

Making Ripples

Acts 16:16-34

Our Scripture lesson for today lacks no flare for the dramatic. It's all there: A female slave with the gift of fortune-telling, an exorcism, a flogging and imprisonment, singing inmates, an earthquake, and an attempted jailbreak. These are pages right out of a Dan Brown fiction book. Yet, this was just another day on the mission field for Paul and Silas. In Chapter 16 of Acts, they were now in Philippi—which is the modern-day region of northeastern Greece, near the port city of Kavala. (The painted mosaic image on the front cover of your bulletin is from a memorial in that area.)

In a *Brother, Where Art Thou* fashion, each day they went down to the river to pray, which was just outside the city gate. In the days prior to the events of this morning's passage, it was by this river where they met Lydia. She was likely a person of some social status and wealth, being a dealer of purple cloth. The text says that she was "a worshiper of God", yet there was something in Paul's message about Jesus which stirred up an inner conviction to join their community. Her conversion was a tiny ripple in the water.

In this chance encounter *on the way* to prayer, they couldn't have known that this momentary shimmer on the water's surface would grow into a seismic wave. Already, there is a lesson for us to learn, though not the main point of this sermon: Often times, God wants to do something in and through us *on the way* to our spiritual appointments? That is, even while we attend to church life and our own spiritual well-being, God will at times interrupt our routines. I say this a bit tongue-and-cheek as if going to pray by the river, or going to church, are the only ways we practice our spirituality with God. When we live, breathe, and move in God, everything is spiritual;

every moment is ripe with the possibility of incarnation—of finding Divinity in the mundane.

After their encounter with Lydia, Paul, Silas, and the others continue visiting the river to pray. And it takes them “many days”, the text says, to acknowledge the presence of another woman. By the way, this doesn’t look good on Paul and co.: for the amount of time it takes to speak to her in light of their *immediate* encounter with Lydia.

This second woman has no position or status in society. In fact, we’re told she’s a slave. Nameless, her worth lies only with her owners’ ability to profit off of her gift to predict the future. She’s a fortune-teller—we’re told it’s because of the presence of a spirit which occupies her. In other words, she’s a prisoner inside and out—an evil spirit within keeps her internally in bondage, while she is also a slave to the societal evils of exploitation. And with her soothsaying ability, she repeatedly calls out to Paul and Silas: “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” Slave recognize slave.

Day after day of this, and Paul finally gets annoyed. And the ripples are stirred a bit deeper. He wasn’t bothered because she was accusing them of some falsehood. She was right—they were slaves to God and the message of liberation in Christ. This directly contrasted her bondage to the systems of this world.

For days, they ignored her. We can learn from this second encounter the endless patience of God to keep showing up despite our stubborn inability to see. Paul gets annoyed perhaps because of the relentless stirring of the spirit within him to free this woman of her spirit. Or maybe Paul is frustrated because he becomes increasingly aware of all the forces which keep her in bondage—her service to her earthly owners, being a female who is exploited because of her lack of position and status in a male-dominated society, ultimately leaving her vulnerable to inner spiritual oppressions. And day after day, she keeps coming to them.

God *endlessly* comes to us as possibility in all our impossible situations. I wonder how many burning bushes Moses walked by unnoticed before finally pausing long enough to hear God's call to liberate the people in slavery. How many earthquakes and scenes of roaring fire did Elijah give his attention to before he learned to hear God in a whisper, which he leveraged to challenge and defeat the prophets of Baal? How many Divine encounters did Saul ignore while harshly persecuting Christians before God finally had to blind him on the road to Damascus in order to fully get his attention and heart? The God of endless possibility transformed Saul, gave him back his sight, and a new name—Paul.

Paul is at the height of his frustration with the fortune-teller and finally relents, setting her free of the spirit. Two women. Two stories of liberation. Lydia, the first, we might say receives salvation from her religious system, moving from what was an outward religiosity to an inner reality. The slave woman experiences an inner salvation that frees her of the bondage of spiritual oppression. We do not know if the ripple effects of salvation ever change her whole story and free her of the relational bondage of slavery.

The owners of this woman were irate with Paul and Silas. The departed evil spirit was the source of her worth in their scheme of exploitation. So, they had them flogged by the crowd and thrown into prison. More inconveniences. More disruptions to their mission.

Now in chains, Paul and Silas begin singing praises to God. The jailer in charge of securing the prison must have been highly confused. To think of the years he only heard shouting, cursing, groaning, and banging down those prison halls. But never singing—That was a new one. The ripples of liberation which only began beneath the surface with Lydia, and then deepened with the slave woman, now have grown in size and force.

