

Acts 16:16-34 The Place of Prayer
June 2, 2019

There was an interesting story this past week in the news about the climbing of Mt. Everest, the world's tallest mountain. It stands at over 29,000 feet, an altitude at which the air is too thin for human beings to breathe. Since the 1950's when Sir Edmund Hillary first climbed the mountain, many other people have put the achievement on their "bucket list."

Though I haven't any real knowledge about what is involved, I know it can only be done at a certain time of the year. There are "base" camps at different altitudes where climbers stay for days or even weeks at a time to let their bodies adjust so they can avoid getting altitude sickness. When they make the final ascent, they reach a platform at the top that is no bigger than a couple of Ping Pong tables, they can stay for a few minutes before beginning their descent.

This past week tragedy occurred when several people died, mostly on their way down. The main problem was the crowded conditions along the trail. Pictures showed long lines like those in line to get tickets to the opening of a blockbuster movie. There simply wasn't room for everyone. They didn't bring enough oxygen with them and it ran out.

One wonders why so many people are willing to take such a risk to stand on top of a mountain for a few minutes. Does it really add to the sense of meaningfulness in life?

Philippi

Contrast with Paul. One might say that Paul had quite a different notion about the source of meaning in life. Let me add this, that sometimes we get caught up in the particulars about whatever point of interpretation or doctrine the study of the Bible presents us, but what really makes it interesting, what makes reading Paul interesting *is that he had a different notion about the source of meaning in life.*

In today's reading, the story is told of Paul's first experience in Europe as a missionary of the gospel. The first town entered by Paul and his companions, was Philippi. Philippi was the hometown of Alexander the Great and the sight of a battle between Octavius and Anthony and Cleopatra on one side, and Brutus and Cassius, the murderers of Julius Caesar, on the other.

It had no functioning Jewish synagogue, so Paul's custom of attending the synagogue first was not possible. Instead he went outside the city to a place by the river that was known as a "place of prayer." The first person he met there was a woman whose name was, "Lydia," a reference to where she was from. She was a seller of purple dye from Thyatira.

She became, notoriously, Paul's first European convert. The irony is that the first European convert was actually from Asia, the place Paul had just left behind.

The Servant of God

While staying in Philippi Paul ran across a slave girl who was gifted with the power of divination. Her owners were making quite a profit. She kept following Paul around claiming about him that he was a servant of the “Most High God,” and that he was proclaiming the way to salvation.

Interestingly, this situation was some kind of nuisance for Paul and it troubled him. So he cast out the “spirit of divination” in the name of Jesus Christ. At this she was no longer profitable to her masters who only saw her economic value. They stirred up the other inhabitants of the town and complained to the magistrate who had them flogged and thrown in jail.

It is amazing that human beings ever came to treat each other in these ways. The exploitation of the young girl; the willingness to disregard her well-being; the stirring of the crowd to turn it into a lynch mob; the gratuitous beating of prisoners without cause or conviction; the abuse and manipulation of the justice system to attain economic benefit; it would all stagger the imagination if it wasn't so common, even today.

The Jail

But the story does not end there. A fascinating and miraculous sequence of events ensued while Paul and Silas were confined. The first thing that happened is singing. These men were so distraught over their

beating and imprisonment that they broke forth in song.

I must say, most of what I hear from American Christians who perceive themselves to be under attack, of any kind, is complaining. Paul says he rejoiced in suffering, in weakness; he was glad when he was persecuted.

The next thing that happened was an earthquake, which had the affect of unlocking all the prison doors so the prisoners could escape, which, strangely enough, none of them did. When the jailer came and saw the open cell doors, he took his sword to kill himself for his apparent negligence.

Paul stopped him and ensured him that no one had left. The man asked after salvation and they told him to believe in Jesus. I am struck at how neither Paul nor anyone else could have planned this.

Then the situation changed and the magistrate decided to set Paul and Silas free. One wonders why the change of mind. Perhaps the magistrate simply jailed Paul until the tempers calmed down a little, always intending to send him on his way.

The Meaning of All This

When reading the Bible, especially the New Testament, it is helpful to understand a little about how things were going in the first century of the Roman Empire. It was a tumultuous century. There

was a great deal of violence because empires tend to be that way. They tear things down in order to build things up. And they disregard the people, whoever happens to be in the way.

For the Jewish people, life would forever change in this century because of the destruction of Jerusalem along with the Temple in 70 C.E. Two options emerged. The first involved a tightening down of things requiring doctrinal and ritual conformity and devotion to the synagogue (their church). It included the willingness to stand out from the rest of the culture. Rabbinic Judaism emerged.

The other option was more open. It involved accepting non-Jewish people and being less concerned with ritual and doctrinal purity. It came *to see in a new Judaism a new humanity*. Christianity emerged.

What we see in this story about Paul and Silas in Philippi is just one small example of how the movement called “the Way” travelled and grew. There were new relationships with unlikely people like Lydia, the seller of purple die, or the slave girl who could predict the future, or the Philippian jailer.

There were happenings that are hard to explain from a modern scientific point of view like the casting out of the spirit of prognostication or the faithful singing of the men who had just been beaten and imprisoned. And there was a collection of otherwise anonymous people who saw the faith of people like Paul and in one way or another made that faith their own.

These kinds of things have been happening ever since, they are happening now.

Doing the Right Things

So let it be among us, that we let our witness be the same as Paul’s was; the willingness to care about lonely people, broken people, exploited people, whose only value is economic, and the willingness also to do the right thing even when the reward is punishment, always the singing the faith. The gospel will spread on its own steam.

Why do so many people want to spend so much money and take such risks merely to climb to a mountain peak, stay for a few minutes? Is it because they want *more out of life* and they think that it is not possible in ordinary places like Delaware or Columbus.

I am struck by the contrast between people like that and Paul’s search for fulfillment. Perhaps it might be more meaningful to seek an adventure not for the sake of it, but for the sake of Christ.

To the glory of God.

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