

Scott L. Thompson
First Presbyterian Church, Willmar, MN
April 20, 2018
"Strange New Paths"
Acts 16: 16-34

16 One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' ¹⁸She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour.

19 But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. ²⁰When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' ²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' ²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' ³¹They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up

into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

I want you to remember the last time you were convinced you were on the right path and were proceeding full speed ahead with your plans, only to have them thwarted and you had to go down a completely different path altogether. Maybe it was a financial decision, a move, a career choice, a college choice, you name it. You're doing OK now though, aren't you? Things ultimately turned out alright?

If you've had an experience like that, then you can relate to Paul and the lead up to today's text. Paul's whole life was defined by those sorts of experiences – of being on one path, then being sent down a completely different one. For instance, we first met Paul last week when we read of his conversion experience on the road to Damascus in Acts 9. Paul was authorized by the Sanhedrin to go out and persecute the fledgling Christian movement. He was on the road to go to Damascus with authorization to round up and arrest Christians. But we all remember his plans didn't go the way he thought they would. For Paul had a blinding encounter of the Risen Christ on the road which leads to him going to Ananias and being healed of his blindness while converting, become baptized, and ultimately going on to become the leading evangelist of the early church.

But this wasn't to be the only time where Paul's carefully laid plans are thwarted. A few chapters later Paul had a similar experience when he and his traveling companion Silas were attempting to go the cities of Asia (modern day Turkey), and the text tells us enigmatically that "Spirit of Jesus did not allow them," (Acts 16: 7). Luke writes that, "⁹During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' ¹⁰When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them." (Acts 16: 9-10).

No doubt this was frustrating and caused no end of trouble for Paul and Silas. They had probably already made arrangements with their friends in Asia for their coming. They probably had grand plans. But they are willing to set these plans aside, they listen to the vision, and they go to Macedonia. This change of plans turned out to be quite fortuitous for Paul and Silas. For when they arrived in

the Macedonian city of Philippi, they began preaching the gospel, and it was not long before they meet a very important figure in the early church, Lydia. Lydia and her household go on to believe and be baptized and ultimately host the nascent church in Philippi.

So, by the time the pair have gotten to today's story, they've already experienced multiple circumstances where their carefully laid plans have been thwarted and God has led them down new paths. And so it continues today. We learn that Paul and Silas were being pestered by a slave girl, one who delivered oracles, and who generated money for her masters. Annoyed by her continued proclamations, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." (16: 17), Paul, "very much annoyed," ordered the spirit of divination to come out of her. This momentous decision set off a chain of events that Paul could not have anticipated. The girl's owners, upset over the loss of the girl's ability to deliver fortunes, angered a crowd and got Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into jail. Talk about a change of plans! One moment you're going down the street, minding your own business, and suddenly, you're cast into jail!

Put it all together and you might think that brash, quick tempered Paul was being taught something. Remember that on the road to Damascus, Paul was in a self-righteous fury over the trouble that was being caused by this new sect of Christians. Remember that stubborn and determined Paul was driven to bring the gospel to Asia and was only thwarted by a vision of the Spirit of Christ and turned towards Macedonia. And here we have angry Paul, who was being pestered by a persistent slave girl day after day, and who lashed out and cast out the spirit, and who found himself cast into jail as a result.

There's a lot of strangeness to this story that we might struggle to understand in today's day and age. Why did it take the girl's pestering and Paul's anger to make him free her from the spirit? Why is the spirit proclaiming Paul and Silas' identity as servants of God? It may seem strange that she is a slave that is delivering oracles or fortunes for her masters. But to translate that into today's circumstances, we have only to think of how young women are even today exploited and trafficked as effective slaves. You may have heard about this during the past few months as attention was drawn to the problem during the Super Bowl in Minneapolis. Young girls are picked up off the street and exploited and

controlled by modern day “slave owners,” just as effectively as this young girl was then. And in those days, just as in ours, messing with these powers while trying to put an end to the problem will put your life on the line.

And this is what happens to Paul and Silas. The slave owners arouse the crowd’s fury, they are arrested, flogged, and cast into jail. And this is where things get a little strange. And you must wonder, because maybe Paul was catching onto the way God was working in his life – always sending him down new paths - because his response to being jailed is remarkable. There he was, in the jail cell with Silas, and instead of fretting or complaining, or crying or worrying, they were sitting there together singing hymns of praise to God and praying. And when an earthquake came to rock the cells and release all the prisoners from their chains, things got even stranger. They didn’t panic, or use the opportunity to run out, or to escape, or to murder their jailor. Instead they sat calmly and didn’t flee. And why did this all take place that way? Because the jailor, was so distraught over the events and what he perceived as his mortal peril over allowing all the prisoners to escape is only saved from killing himself because he realized they’d all chosen to remain in their cells.

