

Midnight's Song  
Philippians 1

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*About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the [other] prisoners were listening to them.*

From this one sentence found in the book of Acts we know much about Paul's way of handling prison life. To lift a phrase from a friend, Rucsandra, the prison is not a prison for Paul. His joy is not contained by human bars.

Paul writes to the Philippians from jail either in Ephesus or Rome a few years after he started the church in Philippi. Having heard that they were worried about his being in jail, he sits down and writes to them an encouraging letter.

Many of you know that over half of the pages in the New Testament are devoted to Paul's letters to one church or another. Letters are his method of choice for keeping communities of faith focused on the gospel. Yet, each letter is different. In Galatians Paul is clearly angry. The book of Romans is a high theological, philosophical argument meant to convince people of the worthiness of his teaching. Corinthians is a bit of both as Paul seeks to defend his gospel from those who have another understanding. As for Philippians, it is a letter marked by his love for those in the church of Philippi and his desire for them to know his joy. It is no wonder that it is a favorite of many Christians.

For who doesn't want to have more joy in their lives? While we are not in a prison cell, there are few who do not feel sometimes trapped in a life that saps us of joy. There are times when we feel beaten.

A man shared with me that when he was a child in Iran he took up boxing for a short while. The first day, he put on the gloves and the head gear, went into the ring and was told to keep his hands down. He wasn't to defend himself at all for today he was going to learn what it was like to be hit. He remembered that the instructor said it would hurt, but that he wasn't going to die. It was necessary that he learn what it was like to be hit so he wouldn't be afraid. For 15 minutes he was hit again and again. When he got home, he looked in the mirror and saw the damage. His mother was not pleased. Yet, he said, it worked. I was never again afraid of being hit.

Certainly there are those in our lives who work very hard to help us avoid pain. But we know that no matter how hard we try, we cannot avoid entering into the

ring of life. We are not protected if we simply choose to never take up boxing. Trouble finds us and when we are hit, and hit hard, we enter into a new chain of fear, the fear that the bell will never ring.

Certainly this is the case for the Philippians. Their leader has been put into prison. They live on one of the busiest trade routes in Rome. Philippi is a favorite city for the Roman elite. So the Christians stand out like a sore thumb.

Yet, the voices Paul refers to, they who are the church's detractors, are not from the Roman Empire. Paul refers to those who are on the inside, they who "preach Christ out of envy or rivalry." It appears that some have used this occasion to strike at the faith of others in their own community. If Paul was such a good man, then why is he in prison? Perhaps, they suggest, the community should look to go a different direction more aligned with their own desire to lead.

Paul knows that there are those in Philippi who worry that he will never again return. With Paul gone, the Philippian church is vulnerable. They have been hit and, I am sure, worry about whether or not they will survive. They worry they will be knocked out before the final bell. But if the gospel is going to be made known, the Philippians will need to be bold and enter into the ring together.

Paul stands in the very place others fear. He knows what it is like to be hit. He bears witness that any suffering, any 'prison,' can be an incredible opportunity for the gospel to be made known. He embraces his plight that he might show those he loves that nothing can stop the gospel from bringing him or others joy.

"I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters having been made confident in the lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear."

Look at all those who are hearing the message! Look at how others are made stronger in their faith. Look how Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true! I will rejoice, he writes. I will continue to rejoice! Paul cannot begin or end a sentence with the bars in view. His imprisonment is part of God's grace. It is that same grace that calls the Philippians to share with Paul in what is his delight, the defense and confirmation of the gospel. God has graced you with the mission.

An AOL poll that ran this past week asked what is your all time favorite book? Of course the Bible had the most votes. The Bible also was in the lead for the least

favorite book of all time. God's word, as good as it is, is not enough. It takes people to make God's gospel, God's love, God's joy known.

At midnight in prison, Paul prayed and he sang, and the other prisoners listened. Paul knew he was being watched. He knew what he did mattered. There in prison, he could have spoken a thousand words, an exposition on why those who follow Christ have more joy. After all, he had a captive audience. But he understood that the joy that comes to those who share in the gospel must be seen and felt. So he did what gave him courage at midnight, when he was tired and afraid. Paul prayed and he sang and the other prisoners listened.

There are those who hear our song. There are those who hear your song. It takes people to make God's gospel joy known. God has graced you with this mission.

This is not a call to perfection. The song of the so called perfect Christian who smiles even when the excrement hits the fan is a cacophony of a soul struggling to be heard. I spent a good amount of time with a woman who was trying to pray the perfect prayer, trying to be the perfect Christian, tears flowing every way as she tried to fit through a hole that isn't fit for her humanity. There is plenty of room for lament in our scripture, for crying out our trouble to God, for bringing to him our pain. Remember Paul prayed at midnight. There is plenty of room for our imperfect selves when we are tired or afraid.

This is not a call to perfection but a call to allow God to make your midnight song meaningful. God can use you even in your struggle. God has graced you to share the gospel.

It is clear to me that Paul is truly elated when he writes the Philippians. On this day, the prison is no prison for him. His joy is real. If we wish to know more gospel joy in our lives, it pays to attend to what he is doing. In our scripture we don't have that same picture of him singing and praying. What we do know is Paul is writing and remembering.

Fred Craddock, a favorite pastor and writer, in his commentary of Philippians reminds us that remembering is a religious exercise. Jews remember during the Passover celebration God's act that freed them. Christians remember in Communion Jesus' last meal with them. Paul remembers, as he prays and writes, the people who walked with him into a life of grace.

