

## **Prisons, Singing, and New Beginnings**

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Edson (Bill) Lewis*

*Olentangy Church*

*Columbus, Ohio*

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### **Scripture Readings**

Exodus 15:19-20

Psalms 137

Revelation 7:3-17

Acts 16:25-34

### **Sermon**

This sermon will be an exercise in weaving a single cord out of three strands that run through the whole Bible, from its beginning to its end. The three are in the title to this sermon. (1) Prison, (2) singing, and (3) new beginnings. The Scripture readings were chosen because the three cords run through them. And, it turns out, they run right through the foundations of my life, and maybe you will say, "Mine too."

The text in Acts 16 may be the most clear of all. Paul and Silas are in prison, in the middle of the night they are singing, and it's a new beginning for the jailer and his family, and in a way for Paul and Silas since they are freed to take up their journey once again. Thus, in Acts 16 the three strands are in plain view: prison, singing, and new beginnings. We may not have the three so clearly in view when we think of our own lives. I suggest that we could be more aware of how our own lives can be described under the rubrics of prison, singing, and new beginnings. I shall do that by offering the following: (1) something I learned about Advent at the Marion Correctional Institution, (2) and then an account of two men whose lives display, I think, the three cords at work in their lives. I hope that as I continue we will recognize descriptions of ourselves.

**FIRST, WHAT DID I LEARN ABOUT ADVENT** while I was in prison? An inmate and I were talking about Christians' celebration of the Advent. I mentioned that traditionally it was understood to be a time of waiting. "Waiting!" he said, "Waiting? That's all we do in prison. We don't have any choice. We are always waiting." I knew what he was talking about.

A prisoner's life is made up of waiting. They wait for role call. They wait for a guard to open the door of their cell. They wait for permission to go out into the "yard" to exercise. They wait for permission to go to the commissary to buy some toilet articles. They wait in line for their food. They wait for mail, for visitors, for parole boards to make up their mind. They wait. And wait. And wait. And then wait some more.

That sounded like Advent to me. I'm waiting too. Christians everywhere are waiting for the Lord to return, for the full establishment of the Kingdom. It's a time of waiting,

but I had never associated it with being in prison. I'm waiting for things to change. I'm waiting – could it be? – I'm waiting because I'm in prison too! I had never thought of Advent that way, but come to think of it, it seems to be profoundly true. Prison is a place where people do not have control over their own lives, and so wait for what they cannot themselves make happen! Isn't that profoundly true of our own lives? Isn't the biblical narrative from beginning to its end an account of people waiting for the promises of God to be fully realized? Truly, there are all kinds of prisons. And we are waiting to get out of them!

Adam and Eve walked out of the Garden of Eden into a prison of thorns and thistles, pain in childbirth, where brothers murder their brothers, where wickedness seems to prevail. That prison, updated, is still with us today. And we are waiting for it to be over! Paul and Silas were waiting in the prison of Philippi, but even more so for the coming of the promised Kingdom in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. The saints singing before the throne are waiting! All of us are waiting to get out of prison. The truth of that has new weight for me! -- Because of what I learned while in the prison at Marion, Ohio.

**I WANT TO TELL YOU ABOUT A MAN** who used to be an inmate in the MCI prison, a man who became my friend He is someone who not only was able to “sing” in prison, but in his own life has made a remarkable new beginning. When I first started visiting the inmates about eight years ago, he had already been in prison for nearly 20 years. Only gradually did I learn why he was there: in his late teens he had raped a woman. Prison was an awful place for him. Early on he was raped by fellow inmates. Hopes of a release before his time was up faded away as petitions for parole, one after another, were denied. I can only imagine the depths of despair and depression, loneliness and isolation, helplessness and anger that my friend has endured. He was truly in prison!

But somehow he learned to “sing” (I am using the word metaphorically!) even while there. He became a dedicated Christian, and speaks compellingly of the grace with which the Lord has embraced him. While still in prison he completed a Doctor of Ministry degree. He was still working on it when I started visiting the prison and, after getting to know me a bit, asked me to help on his thesis. He was finally released from prison (about 4 years ago), and now lives in the Columbus community. He reworked his thesis and has made it the basis for a series of workshops called “Awakening” that he now offers in prisons in Ohio, MCI being one of them. He has been an inspiration to other inmates who have dared to believe they could do what he has done. They want to “sing” and begin anew the way my friend did. Paul and Silas, and the jailer, would understand!

**THERE ARE ALL KINDS OF PRISONS**, and every one of us is in one of them! Maybe it's the prison of depression, or a profound sense of failure. Maybe it's a dysfunctional marriage. Maybe it's bullying at school, or a veritable war zone between a parent (or parents) and their child (or children). Maybe it's a bad business decision that hangs like

a millstone around one's neck. Maybe it's a secret sin that won't go away. All make for prisons. Each of us is in a prison cell. And we wait for liberation, a liberation that we can't ourselves seem to bring about. So we wait.

