

This is an Easter Story... about ... eggs

A few years ago, when the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were much more present in the news cycles, a friend and mentor of mine, Theo, decided to add a new routine to his life for lent. In the morning at the end of each week, Theo hand-delivered a letter protesting the wars to each of the U.S. congressional offices in his city. Every week he'd write the letter, drive to the office, hand it to the disinterested intern working the desk for their respective candidate and with a “thank you” he'd say, “See you again next week.” Week in, and week out... all through lent... but this is an Easter story afterall... and Easter was right around the corner.

As Theo turned the corner, early one morning, and walked up to one of the offices, he noticed toilet paper was strewn about the sidewalk... even before he got to the door he could smell it... it smelled like old... rotten... eggs. The front of the office was plastered with them... a sulfur-yellow film making opaque the once clear view.

Theo walked into the office, the usual intern obviously more distracted than usual. Theo handed in his letter and said, “looks like someone was pretty angry last night.” The intern looked up and replied, “Yeah, this kind of thing happens every once in awhile, someone upset over a decision, or a lack of a decision, and our office gets egged.” Theo asked, “That doesn't work, does it? I mean, has it ever changed anyone's mind?” “Oh no, of course not.” “No, I wouldn't imagine so, we'll I'm sad this kind of thing happens, I'll see you again soon.”

But, this is an Easter story afterall, and Easter was right around the corner... so not a few minutes later the intern saw Theo come around the corner, squeegee and a bucket of water in hand. Theo walked straight to the windows and began soaking the squeegee and with a high pitched “SWEEEK” began de-egging the vandalized office. Of course the intern was shocked, as the egg pieces began to rain down off the window. He quickly hurried out... “You don't need to do this, we have a cleaning team on the way.” Theo just kept working in silence, interrupted by a SWEEEK at each slide of the squeegee leaving a clear window in its path. As Theo finished the last few swipes of the restoration the intern asked, “Why are you doing this?”

Theo replied, “You know, I've been coming in to your office for months now to deliver my letters. You've received them, maybe you've even passed them on, but it's interesting to me you've never asked what I'm about, or why I'm doing it... now that I'm here cleaning egg off your windows you're willing to listen to me. Violence never changes anyone's mind. It never works, just like eggs on an office, but kindness... kindness is always intriguing to people...” Theo began to walk away, but turned and with a tiny grin said, “See you next week.” The whole place smelled like... Easter... It's an Easter story afterall.

There are a lot of lessons to take from that story, but for this morning let's focus on the attracting power of curiosity and how faithfulness in action seems the most curious to people. Most of us can relate to being curious... I'm curious who wouldn't. It's why people investigate mysteries; connect dots; uncover Easter Eggs – some curious people become scientists, some of us go into biblical studies... whenever the Bible presents a thought that makes me say, “huh... that's intriguing... or hmmm, I wonder...” that's when my curiosity kicks in! Acts 16 does NOT disappoint. Here are some examples:

Earlier in Acts 16 Paul gets a vision about a man from Macedonia inviting them to come over to Macedonia and help... when Paul and his ministry team arrive they don't first encounter a man, they encounter a woman, Lydia. I wonder if there's anything there...

Lydia is a wealthy merchant from a textile capital called Thyatira, in a region called “Lydia” the neighboring region to where Paul and his team had just left. That's intriguing to me.

This morning’s passage starts with Paul and Silas being followed by a slave-girl who has a spirit of “divination.” In the Greek it’s a spirit of “Python” – like the snake... specifically the snake from Greek Mythology that guards the Oracle at Delphi – one of the most important religious sites in the ancient world, known for giving cryptic and easily misunderstood oracles (Just ask King KREE-sus in 560-547 BCE... by the way King KREE-sus was King of a region in Turkey called... Lydia). When this slave-girl, with the spirit of Python, starts announcing, “these men are slaves of the ‘Most High God,’ it isn’t obvious which God her hearers think she’s talking about.

Paul’s expulsion of the Python spirit emancipates the slave-girl and incarcerates Paul and Silas. They’re charged with disturbing the city; being Jewish (which may shed light on why Philippi has no Synagogue, as it requires 10 Jewish men in a city to start a Synagogue, Philippi doesn’t appear to meet that quota); and they’re advocating customs that are unlawful for Romans to adopt or observe. Are these accusations accurate? Hmm... I wonder... Paul and Silas are preaching a competing gospel; a competing king and kingdom; a competing peace; a competing form of honor and righteousness... Maybe the charges ARE accurate afterall.

They’re handed off to a jailer, who puts them into the innermost cell, and fastens their feet in stocks, amongst all the other prisoners. Then... they sing. NOW, as we heard, an earthquake occurs, foundations and jailer are both shaken, both literally and figuratively – aftershocks are experienced in the jailer’s “tremor-ing...” that’s all worth picking at, but I’m most intrigued by the song. You know... the song that Paul and Silas were singing to their captive audience just before the earthquake... the song that apparently communicated such an important message that once the doors were flung open, none of the inmates left... the song that saved a prison guards life... that’s one “heaven” of a song... I wonder what it was...

