds someday. Everyone's conscience bears witness to that. Natural knowledge is the law.

Where does natural knowledge get you? In its most awesome moments, it will be the ground quaking beneath your feet in an amazing, powerful display. Or it will get you a wild look at the weather on the coast as a hurricane or monsoon sweeps in. Or it will get you an unbelievable rush in seeing a monumental mudslide sweep down on your house. Or it will cause you to quake with fear as a mountain like Mt. St. Helens blows its top. **This is natural knowledge speaking, and it clearly shows the law of God, which causes us to tremble with fear.**

This leads every human being to ask the enduring question that they do not know the answer to: What must I do to be saved? Beneath every rough exterior of every tough guy lies this question. Beneath the super-smart exterior of a 4.0 college student lies this question as well. **What must I do to be saved?**

2. But take to heart Paul's words!

Let's leave this depressing scene and continue on to the answer that the jailer needed to hear. It came from the lips of Paul and Silas. *"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."*

The words they answered clearly revealed the comfort and hope that lived in Paul and Silas' hearts. "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." Have you ever heard a politician answer a pretty clear question that was posed to them? Perhaps it came from a reporter in an interview, and when it was asked you thought, "That's a good question! I want to know his answer to that!" But the three-minute answer that proceeded to come out of their mouth didn't really answer the question too clearly. Its circuitous route left you wondering whether it was a yes, no, or maybe!

Paul and Silas leave no doubt as to what the answer was. It left no doubt as to why they felt as they did after suffering the injustice, abuse, and imprisonment with no pillow or blanket or comfort. What were they doing at midnight? They were singing hymns. I can't imagine that was a common sight in that prison. Incidentally, it can also be a good lesson for us in why we memorized all those passages of Scripture in our religious education and why learning hymns in hymnology is still a good idea!

Those words also revealed why they hadn't even felt the immediate compulsion to flee when their prison door was shaken open. They had stayed there! That certainly was not normal behavior either. There seemed to be no despair about these two men, and their answer revealed why. It gave an epiphany to the jailor.

We call the words of the gospel that Paul and Silas revealed to him "revealed knowledge." It is the message about a Savior, the Son of God, who came to this earth to save mankind. It is not carved in the trees or written in the clouds. It is only revealed in the Word of God and through God's believers. And it perfectly answers the ridiculous question, "What must I do to be saved?" That's the natural thought that the world would think is the answer, after all. Do your best. Live a good life. Obey the rules. Work hard. Be a good example. Be a good father. All respectable virtues, but not the correct answer to the question.

The answer is found on another day when the Lord let the ground shake.

- A day was when Jesus Christ was unjustly arrested.
- A day when Jesus was put on trial and lies were spoken.
- A day when he was abused and flogged by the Roman soldiers.
- A day when his feet were not in stocks, but iron was nailed through them and his hands as well.
- A day when without a pillow or blanket or comfort he was praying a prayer of forgiveness for those who were crucifying him.
- A day when it was dark as midnight for three hours as he suffered for the sins of the world.
- A day when the ground quaked and rocks split when he died.
- A God-man who was content to do his Father's will and save your soul from the suffering of hell.

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

And then, after the washing of the wounds had been done, the washing of Holy Baptism was given as well, where sins were washed away and the gospel was administered in a visible way. It was administered to an entire household, for adults and children alike needed the forgiveness of sins that Paul and Silas preached about.

As we think about that momentous day that occurred long ago and that shook up the life of that jailor, we must also think about our own lives. We thank God that he has brought an epiphany to us, that he brought faith to our hearts and made us his children, and we also pray for days ahead when life shakes us up as well:

- When crime strikes your family
- When a friend forsakes you
- When the doctor calls and tells you to stop by the office and asks you to sit down to talk
- When bad financial news comes

- When the phone rings and you sense it's bad news

- When your spouse leaves you

Days when the ground starts shaking.

When those days come, we have the comfort of our eternal Savior. We have the comfort of our baptism, when God claimed us as his own and put his seal upon us. Unfortunately, there can be days when we forget about our baptisms and the blessings it brought us. Have you thought about yours lately? Have you thought about the objective comfort that is yours through your baptism? No matter the storm or the earthquake that comes along, nothing can take the blessings of this revealed knowledge of God away.

May this comfort be ours in life and in death.

**The Word they still shall let remain
Nor any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plain
With His good gifts and Spirit.
And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child and wife,
Let these all be gone,
They yet have nothing won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth. Amen.**