

Have you ever been in prison, either literally or metaphorically? Where in your life have you felt trapped? Stuck? Helpless? Not able to do what you needed or wanted to do?

At 7 years old I needed to take in another breath of air but I couldn't. I was the canary in the coalmine when the Washoe theater in Anaconda had a carbon monoxide leak. The irony here was that I was watching the movie *Anaconda*, you know the one with the big snakes, in Anaconda, and this particular film had the tagline "When you can't breathe, you can't scream". Turns out that's true. I'll come back to this story later, however, most of my moments of feeling trapped are not quite so intense...

For instance, I recently changed the wallpaper on my computer. It's a lovely picture of a group of stingrays swimming in the ocean. I didn't choose this picture because I like stingrays, I didn't choose it because I love the ocean, I chose it because I feel like I'm drowning.

Currently, I find myself in the most wonderful, joyfilled, precious seasons of life – raising young kids. And it is all of those things. Reuben and Junia are literal answers to prayer, they make me laugh out loud everyday, they have brought so much brightness into my life. I do not have words to convey the depths of my love for them.

And, parenting young kids is also relentless. I am on all day long, and all night long. In my days there is this refrain of *I don't know how to keep up*, there's not enough time, help, margin, sleep, there's really not enough sleep. And then when someone asks me how I am I say *I'm ok*, maybe I add that I'm tired.

I know that my situation is not unique and I know that there are so many people in much more challenging situations, which makes it hard to give voice to my feeling of overwhelm.

And yet, I want my overwhelm to be seen, to be known, because it feels like I'm drowning. Why does life feel so hard at this stage? Maybe it's not just little ones, eight months ago we made a long distance move, I started a new job in a new field (which I love by the way), we moved into what was my grandparents home which is both a gift and a challenge, and did I mention we have two little kids? There's this stage with little ones where they are constantly on the verge of serious injury or bodily harm to themselves. And it makes it hard to do anything.

Yet, there are so many things that we are told we should do. I should get enough sleep, eat healthy which usually means home cooked meals, keep up on appointments, work hard, work out, make time for others, take time for myself, the list goes on and on. And this list isn't just for me, it applies to my kids and my husband. They need these things too.

But right now, some moments, all I can do is hold my baby because when I set him down he will either, if he's in a good mood go try to hurt himself, or if he's in a bad mood, cry and cling desperately to my leg as I try to cook dinner. When I really need to get something done I will wear him in a carrier, which works well until I throw out my back, which keeps happening, because I'm not working out, because I don't know how to find the time or the energy.

And yet, what does God have to say to me in the ordinary space of parenthood and feeling overwhelmed? I can think of lots that I would like to say, but you've heard enough of Sarah's words, so, what does God have to say?

In this morning's passage we encounter Paul and Silas in the city of Philippi, and, spoiler, they will be thrown in jail. As we read I ask you to keep in mind one way in which you're feeling trapped, overwhelmed, or stuck. Our passage this morning is Acts 16:16-34. Please listen or follow along.

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let’s pray.

So in this passage we encounter Paul and Silas as they’re on their missionary journey. At this point in the biblical narrative Jesus has left earth, the Holy Spirit has come to the apprentices of Jesus, the church is just beginning. Paul and Silas are helping it grow as they plant and encourage communities of Jesus followers throughout the Roman world.

In this text they are still in Philippi, where last week we saw them meet and baptize Lydia, along with the members of her household. It is on their way to pray one day that having become so annoyed they cast out a spirit from a slave girl and in turn get stripped, beaten, and thrown in jail. And here in a Philippian jail, within the inner cell, we find these two men held in stocks, still aching from the rods that ruthlessly struck their bodies, and what are they doing...

...singing and praying. Can you imagine it? This alone is astounding enough but the surprise doesn’t stop there— a violent earthquake, every door opened, every chain broken. Suddenly, a reversal in roles. The prisoners are free and the jailer is the one who’s trapped.

This story is really beautiful. Did you catch all the people that were set free? In this one passage there are three vignettes, within each a person who is trapped, and in each one God's deliverance. First we see the female slave held captive by her masters and this spirit that predicts the future. Paul and Silas are quite literally imprisoned. And third we see the jailer who sees no way of him getting out alive. All three of them trapped, and all three set free.

This morning I want to focus on the story of the jailer, and I want to start by talking about the word "saved". There is a weightiness to this word. When I hear the word "saved" my mind immediately turns to heaven and hell and which one you will go to when you die. But this Philippian jailer is not a 21st century Westerner, and my understanding of this word was not his understanding of this word. So when he asks, "what must I do to be saved?", what does he actually mean?

