

Psalm 107: 1-15

Acts 16: 25-34

“Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So! Those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the East and from the West and from the North and from the South... Let the redeemed of the Lord SAY SO! (Psalm 107:2)

And who are the redeemed? Well WE ARE of course! All of you who are came this morning-on a long holiday weekend no less.

You made a conscious decision to spend your morning here rather than somewhere else. And you might notice that it's not exactly standing room only! There was a time in the last century when maybe it was the social norm to be in church on Sunday morning, and some people came because there wasn't much else to do, but those times are long past. Today you could be anywhere, you could be home in bed, sitting in the lazy boy reading the paper (if you still get a paper) at Starbucks, or playing golf, watching “Meet the Press”! You could be grocery shopping, posting on your Facebook page or ordering from Amazon. But no! You came here this morning and I came here this morning. We came because we are the Redeemed of the Lord.

Don't misunderstand, to say that we are the redeemed of the Lord is not to make some self-satisfied elitist claim- The Psalmist is very clear as to who the Redeemed of the Lord are!

Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town, hungry and thirsty their souls fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and he delivered them from their distress. (107:4-6)

Some sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery...for they had rebelled against the words of God; their hearts were bowed down with hard labor. They fell down with no one to help. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and he saved them from their distress. (107:10-13)

We are here because at some time in our lives and maybe right now, either materially or spiritually or both, we have wandered in desert wastes; rebelled against the words of God; we have fallen down with no one to help. But we have also turned to God and experienced- personally experienced- God's mercy and the Lord's hand leading us back on to the path of life and hope. . And so with the Psalmist, we come this morning to

“Thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for is wonderful works to human kind, for he satisfies the thirsty and the hungry he fills with good things.” (107: 8-9)

But then why is it so difficult for us- to just Say so in places other than here on Sunday mornings! I have been pondering this question for a while- a luxury I have, since I only preach occasionally. I have noticed recently that when I am thinking about certain questions of faith and spiritual practice, I will stumble upon someone from a completely unlikely source that is wrestling with similar questions. In this case it was an op ed piece in the New York times last month by regular columnist Nicolas Kristof titled “What religion Would Jesus Belong to?”<sup>1</sup> Kristof notes “ The west has rapidly become more secular with the “nones”-that is the religiously unaffiliated..accounting for almost one-fourth of Americans today – the share is rising quickly: among millennials, more than one-third are nones...” and this he writes “has been accompanied by a decline in public interest in doctrine. One of the most religious countries on earth... is also a nation of religious illiterates”<sup>2</sup> Only half of American Christians can name

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<sup>1</sup> New York Times, Sept. 3 2016

<sup>2</sup> Prather S. 209 “Religious Literacy- What Every American needs to know and doesn’t” HarperCollins.

the four Gospels, only 41 per cent are familiar with Job. Kristoff speculates that there are those who suspect that Joan of Arc is Noah's wife or that the epistles were female apostles. "No wonder" Kristoff writes, "that more and more of us who are Christians by birth, by choice or both find ourselves shaking our heads and asking "What happened to Christianity?"

To answer this question the columnist references a new book by spiritual writer Brian McLaren, called "The Great Spiritual Migration"<sup>3</sup> (which I am now reading and which I highly recommend!!) McLaren puts into words what I have been feeling for a long time!!

He writes:

"Our religions often stand for the very opposite of what their founders stood for... We feel as if [Jesus] has been kidnapped and held hostage by extremists. His captor parade him in front of the cameras to say...under duress... things that he obviously doesn't believe...[Christianity] comes across as anti-poor, anti-environment, anti-gay, anti-intellectual, anti-immigrant and anti-science .That's not the Jesus we met in the Gospels. That's not the Jesus who won our hearts (6-7)

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<sup>3</sup> McLaren, Brian, (2016) the great spiritual migration. Convergent books

In light of this observation, it is understandable that we are not sure how to speak of our redemption outside of the safe setting of our own church community. We are rightly afraid that Christian words and spiritual language have been so co-opted that talking about our faith “outside” might lead to painful misunderstanding ,instead of helping others find the redemption we know.

But there must be a way to proclaim our redemption. McLaren suggests this intriguing approach.