When the jailor saw this, and no doubt he’d heard Paul and Silas singing and praying in the hours leading up to the earthquake, a remarkable chain of events ensued, “²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’³¹They answered, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay.” (Acts 16: 29-33).

In other words, God used this chain of events to make a new disciple. And not just one, but the jailor’s whole household. As I mentioned earlier, these events in Philippi, the conversion of Lydia, the conversion of the jailor, ultimately result in the foundation of the most influential of the early churches. The same strong church that Paul wrote to in later years in the remarkable letter preserved in our New Testament book of Philippians. An amazing testament of faith that extols the virtues of a faithful congregation and their love and joy in God.

God intervenes on Paul's path to Damascus. God sends Paul from Asia to Philippi. God takes a chance encounter on the streets of Philippi and a night in jail and turns it into the foundation of disciples and a new church.

If were in Paul's shoes how would we have responded to these strange turning of events? We must be honest here, these U-turns on our paths are sometimes terrifying. Think about Paul for a second, I wonder what sort of fear and terror Paul had after being struck blind on the road? After the blindness and the vision, he was at the mercy of the ones he was traveling with, and he was instructed to and put himself at the mercy of Ananias, one of the very ones he had been set to kill or imprison. And later in his travels when he was thwarted from going into Asia and sent off on another direction, he no doubt had friends that expected him in Asia. He wouldn't have known a soul in Macedonia, he had no idea what to expect, it wasn't in the plan. And once he was in Philippi and he freed the slave girl from her bondage and he was being beaten and flogged as a result and later cast into prison, no doubt he terrified. You have to wonder if he was sitting in prison wondering if it was all over for him and Silas as they sat in chains.

But here's where Paul's response to these things is so instructive for us in our lives of faith. Look at how they responded as they sat in their wretched cell in chains. They sang and prayed to God. They fell back on their faith. They knew that God didn't abandon them in the past, and they trusted that God was with them even then, chained and imprisoned.

They didn't have any illusions about the hardships they'd been through. They knew that being a person of faith didn't mean that they wouldn't encounter roadblocks or detours in their lives. They knew there were hardships – Paul would go on to experience shipwrecks, more beatings, more imprisonments, and ultimately be martyred by the Romans. So, oh yes, they knew it was going to be hard. But during all of that they knew that being a person of faith meant that it was possible for God to work in and through those things to make good things happen in the end. Think about it and the stories we've rehearsed this morning: Paul became an apostle because of the Damascus road, he founded a church in Philippi because his traveling plans were thwarted, the jailor and his family were converted only because he'd been tossed into jail.

And if you look over the whole of scripture, this seems to be the way God works. Remember the story of Joseph. He's the younger son of Jacob who is envied by his brothers, cast into a pit, and sold into slavery in Egypt. You'd think he would have despaired and his life would have been over. But through a series of remarkable events this young boy – a slave – goes on to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, rise to a position of leadership in Egypt, and God goes on to use Joseph's influence to save the entire Hebrew people. Remember the story of Moses, who fled Egypt because he feared for his life, and is having a normal day herding sheep on a mountain side, when he sees a burning bush, God speaks, and he goes on to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt. God is constantly changing our best laid plans. God is constantly intervening in the midst of our hardships to lead people down new paths. God is constantly taking our pain and fear and our hard times and bringing good things out of them in the end. Not always immediately. Not always in a timeframe we'd like. But God does. As a people still standing in the shadow of the cross from Easter, we can see this, we know it to be true.

Is it possible that God is using the hardships that you're experiencing to bring about something good in the end? Maybe. How then are we to discern this? Maybe we can follow the lead of Paul and Silas. Maybe we need to seek God's will in song, prayer, and worship. Maybe we need to pray and seek God's will in our lives and see how and where God is leading us. Even if the paths are dark or new or full of hardship. Maybe we'll be surprised by the ways that God will work and through these things.

May you seek God in the midst of where you are. May you seek God's will for you even despite of the strange new path you've found yourself on. May you sing hymns of praise and pray faithful prayers to God in the midst of your distress. And may you find God there, and may you move forward together.

Alleluia and Amen.