

## SERMON AT TRINITY UMC, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

### “SONGS AT MIDNIGHT”

May 16, 2010

**TEXT:** Acts 16:16-34

**BY:** Pastor Kirk Reed

Anybody can sing on Sunday morning at church. But Paul and Silas were singing at midnight in a jail cell. Anybody can trust God on a good day. But Paul and Silas were trusting God on one of their worst days.

They had been bullied by an anti-Jewish mob. Later they were stripped and flogged – severely flogged, it says (v. 23). They were not given a fair trial. They were not allowed to defend themselves. What was the outcome? “Put them in solitary confinement! Fasten their feet so they cannot move!”

Paul and Silas were alone at midnight. What would happen tomorrow? Would they be flogged again? Would they be tortured or even condemned to die? They had not a clue. They were in the dark.

“But why?” we ask. Why were they in prison? What crime had they committed? They were arrested for healing a mentally disturbed slave girl, who made money for her owners as a fortune teller. Paul saved her from being exploited, and so the exploiters were enraged. They were up in arms, because these followers of Jesus were hurting them in the pocketbook. No more big bucks for the slave owners. Immediately they began to shout anti-Semitic slogans: “It’s these foreigners, these Jews, who are ruining our Roman heritage.” The crowd became a lynch mob, and it was downhill for Paul and Silas. It was a wretched day. Here they were, bleeding, alone, unable to see in the darkness of a Philippian jail. And yet they began to sang.

Wait a minute. People don’t do that, do they? Singing in jail? Singing at midnight?

Some people would day that Paul and Silas were in denial. They would argue that if you have a terrible, horrible day, you should never sing. You should grieve, they would insist, instead of putting on a cheerful face, pretending that everything is OK. It is *not* OK for those who have suffered a tragic loss. So don’t sing, they would tell us. Don’t deny the pain.

I would say, “Yes, you’re partly right. We must be able to grieve.” When my wife’s brother called last Sunday morning to say that Pam, the love of his life, had died suddenly, we did not smile and say, “It’s a blessing.” Instead of responding with words of artificial comfort, we entered into his grief. The Bible says, “Weep with those who weep.” And we did. After losing his wife of more than 30 years, he was in severe pain that could not be covered over with cheery words.

And yet as people of faith, we do not fall into despair. Listen to the words of Paul himself: “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope” (I Thessalonians 4:13). Yes, we grieve

together. But it is not hopeless grief. We are able to hear God's song of comfort, and therefore we can sing that same song of Easter confidence. It's not a bouncy tune with shallow words. It is a midnight song that the world cannot completely understand.

Almost nine years ago the world did understand what it means to sing at midnight. You remember the month of September, 2001. We were still in shock. The Twin Towers were gone. More than 2900 members of our human family were gone. Our naïve assumptions about being safe were gone. And yet we heard in a national broadcast tens of thousands of voices singing at midnight. I'm talking about emotional midnight. In New York and across the nation we came together to grieve, and as we grieved, we were reclaiming a song that some of us learned from Kate Smith back in the 1950's. It became at that frightening moment a song of hope and comfort, a song that unified us, a song that helped us express our admiration for the true heroes of that soul-shattering day. We were singing in the darkness: "God bless America, land that I love. / Stand beside her, and guide her / Through the night with the light from above."

When we as Christians sing at midnight, we are not denying the pain. We are not glossing over the hurt and the disappointment. Instead, we are saying what Paul says in II Corinthians 1:3-4: "Blessed be . . . the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console [others]." That's what Stephen Ministry is about here at Trinity Church. We allow God to bear our pain, so that we can help to bear others' pain.

One of my favorite new hymns is a midnight song. I love these words: "I will hold the Christlight for you / In the nighttime of your fear; / I will hold my hand out to you, / Speak the peace you long to hear" ("The Servant Song," verse 3).

When John Wesley was terrified in an ocean storm, a group of Moravians from Germany began to worship God by singing. Wesley could not understand their faith until later, when he finally heard God's song in his heart.

How could the American slaves sing when they were tormented? They did sing, songs like: "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; / There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sinsick soul." How could they do it? How could they possibly keep singing when they were demeaned and degraded? They were hearing God's song, a song of consolation and hope.

"I have loved you," says the Holy One, "with an everlasting love." If you can hear that song, then you can do what Paul and Silas did at midnight.

To sing at midnight has nothing to do with the quality of our voice. It has nothing to do with our diaphragm or our vocal cords. It has everything to do with our soul. "When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, / When sorrows like sea billows roll; / Whatever my lot thou hast taught me say, / It is well, it is well with my soul."

There is a bumper sticker you may have seen: "Those who sing pray twice." It's true. May we all learn to "pray twice," so that like Paul and Silas, like John Wesley, like many of those in slavery, we can sing a song of hope. Paul and Silas were singing in a jail cell, and the other prisoners were listening, and even the jailer was blessed. Anybody can sing in church on Sunday morning. But we are learning to sing at midnight.