

Text: Acts 16: 16-36
Title: 'Round Midnight
Date: 05.29.22
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What keeps you awake at night?

What keeps you tossing and turning, wondering and worrying?

After being hit by a car I couldn't sleep. Nerve damage, a variety of boots and braces, and my hesitancy to take pain medication made for endless nights where I was frustrated, flopping around, and not falling asleep before 3 AM. Reading or watching TV was out because my eyesight was on the blink. So...

I couldn't sleep but I could worry,
couldn't walk but my mind was racing,
couldn't rest but was exhausted.

What keeps you awake at night?

A shooting in a church, a grocery store, a school...
The politics of outrage and fear...
The idolatry of guns...
War that seems poised to grind on permanently...
Living in an inflationary recession...
The daily shootings in city and suburb...
A lingering pandemic...
The black dog of depression, grief, or powerlessness...
What keeps you awake at night?

Our text this morning is enduring and endearing because if you strip away the drama of screaming demons, a jailer going from suicide to baptism, earthquakes, jailbreaks, and exorcisms, you're left with two guys awake in the middle of the night praying and singing.

Let's sit with the story for a few minutes.

Paul and Silas are hauled off and roughed up by the police. For some reason, even as they're stripped and beaten, Paul keeps silent about his Roman citizenship. He could've spoken up in his own defense and changed the dynamic, but with bruised limbs, bloodied backs and sealed lips they're tossed into the dark stone holes of the inner cells.

When in Israel I saw these as first century prisons.

They weren't buildings with small rooms and bars on the windows; they were holes in the ground. They were deep cisterns into which prisoners were lowered or there was a sort of network of caverns connected by narrow stone tunnels. To be placed in an inner cell would put you a good distance from light, fresh air, or the winds of hope.

So, I can imagine that Paul and Silas were discouraged by this turn of events. They were in Philippi because of a dream, they'd followed the flow of the Spirit to the far reaches of the Empire, and now their legs were locked in stocks. Confinement was not the gospel freedom they had anticipated....

And yet, 'round midnight, rather than rest their weary bones or lay awake in worry, they pray and sing. And their song echoed off the stone walls, reverberated in the hallways, and overflowed to the other prisoners.

My guess is when confronted with uncertainty and insomnia they turned to the songs of their faith tradition – the songs that they knew by heart. Paul and Silas were Jews, but maybe they were beginning to see Jesus in the lyrics and imagery of their old songs. And they could have sung to fight off fear, they could have sung out of habit, or they could have sung with gusto and defiance, but however they sang they had a song that could be sung in the darkest prison cell.

In the words of Charles Spurgeon:

Any fool can sing in the day. It is easy to sing when we can read the notes by daylight; but the skillful singer is he who can sing when there is not a ray of light to read by. Songs in the night come only from God; they are not in the power of men.

Could it be that simple?

In the middle of the night, when everything else is stripped away, when everything else fails, when our best laid plans and our earnest efforts fall short, when we're sleepless-restless-souls- before-God – maybe sing a little tune?

I don't mean to be flip. I'm not suggesting a cure for insomnia. I typically have tunes and lyrics in my head, but I'm not quick to sing in bed. But, maybe there's something else in this moment, maybe there's another way to think about this scene....

Jeff Munroe wrote recently about trying to find a unifying theory for the breakdown in contemporary life. When everything is falling apart is there something that explains everything? Is there a unifying theory? He lands on a pandemic of mistrust. For a whole host of reasons, we don't trust politicians, pastors, or police. We no longer trust the church or the government, the medical community or institutions of higher learning. We don't trust social media, news media, or one another. Etc, etc, etc. There's clearly more amiss than that, but Jeff details a pervasive distrust.

And then he writes this:

I'm a Christian. I have hope. But biblical hope is not the same thing as optimism. I love this line from Richard Rohr, "Remember, hope is not some vague belief that 'all will work out well,' but biblical hope is the certainty that things finally have a victorious meaning no matter how they turn out." That quote creates space between biblical hope and optimism. Optimism is the belief that things will work out well. Biblical hope is more than optimism, it's the belief that ultimately God will work God's purposes out. Biblical

hope is centered on the New Creation. Biblical hope is the belief that there is always more happening than meets the eye.

Dear friends, I don't want to relegate Paul and Silas in prison to optimism and a cheery-cheesy-faith that doesn't consider the ramifications and realities of human suffering. They had good reason to lay awake with worry. They could have known the dark night of the soul. Their songs could have been laments; their prayers could have been despairing. But...

But they had encountered the risen Christ and therefore knew a sustaining hope rather than an optimistic belief. They knew there was more than meets the eye. And, they could sing because they trusted that all of this was in God's hands – no matter how it turned out.

As Paul and Silas sang the very foundations of creation shook, the prison doors flew open, and the shackles fall off for everybody. Crooks, criminals, and creeps were liberated. The guilty, the godless, and the good-fer-nothings were set free. It was a complete jailbreak.

I am not suggesting that their singing unlocked the locks, but in the power of the resurrection creation is changed...

There is a crack in the natural order of things.

A new creation is being born.

Death and its minions no longer have the last word, but life- abundant is come and coming in Jesus.

That resurrected reality reached to those jailed in the darkest dungeon on the edge of the known world. And therefore, even there, Paul and Silas knew a peace that let them sing or sleep.

Wallace Stevens wrote a poem entitled "The Well Dressed Man With A Beard" that opens with this line:

*After the final no there comes a yes
And on that yes the future world depends*

I love that line. I don't think Stevens was writing about the resurrection but it is a wonderful take. After the final "no," after Jesus is crucified and placed in the crevasse of a cave with a stone rolled over the opening, there comes a "yes" – the "yes" of the resurrection. And on that "yes" the world depends – a new creation....

I don't know what that says about mass shootings, war, recession, depression, division, synod, or this particular moment. These last few years can feel like the death rattle of a culture. And, I think there's good reason to lament, rage, and be sleepless. There's all manner of public policy decisions that make sense to me. Inaction is a tragic mistake...

But scripture and Spirit don't leave us hopeless, powerless, or limited to political action.

We're called to a hope that transcends this moment, this tragedy, this sleepless night. Our deep trust is in God in Christ. Our deep trust is in the resurrection.

In an early novel, Frederick Buechner writes of a seminary professor, Dr. Henry Kuykendall, exhorting a group of seminarians about the nature of their faith. He says:

Every morning you should wake in your beds and ask yourself: 'Can I believe it all again today?' No, better still, don't ask it 'til after you've read, The New York Times, 'til after you've studied that daily record of the world's brokenness and corruption, which should always stand side by side with your Bible. Then ask yourself if you can believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ again for that particular day. If some morning the answer happens to really be 'Yes,' it should be a 'Yes' that's choked back with confession and tears and great laughter. Not a beatific smile, but the laughter of wonderful incredulity.

There's a wonderful incredulity to the resurrection. No matter what darkness, no matter what demon, no matter what death, the last word belongs to God in Christ. And that's enough to make you sing joyfully or sleep soundly.

Dear friends, there's reason for sleeplessness. Heartbreak takes a toll, uncertainty and anxiety exact a cost, open your heart to the groaning of creation and lying awake is understandable. And, being "woke" has become one more thing to worry about....

But scripture and Spirit proclaim a reality that's other than just what we see. Not the magical thinking of God needing little angels for heaven, or whatever we tell ourselves in the face of such horror, but the biblical hope that all of this is in God hands and God will make all thing new.

Until that day, let us pursue justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God and know a measure of peace in that resurrection faith.

Amen.