Some of us will sing while we wait. Some won't. What enables one person to sing while another cannot is a mystery beyond my understanding. But I do know that the difference exists. The biblical narrative from beginning to its end, I think, is trying to tell us that the first cord, the one named "prison," is not the only one that, by the grace of God, runs through our lives. There can be singing in prison, the very prison we (you and I) are in. We are encouraged to lift up our eyes, open our mouths to sing, and begin a new life. My friend who used to be in the MCI prison tells us it can be so. It's mighty humbling to see it happen!

**I SAID THERE WAS ANOTHER MAN** I wanted to mention, also a friend. Yesterday, by telephone, I talked to him. He lives in Washington, D.C. For his story we need to have the gray psalter-hymnal in our hands. Get one and turn to page 8. At the bottom of the page you will find a listing of the 12 people on the revision committee who worked for 12 years on the book you have in your hands, making for the church a replacement of the older blue hymnal which some of you will remember. At the bottom of the 2nd column you'll find the name of my friend, Jack Reiffer. I think you should know at least part of his story. In case you begin to wonder, he knows I am telling you about him today.

Jack and I, with others, spent a lot of time in the 1990s working together to get a department of campus ministry established in Christian Reformed Home Missions. We were eventually successful. Jack was president of the Campus Ministry Association and I was its part-time employee with the high-sounding title, Advocate for Campus Ministry in the Christian Reformed Church. Jack is an accomplished musician -- organ and piano and talented vocalist -- he performed as a soloist in operatic productions. He was the choice of the committee when it came time to update synod, more than once during the many years it took to make a new hymnal. Jack, I am told, would stand before synod and lead it in singing new or revised entries in the hymnal, many for which he was personally responsible. Every page of the book you have in your hands has the fingerprints of Jack on it.

Then the unthinkable happened. Jack was the pastor of the Washington, D.C., Christian Reformed Church, married with grown children attending Calvin College. And then, in a move that was unexpected by all of us, Jack announced to his family, to his congregation, and the rest of us that he was gay, and that after a long struggle he had decided that honesty and truthfulness required that he "come out of the closet." It would be more accurate to say, "Out of the prison" in which he found himself. A prison, by the way, in which he had been singing, and in which he had found the courage to be honest and open about himself. For too long he had been bearing the burden of that fact alone, by himself. He wanted out of that prison. In a sense, however, he had stepped from one prison into another.

Ashamed, I suppose, his wife divorced him. The church council sought and obtained his resignation and Jack chose to sever his ties with the CRC since it seemed to insist, in his case, that he remain in the "prison" to which people like him are consigned in the CRC. I am haunted by the image of my friend, all alone in his knowledge that he is gay while he leads the synod in singing songs from a new psalter hymnal that we now hold so carelessly in our hands. In prison, and yet he sang! Still into another prison, not entirely of his own making. It's good to know that Jack is still singing. He is on the staff of a Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Washington, D.C., and when I asked him, said he is doing well, and that his relationships with his wife and two sons are healthy and supportive. A litany of new beginnings for all of them! It really can happen! By the grace of God!

**STILL, ONE MORE THING BEFORE** we close the gray book. Have you ever wondered why people sing together? We read in Exodus that Miriam and all the women sang together! Rev. 7 gives an account of a great multitude, so large they cannot be numbered, there before the throne and the lamb. And what are they doing? They are singing...together! Why together? Why with one voice?

I have to say, "I don't really know!" I can't offer a biblical or theological prescription for singing with one voice. But I know the power of it – and, I dare say, so do you! I experienced in a US Navy bootcamp. Partly to break up the monotony of marching in formation all day, we would break into a song and march to its cadence. "Ninety nine bottles of beer on the wall. Ninety-nine bottles of beer One fell off and ninety-eight were left." I don't remember ever singing that silly song long enough to get all the bottles off the wall. But I know the power of marching in cadence with the singing of all those voices. Somehow the silly song invited us into a body, a unity, that we were beginning to be! A new beginning?

I have experienced the power of singing in civil rights marches. The route of the march may be long and bodies are becoming fatigued, and then someone starts singing, "We Shall Overcome," and soon hundreds of others join in to make one voice. And mysteriously bodies are no longer tired. The marchers are revived and sustained by the singing. A new beginning? I don't understand it but I know it happens! Its real.

So, I must warn you. Be careful when you take up a hymnal and sing with others. Unexpected things can happen, especially when it's a "Song of Zion." The Babylonians did not realize that they were playing with fire when they asked the exiles to sing to them one of the "Songs of Zion." So enjoy the congregational singing, for sure. But take note of the power that's in the solidarity, the joint witness and commitment that singing together constitutes, and watch out! Be aware of what is happening, or could happen! There's more to singing together in prison than meets the eye. I won't blame you for being cautious. A new beginning may be just around the corner!