

“Be kind, because you never know what someone else is going through.” “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” “Behind those smiling faces, you can’t know what is going on.” These are slogans that help me remember to restrain judgment in casual encounters, when people drive angrily or seem grumpy in the grocery store. Just in the nature of things, most human beings function as scenery in our own lives. We don’t know why they do what they do, and if we speculate, we’re likely to be wrong. Best to move humbly and quietly among them. But Paul was only human, and he did not suffer from excessive humility. This is the guy who suggested to the Galatians that whoever was teaching circumcision among them should castrate themselves. It was Paul who explained to the Philippians that if anyone had reason to feel good about their fidelity to Jewish Law, he had more reason. So it seems well within Paul’s character to snap one day at a slave girl possessed by a spirit because her repeated cries annoy him. The spirit of divination that has brought the girl’s owners a lot of money keeps crying out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” Paul’s doing a lot of important preaching, so he loses his temper and says, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it comes out, and there is a cascade of consequences for everyone.

The immediate consequence for Paul and Silas is that the girl’s owners, angry that their revenue source has dried up, drag them to the magistrates and accuse them of unlawful behavior. Onlookers pile on, and they are flogged and imprisoned with their feet in stocks. And that’s really bad. One minute you’re speaking with authority to a crowd about something important, and the next minute you’re almost

unconscious with pain, in prison, and probably going to rot there unless you die of infection first.

But the consequence for the slave girl must also have been bad. Without her spirit of divination, she's of no use to her owners. Unless she had some secret sponsors, she was entirely on her own, and would probably have had to resort to prostitution to keep herself alive. That's no way to grow old. You have to think she was also likely to die young, of violence or disease. Luke just drops the story of the slave girl, and I understand that he wants us to pay attention to how Paul and Silas handle their own adversity, but she's just enough of a character that I have recognized her as *not* scenery, and I resist the implication that her fate does not matter.

But let's play along with Luke long enough to see what he wants us to see. Paul and Silas, bound in jail and probably in shock as well as pain, react by praying and singing hymns. Perhaps they sing Psalm 22, that starts, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I don't imagine they're praising God and rejoicing, just because Luke says they're singing. You can be miserable and frightened, and share that with God. The point is that they include God in their experience there in a dark, filthy prison where they don't know if any friend knows where they are. This being the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit has everything under control, and so an earthquake opens the prison doors and breaks their chains. Suddenly Paul and Silas are back in a position of power. It's the jailer whose life is at risk, for if prisoners escape, he will pay with his life. But Paul cries out to reassure him before he can kill himself, and the jailer falls down trembling before them and asks, "Sirs, what must I do to be

saved?" And they tell him and baptize the whole household. From being prisoners, they have become vessels of God's grace.

If this story were meant to tell us that people of great faith can count on being saved from troubles, it would be a miserable failure, because we all know that's just not the case. But I do think Luke is trying to tell us something important here. You can be in trouble and include God in your situation, or you can be in trouble all by yourself. If life is meaningless and trivial, you'll do it alone. But if life has any meaning, and if you are a real person and not a prop or a piece of scenery, I would think God would be there with you.

The Quaker writer Parker Palmer just wrote something that made me think that. He wrote, "The question, "What's life trying to teach me about myself and my world?" has helped me find meaning amid madness and tragedy in personal, professional, and political life.' What's life trying to teach me? Palmer goes on to quote Merlyn in TH White's *Once And Future King*: "The best thing for being sad is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you."

Without making an explicit reference to God, Merlyn *is* saying something

similar: that our lives are meaningful, and that even in adversity, we have meaningful options. We should take ourselves seriously, if you will. That's what I think Paul and Silas model for us when they are thrown into prison. They go from utter powerlessness to *powerfulness* because they believe they matter in the grand scheme of things. They believe they matter, they believe they are loved, and so they believe that God is attending to them, and they are not undone.

This is not self-confidence but God-confidence, and you can tell because when the earthquake frees them, the apostles treat their erstwhile jailer with kindness and generosity. It reminds me of the story of Nelson Mandela making friends with his prison guard. His wife had smuggled their baby granddaughter to the prison, and Mandela deeply wanted to hold her. So he asked his guard. The guard asked his superiors and got permission, and having shared that mutual recognition of humanity, the two became, oddly, friends. As in Luke's story, God used Nelson Mandela as a vessel of divine grace even in prison. Mandela was not alone.

John Dominic Crossan, who often uses the insights of anthropology, has argued that physical bodies are microcosms of the larger political systems which they inhabit. In the symbolic universe of the Greco-Roman world, exorcisms in "foreign" territory become explicit political acts connecting political oppression with demonic possession. That's a neat insight, and I'll take it on the literary level, as an artistic way for Luke to show that Paul's ministry functioned to throw off the demons of imperial oppression. Paul exorcised the slave girl's demon as he was also exorcising the power of empire. But on the level of the characters as people, there is

an untold story here, the story of the girl who may or may not have seen herself as beloved, who may or may not have been able to include God in her situation, who may or may not have known there was meaning amidst the madness and tragedy of her life. She was not just a prop; she also had a story, and I hope that she at least recognized it.

God of freedom,
Paul and Silas worshiped you, even when they were flogged and imprisoned. They believed that they counted to you, and in their confidence, they were able to approach their enemy with gentleness and power. Give us that confidence, that our lives matter, and let us also transform antagonism and frustration into mutual love. Amen.