Acts 16:23-26 (NRSV)

23 After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24 Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. 25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

Paul has found himself in a heap of trouble. He and his fellow apostle Silas have been out preaching the Gospel and they have not always been welcomed with open arms. Paul's crime was ordering a spirit of divination out of a slave-girl who had been making lots of money for her owners. The scripture says that the spirit kept speaking through the girl telling everyone that Paul and Silas were servants of the Most High God...over and over and over again. The text says that Paul got annoyed and ordered the spirit out. Yes, Paul performed an exorcism simply because he was annoyed.

Now, the owners got angry and reported him and Silas to the magistrates of the city as disturbers of the peace, claiming that they were bringing customs and practices they didn't approve of. Well the magistrates must have agreed because they were both flogged (which is actually quite horrible) and then threw them both into jail.

Beaten, humiliated, shackled, and imprisoned........all because Paul got a little annoyed. I bet Silas was hurting, and also kind of irritated.

But in the broad scheme of it all, Paul and Silas were imprisoned for their faith, locked down for practicing their religion.

I would hazard a hopeful guess that literal imprisonment is not something that most of us have experienced. To be beaten and flogged and thrown into jail at all, let alone for our religious beliefs is not familiar to us.

But imprisonment comes in a variety of forms doesn't it? Grief.
Disappointment. Self-Pity. Guilt. Anger. Alcohol. Stress. Schedule. Consumerism. Toxic relationships. Even in our story there are various forms of imprisonment. A scholar named Lawrence Farris observes that "everyone in this story needs to be freed, not only the slave girl but the men who used her (possessed by greed), the men who judged Paul (possessed by fear and a hunger for power or maybe for the public peace), the jailer (owned by the empire), and, most surprisingly of all, Paul and Silas themselves, who need to be freed from their narrow way of thinking."

Walking through life, we have within our human experience various states of being and even situations that can make us feel shackled and tied down. And often we bear the burden alone, longing for relief. I think we all felt this way at some point or another. But the question for us today is how do we respond? How do we react?

Adversity has a wide variety of effects on people. When the stress level, pain-level, tension-levels go up, the spirit of a person is challenged. The pain they experience is real, their lives are made vulnerable, and it can bring forth frustration, anger, depression, and pain. This is all too real for so many of us. But we also know that the human spirit has enormous capacity for resilience, determination, and even joy in the face of the dire circumstances of life.

We see that in our story today. The scripture says, "25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them." They were bearing testimony to the living God even in their imprisonment. Now being away from home, in prison, at midnight no less, I would guess that most of us would not be singing hymns to God--praying, yes, but not singing.

Praying, crying, feeling lost, stuck, and hopeless sounds more like it to me. The shackles of imprisonment, chains of grief and despair locking us up and bringing us down.

But in the midst of this they were singing. Amazing isn't it?

I wonder what hymns they were singing? Perhaps songs from their youth at the synagogue? New hymns the church musicians have already written? Some believe that Philippians 2:6-11 was an early Christian hymn.
But singing has sustained others as well in human history. In a book entitled, "Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust," the author, Nechama Tec, says that singing was a way that people in concentration camps made it through. She writes, "Reports about informal, spontaneous singing and how it kept up inmate's spirits abound." It's hard to imagine singing in concentration camps, but songs of faith were still sung for strength.

Slaves and those held captive during the Civil Rights movements gathered strength through songs and hymns. Balm of Gilead, Swing Low Sweet Chariot, I've got Peace like a River, Wade in the Water, Kum ba Yah, Down by the Riverside, We Shall Overcome.

Songs proclaiming Freedom, Hope, and Faith.

These are the songs that are sung. But what about you? When shackled, chained up, imprisoned....what song do you sing? What song does your life sing? Songs of life and faith.....or songs of defeat.

Music has an incredible effect on our lives. It can alter our moods, it can inspire us, it can move us, it can put us further down in the dumps. It also can effect what we believe. Its my understanding that many people gather their theology from hymnody. Even if you are not a singer, the songs of faith still move our spirits. St. Augustine said that when you sing you pray twice. You pray with your voice and your heart...a full body act of devotion.

Presbyterian pastor, Ralph Wood, says, "These words and tunes [of hymns] are stuck in my head, at least parts of them, because their music and their poetry have made them memorable. They are etched in my memory because their rhymes and images, the melodies and rhythms, make vivid the great Christian doctrines that might otherwise remain abstract and impersonal. Hymns enable me both to hear and see the Gospel from within no less than from without."

So if stuck in prison you were....What song would you sing? What story would you remember? Maybe you'd sing Sweet Hour of Prayer. Amazing Grace? Old Rugged Cross? Be thou my Vision?

The hymns of our faith are not just empty lyrics and tunes, but verses which seek to tell the story of God. Lyrics that shape who we are as the people of
God, much as the scriptures do. Now we do acknowledge that some hymns might be offensive to us theologically or we might not connect to them. But the hymns we sing seek to proclaim the greatness and goodness of God and calls us to greater faithfulness.

For the Beauty of the Earth
A mighty fortress is our God
Bread of Heaven, feed me 'til I want no more
No one is a stranger here, everyone belongs...
It only takes a spark to get a fire going...
Great is thy faithfulness, morning by morning new mercies I see
Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come;
Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because he lives all fear is gone.
The Story of God sung and proclaimed each week in the gathering of God's people. When sung with our hearts and our voices we pray twice and we are blessed in the process. The story that is sung through these songs can grant us hope and joy.

But in our lives, part of our testimony to the world is to share this with others. When we leave here, what song are we singing to the world? Maybe not literally, but what are we expressing with our lives? The scripture says that while Paul and Silas were imprisoned, shackled, and chained they prayed and sang hymns, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

My brothers and sisters, all around us people are listening to the song that we sing, this world filled with people who are shackled and chained by so many different things, just like us. So many different burdens in their lives....and they need a new song to sing. We need to hear a new song that gives us hope and joy in the midst of our circumstances. We need people telling stories of hope with their lives, saying prayers and singing hymns of praise to God in the midst of the struggle.

For the story we sing of, the story our life should bear testimony too does not bow down to the forces of death and grief, but sings of life and hope and freedom. Sings a little light into the darkness. We may be struck down but not destroyed. Part of the Good News that Christ came to bring was to proclaim freedom, release for the captives. A story, a song of liberation proclaiming that that nothing in all the world, that death nor life, not height nor depth, nor rulers nor powers, nor any situation or circumstance, not even a cold prison cell, can separate us from the Love of Jesus Christ. We believe that the promise of Love is stronger than any chains or bonds that hold us. Singer-songwriter Eileen
Jewell says, "More powerful than riches More precious than your gold Holier than your churches
Bewildering as desert cold You can lock me in jail Cheat me of all I own Tie me to the rails Leave me forsaken and alone, But you can’t take my song away…"

We gather here in this space to be unshackled from the burdens that plague us each day. We come to be free, to give our cares and worries over to the Lord. But it is not just about us. When we arise from our pews we are to take our song, what has moved us and given us life, into the world.

2 He drew me up from the desolate pit,
    out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
    making my steps secure.
3 He put a new song in my mouth,
    a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
    and put their trust in the LORD.

Psalms 40:2-3 (NRSV)

As you may know already, the story of Paul and Silas doesn't end in the prison cell. The scripture directly following our passage says, ”26 Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened." And so then, the story of the impossible becoming possible, the story of hope in bleak circumstances continues.....The story of release for the captives goes on...

So is your life singing this story? When we walk out the doors, what song are we singing?