"I thank my God every time I remember you."

Remembering is a sacred act. Remembering those we've loved is a type of sacrament. It is the way we make them alive.

Similarly, to be remembered by someone, to receive a note of love, to receive a phone call or even a quick text message, is to be recognized as someone who is alive, to be a person who matters.

Paul takes it one step further. Paul thanks God for the lives of those he remembers. He shares with them this part of his prayer, his thanksgiving. He wants them to know what he knows...God is thankful for them...and God just might want to have something to do with them. Not only do they matter to him, they matter to God.

“I thank my God every time I remember you.”

As Paul writes, he remembers and lifts others up into the presence of God, his paper fills with words that I am sure touched him deeply. Paul writes and remembers himself into joy.

This last Wednesday I was alone. Usually, at noon, a few of us who feel called to do so gather together and pray for our church. After a time of prayer, we share what we might have heard. This Wednesday, everyone was on vacation, but it is a habit I wish to not break. After prayer, I was tired, the sun on my shoulders had made me sleepy. I would have welcomed a little cat nap.

It has been a little overwhelming these past two weeks. I’ve been way too focused on the challenges we face as a church. It isn’t anything big. But so much of my prayer seemed to focus on what I was supposed to do about this and that. It was not wonder that I felt tired.

But it seemed incomplete to leave without speaking. Now talking to myself doesn’t seem very holy, so I started writing. As the pencil moved across the paper, I was awakened by an inner “aha.” One prayer that I say again and again is that this church be experienced as holy ground, that all who would enter would know that the Holy Spirit is at work here. I ask that even those who pass by walking their dogs would feel a bit more alive as they walk by.

It wasn’t until I started writing that I recalled that just this past week I was told by someone whose opinion I care about very much that there’s something holy about this place. I remember being lifted when he spoke those words. As I remembered, I was struck by joy.

Paul is showing us what gives him courage and conviction; he is showing us what will strengthen ours.

Paul prays and writes himself into joy...into God's joy. In sharing the gospel through his letters, I am confident Paul experienced many "aha" moments. It is no wonder that we stress journaling, not simply so you can go back and mark off answered prayers, but so you might write yourself into an awareness that might otherwise be missed. With God we can write ourselves into joy. Just as the prison remained, it doesn't mean that the clouds go away. But with God we can see how God is using us in every time and place to make his gospel, his grace known. When we turn a journal into a letter, with God, we reveal God's grace.

I thank God every time I remember you.

A monastery had fallen upon very hard times. Once a great order, but over time it had been reduced to only five monks—the abbot and four others—all well into their seventies. The order was dying.

Deep in the forest surrounding the monastery there was a little hut which a rabbi from a nearby town used occasionally for personal retreats. The old monks had developed a sixth sense about the presence of the rabbi, and always could tell when he was in the forest. On one such occasion, the abbot, who had been agonizing over the demise of his order, decided to visit the hut to ask the rabbi if he could offer any advice.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot into his hut, but when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only empathize with his plight and commiserate with him. "Yes, the spirit seems to have gone out of the people. It's the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."

So it was that the abbot and the rabbi spent time that day talking of deep things. Finally, the time came for the abbot to leave. The men hugged and the abbot said, "It is wonderful that we could meet and talk after all these years, but I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there no advice at all you can give me that would help me to save my dying order?"

"I'm sorry," said the rabbi. "I'm afraid I have no advice to give. All I can tell you, though, is that the Messiah is one of you."

Upon his return to the monastery, the abbot was joined by the other monks who asked, "Well, what did the rabbi say?"

"He couldn't help," the abbot replied. "We just sat and talked. And as I was leaving, he said that the Messiah is one of us. I have no idea what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered if there could be any possible significance to the rabbi's words: The Messiah is one of us. Do you think he meant one of us monks here at the monastery?

If he meant one of us, he surely must have been referring to Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.

One the other hand, he could have meant Brother Thomas; he is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.

Certainly he could not have meant Brother Eldred! Eldred gets crotchety at times...But even though he can be a nuisance, when you look back on it, Eldred virtually always has a valid point to make. Perhaps the rabbi did mean Brother Eldred.

But surely not Brother Phillip; he's so passive, a real nobody...But then, almost magically, Philip has this knack of appearing at your side just when you need him the most. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

But of course the rabbi wasn't referring to me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet what if he were? What if I am the Messiah? Please, God, not me; I couldn't mean that much to you, could I?

As they reflected in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the remote chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they each began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect as well.

Because the forest was so beautiful, people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to walk along its paths, to sit quietly in the chapel. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect which seemed to surround each of the elderly monks and which permeated the atmosphere of the whole place. There was something compelling, empowering about it. Without knowing exactly why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to visit, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to share this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

In time, some of the younger men who came to visit began to talk more and more with the elderly monks. After a while one asked if he could join the order. Then another. Then another. Soon, the monastery once again housed a thriving order,

and thanks to the rabbi's gift, became a beacon of peace, love and hope in the realm.

Community Congregational... You are a spiritual community that welcomes theological inquiry and challenges each other to walk more closely with God. You are a people unafraid of truth who often share things with one another others would be pressed to share in therapy. You are a people willing to serve, to welcome, to reach beyond your comfort zone that others might feel the love of God.

You are a holy people called by God into and sent out by this community. You have much to share. It takes people such as you to make God's gospel, God's love, God's joy known. Be bold. Live your lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Stand firm in one spirit. Do not be intimidated but strive side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.