

1st Sunday After Epiphany (1-10-21)

Acts 16: 25 - 34

Pastor Arndt

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. ³⁴ 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 household.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The prophet Isaiah, in speaking about Jesus, says *"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob... I will also make you a light for the Gentiles."* In our lesson for today we're transported to the gentile world of the city of Philippi. There we meet a nameless man. He is a jailer.

His name isn't known to us, but his condition is. He's lost. He's overwhelmed. His life is spiraling into despair. In the midst of that despair he calls for light so that he can see what's really going on. The light he ends up seeing is Jesus Christ. It's my prayer that all of you join the jailer in seeing this Epiphany light and join in his song of praise!

I. A Dark World

As I mentioned, we don't know the jailer's name. Here's what we know about his life. As keeper of the jail his everyday life straddled two worlds; The Roman legal system, and the prisoners that he guarded.

In some ways, the Roman system of justice was a giant leap forward when it came to human rights. At the same time, all it takes is a look at the crucifixion of Jesus to see that Roman justice was selective. In the events of the coming night the jailer would do nothing wrong. But, to the Romans, that didn't matter. If any of his prisoners escaped the jailer would be killed. There was no compassion. He could not plead that he had a wife and children. He was a cog in a machine. He was... replaceable.

Our jailer also was immersed in the life of the prisoners that surrounded him. The jail of Philippi probably contained some people that were innocent. It also held criminals who were guilty. How many times a day would the jailer hear, "I didn't do it!" "I'm innocent."

Prisons also can breed despair. In a few moments, our jailkeeper will draw a sword and seriously contemplate suicide. He probably had seen a fair share of his inmates break down under pressure and do the same.

This is what his world had taught him: His life didn't mean anything. Justice isn't real. There is no hope. These forces descend on the jailer like a freight train until everything is interrupted by the voice of Paul who cries out, *"Don't harm yourself. We are all here."*

II. He called for light... and found Jesus

The jailer calls for light. Paul happily shares with him the light of Jesus Christ. How did Isaiah put it? *"Jesus will also be a light for the Gentiles!"*

This Jesus stepped forward and declared, "I did it!" The Lord placed all of our sins upon Jesus and he willingly paid for them in our place. But that's not even the best part. God loved Jesus. God himself said, *"This is my Son whom I love"* when he was baptized. That love is now given to you!

The jailer takes Paul home and washes his wounds. The conversation naturally turns to baptism. There, in the middle of the night, the jailer's entire family is baptized in the name of Jesus. The transformation is beyond belief. One moment the jailer is about to jettison his family and take his own life. Now, he can look forward to his entire family spending eternity with him in heaven! **"He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household."**

III. Let your Epiphany light shine!

Some of my most memorable moments in ministry have come in prisons. I remember baptizing a child and then taking a cell phone to prison to show the video to his father. "Do you see that! Your son is forgiven! You know what else is true? You also were baptized!"

The point is, the epiphany light of Christ shines in even the darkest corners of our world.

We don't know the name of the jailer, but we know his world. We also know the light of Christ that appeared to him.

Almost 3,000 years ago, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and said to his Son, *"I will also make you a light for the Gentiles."* We are the Gentiles. We have seen his light!

-Amen