

“Divining the Future”

Sermon on Sunday, June 2, 2019

Based on Acts 16

Fortune telling, psychic readings, crystal balls, Tarot cards, sessions with human mediums, - all of this business must be doing well these days. When I go up to New Hope/Lambertville, I am always stunned by the number of store fronts that offer those services. New Hope is flush with psychic specialists, it seems. There are some here in North Wales as well, and it shouldn't surprise us. Humans are curious by nature. The desire to learn about our fortunes and potential misfortunes is as old as Adam and Eve. Don't we want to know what's around the corner? Isn't it tantalizing that there might be people out there who can move back the veil that hangs over our future, who are in touch with life's magical flow and can predict things before they happen? I would never say that all of this is non-sense, although a pretty good portion of it probably is. Fortune telling is a fact of life, and few of us would reject the more playful versions of it, like opening a fortune cookie in a Chinese restaurant. In fact, I opened one in preparation for this sermon. It said, “An exciting opportunity lies ahead of you.”

Well, the fortune cookie's message is definitely right. Every day, an exciting opportunity lies ahead of me. I just have to see it, recognize it and claim it. This morning, an exciting opportunity comes our way in the form of a sacred story that may open up for us new avenues of knowing and serving God, and by extension - new avenues of knowing ourselves and serving people. Every Sunday is an opportunity for us to draw deeper into the presence of the one who holds our present, future and past in his (or her) hands. Isn't that something? The Holy Scripture is our medium and the pastor, if you want to use this language, is the psychic. So, get ready for your session this morning and find yourself anew in this ancient story from the Book of Acts. What do we find here?

Paul and his friend Silas travel to the Greek city of Philippi as part of a long missionary journey. Unlike our team that's going to Puerto Rico in two weeks, they didn't have to fill out seven forms; they didn't have to deal with insurance matters and legal wavers; they didn't have a lot of information ahead of time; this adventure was on them. They were, as the Book of Acts keeps telling us, guided by the Holy Spirit. In fact, they had come there, to the region of Macedonia, only after Paul had a vision in a dream of someone asking for help. “Come over and help us,” the man had pleaded. And now Paul and Silas arrived in the main city of the area, Philippi, - named after Alexander the Great's father. What would the future hold for them here? Was there a future for the Christian faith?

Like all Greek cities of the time, Philippi had a cosmopolitan flavor. It was teeming with all kinds of outfits and all kinds of misfits, an exciting city that also had a darker side. Among other things, slavery and human trafficking, prostitution and violence in the justice system were entrenched in the city's culture. Before long, this pair of eager, well-meaning missionaries experienced the entanglement of darkness and pain on their own bodies, as the whiplashes of the justice system were drawing blood from their backs, as they were thrown into the city's darkest jail. If they had known this ahead of time, if they had been told their future before coming to Philippi, they

probably would have – gone anyway! I am certain of it. Because a few days prior they met a woman named Lydia who, after hearing them, was ready to be baptized. She was one of the founders of the first Christian church in the city.

If Paul had known the future, he would have gone to Philippi, whiplashes, jail and all. Partly because of this: a central part of his faith, a central part of our faith, is a belief in the transformation of pain and darkness by the power of Jesus Christ. We believe in death and resurrection as something that takes place in our lives many times over. In the course of life, we die to certain parts of our own selves. We die to certain expectations. We experience loss, we experience illness, we experience disappointment; and if our faith is “worth its money,” it will guide us toward resurrection. Paul knew it, taught it and lived it. He said: your future is to rise with Christ, no matter what happens to you!

That bring us to the star witness of today’s sermon and frankly, the reason for the theme of this worship service: a fortune teller! A tough cookie of a fortune teller, if I may say so! Paul and Silas had gone down to the river to a place of prayer to find people sympathetic to their message. One day they met a slave girl who had the gift to see into the future. I am going to assume that she was good at it. Luke tells us, she made boatloads of money for her owners. It was lucrative business. Unfortunately, her gift also came with a liability. It wasn’t clear whether she possessed this special psychic gift or whether the gift possessed her. In any case, the gift compelled her to follow these two dudes from Judea who kept talking about freedom and salvation. Paul and Silas were talking about freedom and salvation in a city with one-third slaves and a lot of Roman army veterans. They were idealists. They too were possessed by something. It’s called Holy Spirit. She kept following them, and almost trance-like, she was yelling, “These men are slaves of the Most-High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”

I find the language of this statement very interesting. “These men are slaves,” the slave girl says. “These men are slaves of the Most-High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” It feels to me that she is unconsciously seeking freedom, and since she lost her gift after Paul performed an exorcism, she paid a high price for her freedom, no longer valuable in the eyes of her owners, still status-wise, a slave girl, free inside maybe, but still serving her owners. Her story is complicated.

But the slave girl guides us to a rule of thumb regarding everything that has to do with future telling: is it going to free us to live our lives and serve God? Or is it going to make us more skittish, even self-absorbed, and concerned about our fate? The Book of Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit freeing people, empowering women, breaking through negative boundaries, connecting cultures and people of various backgrounds. It is a huge freedom movement, including the liberation of a person’s innermost soul. Yes, my fortune cookie was right: “An exciting opportunity lies ahead of you.” It is the opportunity to follow that spirit’s trajectory in the here and now, to be free to serve and love God without too much concern about the future. It is something we don’t always realize; in fact, often times we don’t even know how much we are enslaved by our own life circumstances. Listening anew, imagining anew, trusting the spirit’s movement, will help us to see and set us free. **Amen.**