This jailer has just been through an earthquake in the middle of the night, all the prison doors have been opened, and all the captives have been freed of their chains. These prisoners were his responsibility. What would be his punishment? Whatever it was, he was inclined rather than facing it to kill himself instead. He sees no situation where he's getting out of this alive. This jailer feels trapped, this jailer is trapped.

Instead of "what must I do to be saved?" NT Wright translates the jailer's question as "will you please tell me how I can get out of this mess?" Wright goes on to translate Paul and Silas' response as "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be rescued – you and your household".

The greek word used here σωζω (sohd-zo), we see used over a hundred times throughout the new testament. One such example is in Matthew 8:25, where Jesus is found sleeping in a boat, all the while a storm rages on threatening to sink it. Jesus's disciples wake him saying, "Lord, save us! (*Lord, sohd-zo us!*)

We're going to drown!" While the disciples surely do care about an eternal perspective, in this situation, they are asking Jesus to keep them from drowning right then and there. *Jesus, we're about to die, right now, do something to stop it!*

Like the disciples in the boat, this Philippian jailer is in a terrifying situation and he sees no way out. In this moment he is not asking about eternal salvation, he is asking Paul and Silas how he can get out of the mess he is in. How is there any hope for a jailer when he's in charge and all the doors are wide open? And what about you, what mess are you in? And where do you need Jesus to step in and rescue you? When I was 7 and unable to take a breath, I passed out, alerting the rest of theater goers that it was time to get out. Everyone did and all were ok, I woke up on the sidewalk with paramedics around me. I was lifeflighted to Billings to spend a few hours in a hyperbaric chamber. God rescued that 7 year old girl and gave her a chance to keep living and eventually come to know Him.

And what about my current, much less dramatic, but probably fairly relatable, feeling of overwhelm? What does Jesus have to say to me in this space?

I recently met with my spiritual director and I shared about this sense of not being able to keep up. And while holding onto that sense of overwhelm she invited me to pause, close my eyes, and imagine Jesus coming near. "What does Jesus have to say to you in this space?" she asked.

Overwhelmed now by his grace, I was brought to tears as I was reminded of Jesus' delight in me, patience with me, and joy in being with me. While I do have important responsibilities in my life, so much of my sense of obligation is a result of the cultural water we swim in and the American drive to be as efficient and productive as possible. I'm talking about the need to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. Work smarter, not harder. Go, go, go! Because sleep is for the dead.

I have this sense that if I don't get everything done, then I am a failure. I hear it from our culture and also from my own rather harsh, and certainly shaped by culture, inner voice. I, not Jesus, am often defining what it means to be a good mom, wife, daughter, neighbor, friend, employee, citizen, human. And so far the expectations from that voice have been unattainable. So therefore, I have failed. But Jesus does not say go, go, go. Jesus says come follow me. Jesus says come to me all who are weary and heavy laden. Jesus says he gives sleep to his beloved. Jesus says that he delights in me. Jesus invites me to sit at his feet like Mary.

And though I struggle to show up as Mary and not as Martha, and though I think this will be a long process for me to show up more and more like Mary, I find Jesus inviting me to slow down. To pause, to be present, to be ok with unfinished tasks. And my prayer is that over the years my trajectory turns more and more to showing up like Mary. It's not a sudden and dramatic rescue like the Philippian jailer, but be not mistaken, it is a rescue! For if I continue on living with the sense that I cannot keep up, if I am constantly rushing, and neglecting sleep and care of my own body, then it does lead to death. You don't have to look far to find information on the effects of chronic stress and lack of sleep on your overall wellbeing and lifespan. It's not good.

And one more thing, what was it that was required for the jailer to be rescued? It was belief in Jesus. And what resulted from that belief? Do you recall? Our text says, "The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household." The jailer was not just physically safe, but joy was a result of his freedom. Joy is what Jesus offers all of us, though our belief in him. What good news – we don't just get the rescue, we also get joy!

Friends, this joy is for you too. So what rescue are you needing? Maybe you're on the verge of losing your home, your marriage, your reputation. Maybe you're cut off from loved ones, from stable income, from hope. Maybe you're losing your life to overwork, anxious thoughts, uncontrolled anger. I'm not sure, but I do know that we all have ways in which we are trapped.

And I want to take a moment as we wrap up to invite you into the same prayer practice my spiritual director led me in. So while you have your own personal prison in mind, I invite you to close your eyes, and imagine Jesus walking up to you, and sitting with you. What expression does he have on his face? What is it that he wants to say to you? Take a moment to ask Him.