

Seventh Weekend of Easter (RCL/C): Pythons, Fortune-Tellers, Jailers and Freedom
Acts 16:16-34; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26
May 28-29, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I say “python” and you picture: what? A snake whose body is easily the diameter of a bodybuilder’s biceps? Weird video or photos of snakes that have swallowed a deer, an ibex, or another large mammal whole, stretching the snake’s skin into the shape of its prey? Thankfully they’re not native to NJ or the US, since they can grow up to 33 feet long and weigh up to 250 pounds. So if that’s a python, what’s a pythoness ☺?

‘Sounds like a female python, right? Female, yes; snake, no. The fortune-teller, the *“slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling”* (Acts 16:16) is called a *pythoness* in Greek. Originally it was the term for the oracle of Delphi, a woman, a prophetess, through whom the god Apollo was thought to speak. Whoever held that position got that name because of a legend in Greek mythology. The story went that once a great dragon, sometimes depicted as a snake with a woman’s head and torso, and called Python, guarded the oracle of Delphi. This was at the bidding of Gaia, the earth goddess, who happened to be the dragon’s mother, so how could the dragon refuse? Eventually Apollo slays the Python, not an easy feat; he uses 100 arrows! He does that as payback for the Python having relentlessly pursued his mother, Leto, during her pregnancy. One version of the myth says the Python was commanded to do so by Hera, the understandably jealous wife of Zeus, who knew that Leto was pregnant because of an affair she’d had with Zeus. Python is the Greek word for rot. The Python’s corpse was left to rot outside the temple precinct after Apollo killed it. Apollo claimed the oracle of Delphi and the sanctuary as his own. The oracle became known as the pythoness.

Delphi was the most important “oracular” site in ancient Greece. Oracles are messages from the gods. Apollo was the god of prophecy, so he’s the one you’d seek out if you were an individual needing advice about whom to marry or what crops to plant, or if you were a city-state discerning whether to go to war and where to colonize. The oracle of Delphi, the “pythoness,” was Apollo’s spokesperson. Not just anybody got to see her, though. Being a resident of Delphi or being rich put you at the head of the line. That was important, because it wasn’t a 24/7, 365 days/year hotline. For the 3 winter months, the sanctuary was closed; apparently Apollo was a snowbird who traveled south when it got cold. The Delphic oracle was available one day a month for the other 9 months, for a whopping total of 9 days a year. Get in line, and prepare to wait! If you got to the head of the line there was another hurdle to clear. Cold water was poured over the head of a goat. If it shivered, you got a green light. If it didn’t, come back another day.

The slave-girl in today’s lesson from Acts was called a pythoness but wasn’t the oracle of Delphi. In time, pythoness came to mean any female clairvoyant, and eventually it included people without any 6th sense but who were in it just for the money. This unnamed slave-girl wasn’t a charlatan. She did indeed have a level of understanding others lacked. She follows Paul and Silas and announces to whomever will listen: *“These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”* (Acts 16:17) She did this *“for many days”* (Acts 16:18) and really got under Paul’s skin. We know this because we read:

...Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.
(Acts 16:18b-c)

This tells us she didn’t simply have a 6th sense. She was down-and-out possessed. It’s interesting to me that annoyance rather than compassion causes Paul to free this

woman from “the spirit of divination.” It’s good to know the Holy Spirit can use even our feelings of annoyance to serve the Gospel and make us responsive to God’s children in need! On one hand, the slave-girl was providing free PR for Paul and Silas, as they walked around trying to reach as many people as possible with the Good News. (Kinda like an ancient version of a megaphone announcement from a car containing a politician running for office.) Maybe Paul is annoyed because she refers to Silas and him as “**slaves** of the Most High God.” Sometimes the word for slave in the New Testament is translated as servant, though. Paul and Silas definitely **are** servants of the Most High God. She’s literally a slave and she calls them slaves. Makes you wonder if she felt like they were kindred spirits.... **Something** attracted her to them, for sure.

Her owners were not happy. To them, the exorcism Paul performed meant the loss of their meal ticket. She read palms and customers handed them the cash. So they basically sue him and Silas for lost wages! ‘Sounds pretty contemporary. So does their anti-semitism. They apparently don’t want to state their case directly so they accuse Paul and Silas of proselytizing Romans. Roman law allowed Jews to practice their own religion but not to convert or try to convert others. Spiritually freeing the slave-girl from that spirit of divination costs Paul and Silas’ their physical freedom. They’re arrested, beaten, whipped, immobilized with their feet in stocks in a maximum security cell of the local jail. Kinda seems like overkill – but maybe the authorities had a 6th sense that these “slaves of the Most High God” had friends in high places ☺.

We hear that at midnight, certainly wracked with pain from the beating and whipping, in the midst of **terrible** conditions, Paul and Silas are **not** cursing their fate **or** questioning their calling, but *praying and singing hymns to God*. (Acts 16:25) Unlike the

petitioners at Delphi, they didn't have to travel a long distance, wait a long time, pass a test for admission, hire a go-between in a drugged state, or pay more to enlist an interpreter; they poured out their hearts in prayer and song to the One who loved them well, was well aware of their plight, and was powerful to save. Let's bounce over from the Book of Acts to Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, to be reminded of his deep-down, **unshakeable** trust, **firm** faith that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord:

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

*"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."*

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This Memorial Day weekend we remember the cost of freedom. We are reminded that some values are more important than life and some fates are worse than death. As Paul and Silas lead their midnight prayer meeting & hymn-sing an earthquake occurs, jolting open doors, releasing fetters, disengaging stocks. The turnkey/jailer despairs, either thinking he's going to be executed by the boss for allowing the prisoners to escape, or he's going to be smitten dead by the Most High God whose friends he's mistreated and imprisoned! This time Paul is moved by compassion, not annoyance, to help. He speaks what would make a great tag-line for any suicide prevention effort: *"Do not harm yourself,*

for we are all here.” (Acts 16:28) I woulda been sprinting for that door as fast as I could, taking advantage of the miracle I would have thought was **for me**. But Paul realized the miracle was for another. *“Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”*

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30) **What must we do to be saved** from despair, paralyzing grief, destructive anger or unholy passivity in the wake of the school shooting in Texas? In the face of the latest report about institutional inaction and de facto toleration of sexual abuse in yet another denomination? In the midst of environmental degradation? As the conflict in Ukraine continues with nuclear saber rattling, undisclosed death tolls, destruction of infrastructure and displacement of millions? **What must we do to be saved** from despair, paralyzing grief, destructive anger or unholy passivity? *“Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”* (Acts 16:31) Turn to God with a grateful heart for blessings like the slave-girl and with a trusting heart in the midst of difficulties like Paul and Silas. Thank God by serving in love like the jailer who takes Paul & Silas into his home to tend to their injuries and who invites them to eat at his table. Exercise holy freedom, holding on tight to true freedom which isn’t “my right to say and do as I please” but my privilege and duty to say and do what pleases God. Amen

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