The author, Luke, tells us that the fellow prisoners “audited” the song... the word Luke uses is related to “auditorium” the place of listening, where one listens attentively. Luke tells us Paul and Silas are in the inner most cell, so when the jailer is about to commit suicide - because those guards who allow prisoners to escape suffer their punishment in their place – Paul shouts back, we’re all “here.” So now I’m curious... where is “here”? “Here” isn’t a general place. It doesn’t mean we’re all here in “Macedonia” or here in “Philippi.” It’s a specific place. Paul says, we’re all “in here.” Paul doesn’t mean “no one moved” as if everyone’s right where the jailer had placed them – in the jail... if he had, the jailer makes an extreme, life-threatening assumption that could’ve easily been checked. Doesn’t it make more sense that the guard assumes everyone escaped because when he sees through the open door the jail “looks” deserted? It looks deserted because people AREN’T where the jailer originally placed them... they DID take advantage of the open doors, they HAVE moved... they’ve just moved deeper INTO the prison. When Paul says, “we’re all IN HERE” he means that everyone is with Paul and Silas in the INNERMOST cell! That’s why the illumination is needed, to account for the prisoners who have encircled Paul and Silas.

Whatever it was about their song, it was intriguing enough to draw prisoners deeper into a prison when they were provided an opportunity to escape. It was intriguing enough to set in motion the salvation of a jailer, by drawing him too into the innermost cell and reconciling prisoners and imprisoner.

Paul will refer to himself multiple times as a “prisoner” in his letters (Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; Philemon 1:9; 2nd Timothy 1:8; Philippians 1:12-14, 29)... but this is the very first time Paul becomes an actual prisoner. This is the prisoner experience that first forms that identity and the lens by which all his other prisoner experiences are influenced... and it’s also the only time we’re told Paul ever sang. It sounds surprising because Paul says he “sings” in Romans 15:9 and 1 Corinthians 14:15, but in these verses he’s quoting scripture ABOUT singing; and using singing as a metaphor, but here in Acts 16 is the only time we ever see Paul singing, himself. So what’s the song? Maybe it’s related to what he instructs OTHERS to sing about in their times of distress. Ephesians 5:19 – ...sing songs and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; Colossians 3:16-17 – Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. That’s an intriguingly good song. A good reminder any Sunday, but especially a baptism Sunday.

SO the desperately curious jailer asks, the enticing question, “what must I do to be saved.” It’s a bigger question than “what must I do to go to heaven when I die” because “salvation” is much more than an afterlife experience. Salvation is about a total life experience... an Eternal life experience... not just after death, but before it too... Salvation is about experiencing Shalom – inner and outer peace, wholeness, right-relationship between oneself and everything else – God, neighbor, community, creation, and oneself... Salvation is a big question... so they give a big answer, in one word... “pistueo.”

“Pistueo” is the greek word that we translate into three English words, sometimes as “believe” sometimes as “faith” and sometimes as “trust.” The problem is those English words have lost their active elements. We’ve made them mental exercises rather than active engagements in reality. “Faithfulness” would probably be a better word to use for Pistueo... “be faithful,” Let me illustrate, when you hire a babysitter or visit a pool you don’t want the babysitter or life-guard to believe in watching your children, you want them to be faithful... to respond faithfully. We don’t want our spouses to believe in their vows, we want faithfulness. Pistueo is a verb... it’s an action... it’s the lifestyle through which Jesus demonstrated a life of salvation which aims to bring about Shalom; right-relationship...

Pistueo, faithfulness, looks like exactly how this jailer responds, binding wounds, showing hospitality, responding like Lydia, he and HIS entire household also being baptized – the symbol of commitment to the journey of faithfulness and the community.

But there’s ONE more curiosity from Acts 16 we need to note this morning (there are hundreds more worth investigating). Who is “we”? Did you notice that in this chapter? The pronouns change. In the beginning, “THEY” – that’s Paul, Silas, and Timothy – are moving around and THEY come to Troas, a city on the coast where Paul has his vision and then WE left for Macedonia. WE set sail from Troas, WE came to Philippi, WE went to the river; Lydia was listening to US; She prevailed upon US to stay at her house. WE were going to pray when Paul cast the Python spirit from the girl... THEY – Paul and Silas – go to jail; THEY sing and convert the jailer; then after THEIR release THEY came to Lydia’s house, said goodbye... and then THEY left. Whoever “WE” is... “we” stayed.” In fact, a few chapters later in Acts 20:6, Paul comes back through Philippi and then WE sailed from Philippi... back to Troas. SO, if you’ll excuse the jarring grammar, – who is “we”?

“We” is the storyteller of course... “we” is Luke. Luke is a part of this story. Paul, Silas, and Timothy come to Troas and Luke joins them in the mission to Philippi! They experience the events of Acts 16 together and then Luke stays in Philippi to help out with this new congregation Paul, Silas, and Timothy leave behind. As we noted earlier, having a Jewish synagogue requires 10 Jewish men... Philippi has no synagogue... but now it has a church, and what does it take to have a church... the same thing it takes to have salvation... the faithful response of anyone to the gospel... ANYONE... whether they are a wealthy merchant or an emancipated jailer or a prisoner or a slave-girl... a church is a community of ANYONES... trying to live in faithfulness to Jesus.

Is it any surprise that Luke, of all the gospel authors, is the most explicitly embracing of women, gentiles, and outsiders!? Look at the church that he was a part of! Faithfulness in the form of prison concerts, a church Led by Lydia; encouraged by a converted prophetess; bringing together jailer and prisoners in the leading city in the region...

Of course, the most important question to ask ourselves this week is: “Who will WE be? Who will we entice by their curiosity in our faithfulness? Where is our squeegee needed most? Those are intriguing questions to ask anyway, but especially on a Baptism Sunday... WE are an Easter story... afterall.