In prison, those ripples turned to audible sonic waves of melodies. It permeated the entire jail, from their center innermost cell, so that all the prisoners were pierced through with songs of liberation. The text

says a violent earthquake shakes the prison to its foundation, opening the jail doors and releasing the chains. If this isn't a metaphor for what God was doing in the hearts of the imprisoned, then we are led to assume that the release of the prisoners was a spiritual release as much as it was a material liberation. Yet everyone remained in place. When the jailer woke up, he assumed everyone had fled, and was going to kill himself, when Paul interrupts, "Hey, we're all still here." The jailer receives salvation which builds to a tidal wave of liberation and brings salvation for his entire family.

We've been preaching Easter resurrection for seven weeks now, one week longer than the season of Lent. And on this Seventh Sunday of Eastertide, resurrection sermons might feel disingenuous during a time of so much global devastation. Symbols of the empty cross and the Easter butterfly can seem trite when the lives of so many in our world remain entombed and under the real threat of death. We want for so many to know the liberating power of the empty cross which proclaims the reign of extravagant love over coercive systems and regimes. We want for so many to know the transformative power of new life in Christ represented by the Easter butterfly which rises from a dark, dank cocoon. How are we to think about the promise of resurrection in our time that is both authentic and hopeful, even in the face of tragedy and crisis?

In 1963, Edward Lorenz, put forth the question: "Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?" Lorenz was a meteorologist trying to predict weather patterns. His particular research led to what would be termed the Butterfly Effect. He believed that sometimes seemingly insignificant and small actions—like the flap of a butterfly wing—can change the initial conditions or atmosphere and can lead to larger outcomes, like a tornado.

Lorenz's groundwork led to what is known as Chaos Theory which folds in the idea of unpredictability in seemingly determined systems. This challenged earlier scientific ideas that science can accurately predict future outcomes. Chaos Theory says that even small changes in initial conditions can bring about great changes in the end.

Easter liberation hardly comes as a tornado, tearing through the oppressive systems which keep so many in bondage. More often, it is the small, daily work of love and justice. Micro-level disruptions to accepted societal assumptions can in time generate macro-level shifts.

Making ripples might look like...

- showing up in protest at a town hall meeting against an act of injustice,
- Or not choosing to return violence for violence,
- Or showing acts of kindness against a perceived enemy,
- Or helping to get a law passed or a code overturned that previously marginalized individuals,
- Or making informed decisions about the goods you purchase,
- Or showing up on Pride Day to give the community a different image of what it looks like to be church.

We know the potential power of a ripple because we've seen this force for evil. Our current economic/ecological crisis didn't arise in January 2025. It is the accumulation of tiny human decisions over years of being under the guidance of distorted value systems—the Butterfly Effect for destruction, not liberation. Systems of injustice don't happen overnight. It is the product of micro-injustices that largely go undetected and unchallenged. Empires aren't built on the backs of the tyrants which rule over them; they are the collective project of many persons who become subjects of tyranny long before an emperor is named.

The Old Testament prophet Amos prayed that justice would “roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24). And while Dr. King, in his *I Have a Dream* speech, proclaims that justice be like a “mighty stream” that sweeps away everything that stands in its way, the original Hebrew translates it as an ever-flowing stream. There were plenty of other metaphors the prophet could have chosen—a tidal wave, a tsunami—these would have packed the punch that Dr. King was looking for to effect seismic change in the American south; yet the continuous tranquility of a

stream captured, for Amos, the image of the consistent work of doing the small things which can build over time. What we know of most streams is that they run—with increasing force—into larger bodies of waters and eventually join the forces of lakes and oceans.

Paul and Silas' mission in Philippi poetically ends with a stop over at Lydia's house. For us, the readers, this should call to mind their first chance encounter, on the way to prayer, which sets off a chain of events they never could have seen coming. Liberation, salvation, freedom: whatever term we use, it happens non-linearly. The concentric circles of love and justice move out from a center, started by some disruption to the calm, accepted way of things. Sometimes we must be the ones to start the ripple. Sometimes we join a movement already in motion and help to make it a wave. The work of love is a patient work.

When Vancouver hosted the Olympic & Paralympic Winter Games in 2010, it was the culmination of a slow process which continued from its first bid to host back in the 1960s. A third bid eventually came in 1996; and after almost 50 years, the Olympic games finally came to Vancouver. A term which is suggested by this slow, group work is Cathedral Thinking. Have you heard of this term? It takes the idea from how cathedrals in medieval times would take generations to complete. Workers could give their entire lifetime to constructing these magnificent structures and only see a portion completed before handing off the work to the next generation.

As people of the resurrection, we have to commit to the sometimes slow, deliberate work of hope, love, and justice. The stones which block tomb doorways are heavy and take much work and many hands to roll away. Perhaps that's really where the miracle lies. We have to be committed to do the small things and trust that those mini-disruptions are building toward something greater, even if we never see the fullness of liberation in our lifetime. Giving into despair and hopelessness weren't luxuries that cathedral builders had. We too lean into the hope and promise of what can be.

Remain open to the God who continually comes to us as possibility along the way. It will often disrupt our routines and come disguised as an inconvenience. May it be so. Amen.