What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes amends for its mistakes and is dedicated to beloved community for all? Could Christians migrate from defining their faith as a system of beliefs to expressing it as a loving way of life? (p.2)

Hmmmm... What would that look like? To find the answer, we can start by returning what Stewart has been calling our “founding stories”. The New Testament is our best source for stories of Christians- that is disciples of Jesus- before “Christianity”- So let’s

look at this morning's story from the book of Acts, which tells of Paul and Silas in prison in Philippi

In the verses before this morning's lesson, Paul and Silas are brought before the Roman magistrates by powerful traders in Philippi who claim that Paul and Silas are foreigners, interfering with their ability to make a profit-

“When they brought them before the magistrates they said, these men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe”. (Acts 16:21).

The town rises up against Paul and Silas and they are stripped, beaten and thrown into jail for the crime of being strangers, migrants, of having different customs and a different religion than the majority. They are placed in an innermost cell and their feet are fastened into stocks.

Paul and Silas have every reason to be very afraid and what do they do? In the words of the Psalmist “they cried to the Lord in their distress”. Acts 16 v. 25 says that Paul and Silas deep in that prison cell “were praying and singing hymns to God and the

prisoners were listening to them”. So this is the first lesson about claiming our redemption; we should cry out to the lord, even if there is a danger that we will be misunderstood. We must dare to make it clear that we rely on God, and not on our own strength. The practice our faith should not be compartmentalized but be at the center of who we are, no matter where we are- and we must trust that our actions will help explain what we mean by our words. Whether, we know it or not others are watching and listening. In spite of the rapid secularization of our world, people are still feeling lost, alone, abandoned, and they are also hoping against hope for a word from the Lord that they can hear. As Christians who put our faith at the center of our lives, we can be the unexpected messengers.

But then there is a miracle! There is a violent earthquake that shakes the foundation. The doors of the prison are thrown open and the chains that bind the prisoners are broken. This can only be understood as spectacular intervention of the Divine, A literal answer to the prayer for release! Now this would be a great

miracle story if Paul and Silas walked free because of God's protection and it would be an even better story if they took with them all of the prisoners who were 'listening' while they prayed and sang hymn in their chains. But instead something even more amazing occurs. Paul and Silas are so confident in God's love that they do not move. Their concern their jailer, for the very one who represents the unjust system that has placed them there. The jailer, seeing what has happened, is sure that the prisoners have all escaped and that he will be the scapegoat- He is preparing to take his own life when Paul cries out in a loud voice "Do not harm you for we are all here".

We are All Here!

Herein lies the second lesson. Following Christ has always been about "making disciples of all the nations". But that doesn't mean making others think and believe and act just like us! It is instead about growing the community of those who know that they are redeemed! The jailer was moved to become part of Paul's community because of the radical and unselfish compassion

shown to him. He brought the prisoners home and they broke bread together. But we know from the rest of the story- the part we did not read this morning that the jailer did not lose his job, he did not leave the city, he did not stop being a Roman Citizen. But because he was changed, and because of the fellowship he shared with the very people he was afraid of, we can be assured that he was a that a new conduit for the love and compassion of God had been opened through him.

Finally, and perhaps most important for the times we live in. Paul and Silas were not afraid. We often think that the opposite of Faith is doubt But I believe that the opposite of faith is Fear! There is a lot to be afraid of in our world, and yet, we believe in a God who overcame death and who lives! That is what we must cling to whenever we are afraid!

The two apostles had every reason to be very afraid, lying bloody and shackled in an inner prison cell, but even though

“they sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery and in irons” (Psalm 107)

Even though “they fell down with no one to help , still “they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.”( Psalm 107)

We are the Redeemed of the Lord. Claim it and Proclaim it!

This week and every week forward remember this truth and Say So! We can Say so by the public practice of our faith! We can say so in acts of unlikely and unexpected compassion and concern especially for those who are not like us! And most of all we can say so in the midst of a terrified world by refusing to be afraid!

Let us Give Thanks to the Lord for his steadfast love

For his wonderful works to humankind

For the Lord shatters the doors of bronze and cuts in two the bonds of Iron! (Psalm 107)

Amen.