

(ACTS
12:1-12)

"JAIL BREAK AT MIDNIGHT"

INTRODUCTION

Today's sermon grows out of a story that's found in the Book of Acts and I'm calling it "Jail Break At Midnight". At the entrance to the prison stands a gate - an iron gate. On one side of this heavy, iron gate are the dark cells where despairing men are prisoners. On the other side of the gate, there's freedom and the enchanted life of the city. The gate is shut, locked, forever closed save when someone has a key to it.

Now inside the jail is a man whose name is Peter. Peter was only a fisherman, but he happened to be a follower of Jesus and as such he was something of an innovator. Along with some other followers of Jesus, Peter had gotten himself into serious trouble. He had been imprisoned by the order of Herod. As far as Peter could see, and as far as his friends could see, there was little possibility that he would escape from prison. Then, one dark night around midnight, something totally unexpected happened. There was a light in the cell where Peter was; there seemed to be someone there with him. He roused Peter out of his sleep.

"Get dressed" he said. "Put on your shoes and wrap your cloak around yourself." Peter did as he was told, and as he did, his chains fell off. Then this strange visitor said to him, "Follow me", and quietly the two of them made their way through the dark corridors of the prison, slipping past one guard after another. Finally they came to this iron gate - the one last remaining obstacle that stood in their way. How would they ever get by it? It had been shut tight, locked. They did not have a key to it. But, the amazing thing is that when they came to it, according to the Biblical narrative,

"It opened to them of its own accord...and they went out!"

Yes, a jail break...in the dark of the night. A beautiful story and one of my favorites. Not a "fairy" tale, mind you...but a "miracle" story, and I hope the difference will appear as this sermon proceeds.

TWO INFLUENCES

As I see it and think about it, there were at least two influences at work which may have had something to do with this escape from jail.

First, there were the prayers of Peter's friends. The Bible puts it this way. "There was a continual stream of prayer going up to God from the Church on his behalf..." - a continual stream of earnest prayer going up from all the people who were associated with him in this new movement that was getting under way. Through this miracle narrative one gets a good glimpse of the strenuous prayer life of those early Christians. Their faith in the power of God was tremendous.

It must have been most reassuring to Peter to know that his friends were thinking of him and remembering him in their prayers. It's always reassuring to people in times of trouble to know that there are others who care enough about them to "lift" them up in their prayers. "I'm praying for you!" - how much that means to us when we're in trouble. Pray for a friend and let him know you are.

But Peter may have said to himself, "It's good to have that reassuring strength, but really what good can those prayers do for me in this situation. Here I am in jail. What chance has a stream of prayer against a thick, prison wall and an iron gate. You might as well match a butterfly with a bulldozer as to expect a stream of prayer-thought to have anything to do with a prison wall."

AND YET And yet we know that in life spiritual forces are continually mastering material situations. For instance, take a person's body. There is the body - free, flexible, mobile and expressive. Then there creeps into the mind of that body an element of fear,, of fright, of anxiety. That's a spiritual thing. You cannot see it. You cannot touch it.

As that invisible wzve of spiritual fright takes possession of the material body, what happens to it? It's apt to be immobilized. The body chemistry changes. The appetite goes. Sleep disappears. The person begins to "fall apart". But, on the other hand, suppose that same body is invaded by deep trust and great faith, by affirmative spiritual energy. Again, you cannot see it; you cannot touch it. It can make its way into a person's body...then it begins to be free again - vital, flexible, workable. The person goes out in the strength of that spiritual power. He or she overcomes the obstacles that may be in the way.

Why then does it seem so strange to our modern minds that a "stream of prayer" coming from sincere, devout, caring people and rising up to God on behalf of someone they know could do something. The longer we live the more we believe from experience that prayer has power, that it does make a difference. Martin Luther once said that "he would rather have an army against him than a hundred men and women praying".

This is one of the influences that was at work in this story of "jail break at midnight". The "stream of prayer" - continual prayer that was rising in behalf of Peter. Let us never minimize or doubt the power of intercessory prayer.

SECOND INFLUENCE The second influence at work was the angel of the Lord, for the Biblical narrative describes this strange visitor that appeared in Peter's cell as an "angel". The Bible, of course, is full of angels. An angel of the Lord is often mentioned in Acts to express the Christian belief in God's active interest in his own.

I like to think of angels - as they appear in the Bible - as the personification of laws beyond the range of the understanding of people. It's as if there were, beyond the horizon of this world in which we live and the laws and principles of which we know and by which we operate, another infinitely greater world, of which this world is only a small exposed area.

From time to time that other world breaks in upon this world and when that happens we see strange and wonderful things. Someone once said that,

"Angels represent those unknown forces that dwell in the margin of mystery by which our life is bounded. From time to time they come into our world like unearthly visitors and strange things occur."

To sum up things thus far: there were these two influences at work in the case of this break from jail, and the case of the iron gate that mysteriously opened of its own accord. First, up from the earth there came this "stream of earnest prayer". And second, coming from the other direction, from the world of mystery and of power came an angel of the Lord. And friends, when these two things come together, unusual things are going to happen. And in this instance, a gate opened and a man was set free.

FIRST MORAL

Now this is a story with a moral. In fact, it's a story with two morals and the first one is this: nothing is impossible.

Let's reflect upon this claim. It may sound somewhat exaggerated to some of you. You say, "Preacher's rhetoric"...that's all. And I suppose that if you pressed me to certain specific instances - there, here and everywhere - that it could not always be proven. However, by and large, I would interpret the lesson of this "jail break" in this fashion that nothing is impossible. It reminds me that we are living in an "unrestricted" universe in which spiritual forces can master material situations. Granted, that does not always happen. The "angel of the Lord" does not always come; the gates do not always open. We're ready to grant that, but it can happen. And I believe that it is more likely going to happen when we build on the belief that it can happen!

