

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

On this seventh Sunday of Easter, our readings present us with a recurring theme about being called to commit our lives to God. And in our first reading from the book of Acts, we find Paul and Silas on a kind of pilgrimage to a place of prayer. Through this story, we come to understand what it meant to commit one's life to God at that time. Both Paul and Silas were first generation Christians, and they are on a missionary task to spread Christianity throughout that part of the world. We get a sense of certainty from these men that nothing can stop this newly emerging Christian movement, in spite of the challenges that they face. We get a sense of their extraordinary enthusiasm and commitment.

In this story, Paul and Silas (and perhaps Luke) are in Philippi which is a major Greek city. Philippi is a somewhat cosmopolitan city and trading centre, but it is not friendly to those of Jewish descent. The young woman who is following them and shouting at them is drawing an uncomfortable attention to Paul and Silas. Paul, who history tells us had something of a temper, loses his patience and calls out the unclean spirit that he believes is prompting this young woman's taunting. Most importantly, he draws upon the name of Christ when this confrontation occurs. The end result is that the young woman is transformed in such a way that she feels that she can take control her own destiny. This is bad news for the owners of this young woman who had been relying on her as a source of income, and Paul and Silas suddenly find themselves being dragged into the marketplace and put on trial. They are essentially charged with public disturbance and trying to corrupt the people with their customs. As the Greek laws allowed, they were beaten and flogged and then put in chains in a prison. But instead of despairing, Paul and Silas rely on hope through prayer and song, and the other prisoners take note and begin to listen to them.

Then, in a real plot twist, there is suddenly an earthquake. While earth tremors were somewhat common in that area – and they still are today – this earthquake was strong enough to basically reduce the prison to rubble. From a Christian perspective, we probably should not be all that surprised at the earthquake. When God intervenes, there is almost always some corresponding sign or response from the natural world. Sometimes there is fire associated with God, or the appearance of a dove, or great winds. The parting of the Red Sea and the appearance of the extraordinary star at the time of Christ’s birth are other examples of this. God as Creator uses his creation to announce his intervention, as a way to say, “Hey! Pay attention!”

In a further plot twist, the guard at the jail is in a real panic because he knows that he will likely be painfully executed if any of these prisoners escape. The reading tells us that the prison door is open and that all of the prisoners’ shackles have fallen away. The guard, in an attempt to save his dignity and to have a death less painful than the one that he thinks is coming, is about to literally fall on his sword. But Paul stops him with his words, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” This would have had to have been quite shocking to the guard who assumed that the prisoners would have run away because that is what he would have done. It is equally possible that the guard is afraid that the prisoners will turn on him and kill him. He then says to Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” This, of course, was a loaded question. The guard is most likely asking the literal question about how he might avoid being killed. But the answer he gets from these 2 missionary travellers is, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” The story concludes with the guard and his family being baptized by Paul and Silas and becoming a Christian household who extends hospitality to these two men who had just been his prisoners.

Clearly, this is a story about a deep and faithful commitment to God. But when we look deeper into the life of Paul, we get further proof of that commitment and how he modelled that for others.

What do we know about St. Paul? We know that he was a fiery, stubborn, and controversial figure who was very passionate about his Christian faith once he found it. He literally went to the ends of the earth to show his love for God, with all his heart and soul, and strength and mind. History tells us that he could often be short tempered, and this is thought to be due, in part, to the fact that he seems to have suffered a lot of joint pain in connection with a condition that appears to have been a form of dwarfism. He has been described as having red hair and a red beard – again, often connected to his temperament. We know that he was born Saul of Tarsus around the same time as Christ was born, and that he spent years persecuting the Christians until his own conversion that occurred on the road to Damascus. Before his conversion, Paul was apparently present for the stoning of Stephen, the first deacon, just outside of the walls of Jerusalem. Paul was not one of the original 12 apostles, but took their testimonies to heart and became one of the leading apostles of the next generation after the crucifixion. Paul apparently entered into an agreement with the apostles Peter and James that he would focus his ministry on converting Gentiles to Christianity. He was a prolific writer and is credited with writing or dictating several books of the New Testament, including Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians. He apparently had developed the skills of tent making and leather tooling in his youth, which served him well later in life. But, perhaps most importantly, we know that he was largely responsible for the spread of Christianity from the Middle East to Europe.

We know that he walked some 10,000 miles around the Roman Empire on foot and many thousands of miles more by sea. To put that into context, Paul's

walking journey was roughly the equivalent of walking the Canada-US border from here to Vancouver and then back again. We know that his travels included at least 2 shipwrecks, one less than a mile from the shores of Malta. Paul was stranded on a tiny island there, well within sight of land. However, the shark infested waters kept him there for quite some time until he could be rescued by another ship. And when I say, “ship”, it is important to note that Paul sailed on something that was more like a raft than a boat as we would think of today. This is where the tent making and leather working skills of his youth came in handy! Through these journeys, Paul took the Christian story and beliefs out into the pagan world, planting seeds of faith that continued to grow for centuries after. In his travels, Paul crossed not only regional and international borders, but also crossed cultural and religious borders in order to bring the word of the new covenant between God and humankind.

If we were to summarize Paul’s ministry, it would have to begin with his belief in total commitment to Christ and to the act of baptism as a way of joining with Jesus and with God. He outlined a way of living that would set Christians apart from other groups within the society of that time. Paul’s beliefs were unshakable, which is quite remarkable when we consider that he was a very devout Jew before his conversion. Following his conversion to Christianity, Paul spent the remainder of his life spreading the Good News of what was to become important portions of the New Testament. He did this first and foremost by example, and then through spoken and written word. It is important that we think about his total commitment to God. His life as an evangelist was not an easy one. But his imprisonment and death were even more difficult. And, despite the physical beatings that he often endured while in prison, he still used his time there as an opportunity to try to educate the Roman guards about Jesus and Christianity.

As we move towards the end of this Easter season and look towards Pentecost, we can think of Paul as a kind of role model. What can we learn from his example to apply to our own lives and to our own spiritual growth? It is unlikely that any of us would be asked to walk to Vancouver and back for our faith, or to go to prison, or to sail throughout the Mediterranean on a raft. What God asks of us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems to pale in comparison to what he asked of Paul. But that doesn't mean that God isn't calling us – individually and collectively – into some form of ministry. During this week ahead and as we prepare for Pentecost, my prayer is that we will all try to take some time as we bask in the warmth of the Easter season to think on this. God considers you and I to be every bit as capable as Paul. While God spoke to Paul in dreams, there are many ways that God communicates his calling to us. The trick is to quiet our minds long enough to be able to hear. Amen.