Sometimes we look at the gates that lead to peace among people. There are many who say,

"Those gates cannot be opened. They're shut tight...closed, fixed...by the laws by which human beings operate - the laws of self-interest, power, tradition, self-centeredness, greed. You'll never be able to open those gates and set people free."

But never say that and never get frozen into thinking that. Those old laws can be replaced by new laws. New laws can be put into operation - the law of self-contribution, self-sacrifice, good-will, understanding, unlimited patience. These, too, are laws of human nature and sometimes they are put into operation in such a way as though something came down from above with the result that the gate seemed to swing open.

Or, take a personal situation. You may have that terrible feeling that you're imprisoned in a hopeless situation. You look around and see no opening, no way out. You feel a bit like ol' Peter must have felt - trapped, imprisoned. You may say to yourself, "Well, this is my fate. It can't be changed. I'll grit my teeth and bear it."

But never say that. There are no hopeless situations for no one knows when some new law may be brought to bear from above that will change the situation. It may be an angel in the shape of a friend. It may be some new idea, some new discovery in the field of medicine that we label a "miracle". But whatever it is, the possibility of it is there and so long as the possibility of it is there, so long as the possibility of change, improvement, release, escape - never believe a situation is hopeless.

Living in the kind of universe we live in, our task is to keep our minds open to the possibility that anything may happen - not always counting on a miracle, but being ready for it should it happen - for when the stream of prayer goes up and flights of angels come down - that you can expect great things to happen. Never forget that.

OTHER MORAL

The other moral, or lesson, is this. Nothing is so hard as you think it is going to be.

We have a way of looking into the future, and as we do, we can see all sorts of obstacles, problems, hazards, difficulties that have to be met and mastered.

FORMAL PRAYER: January 16, 1983

ORNAL SPIRIT - who., whether we walk through green pastures,
beside still waters,
or through the valley of the shadow of death,
canst be our guide and our helper -

BEHOLD US NOW - here in this sacred place of worship,
seeking in a common prayer, light upon our
separate ways, and strength and illumination
within our individual lives.

SEEK US OUT - one by one - in those special circumstances of need
that have drawn us here to this sanctuary on this
cold, Winter day.

- lift up the unhappy souls into joy...the discouraged souls into encourage-
ment,..the defeated souls into victory...and thus enable us -

"To fight the good fight,
to keep the faith,
to finish the course".

Breathe into our hearts, O God, goodwill and generosity.
Breakdown our stubborn prejudices.
Save us from letting un-Christlike attitudes and actions take hold
within us.
Forgive us that at times we can be such a part of the world's
problems and such a fraction of its solutions.
Comfort us, Lord, where we hurt.

US AND UPHOLD US through the days of this week before us that we may be
more than conquerors in the inner struggle against all
that is cheap, hurtful, degrading in ourselves and in
our city.

THOSE OF US WHO take Jesus seriously and who try to follow in His Way to be:

Agents of His love - pure in thought,
Gracious in our speech, kind and courageous
in our actions.

LLY, O GOD, and FATHER OF US ALL -

"Grant us the serenity to accept the things we can-
not change; the courage to change the things we can,
and the wisdom to know the difference."

All this we ask in the name and spirit of
Christ, our Lord.

This is a habit I'm sure all of us have because we're human and because we have imaginations. And then, finally, when we get there...those things we have been dreading are not quite as bad as we thought they would be.

Remember how it was to drive a car back in forties and early fifties before all of the super highways and interstate roads were constructed, before all the hills and valleys were smoothed out...flattened? Do you remember as you drove down a steep hill and saw another hill ahead of you, it would look so steep that you wondered if the car could possibly make it? But then when you got to the hill and began to go up it, it didn't seem quite so steep. Well, there are burdens like that in life. As you look at them and consider them in preparation, they seem so heavy that no human shoulder could ever carry them, but when you pick them up they are not nearly so heavy as you thought they were going to be.

We all spend a great deal of time dreading the future. We've all had the experience of dreading a visit to the doctor or the dentist and then discovered upon our arrival that while it wasn't the most pleasant thing in the world, it wasn't quite as bad as we thought it would be. We all had responsibilities to carry...speeches to make...that have caused us anxiety as we approached them... and then when the time came and the moment arrived - while it was not easy - the way was open and all we had to do was go through it.

Remember, when you begin to shoulder the task, the weight is diminished. When we get to those heavy, iron gates that seem to be so difficult to open, so tightly shut, they have a strange way of opening of their own accord. Even the gates of death which seem to be so fastly closed and so terrible to anticipate, when you get to them they open as if to welcome a friend and you go through without fear or dread.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

As this brief story of "jail break" from the Book of Acts comes to an end, we see Peter walking down the street after having been set free from prison. He goes one block and then the angel leaves him.

To me, it's as though when we need strength to meet some crisis in life, that strength comes, and when we go through the gate and are set free once more into the ordinary paths of life, the angel leaves us and let us go our way.

But we go with the remembrance of the time when we going was hard, and how the angel of the Lord came and visited us, and that there was a light in the cell that had been so dark, and the iron gate was opened to us and we walked through it to freedom and to new life.

PRAYER

Our lives are not always easy, O God, and we ask for strength to meet the difficult things that are before us in the week ahead. Open our eyes to the shining things that lie ahead of us. Help us to put the past - with all of its regrets and disappointments and difficulties behind us. Help us to pour all of our energies into the race that lies ahead, keeping our eyes always steadfastly on Him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Amen.