

Acts 16

The symbolism of the cosmic battle of the gods...indeed the battle between God and evil... is rich in this story. The spirit that this slave girl is possessed by...this spirit of divination...is a spirit wrapped up in Greco-Roman mythology.

It's what's known as a pythian spirit. The Greeks associated it with a serpent, or dragon, who guarded the entrance to the Oracle of Delphi. The serpent was slain by the god Apollo who then took on the spirit to predict the future.

Somehow, this woman is possessed by the Pythian Spirit. She may be one of the women who guarded the entrance to the Oracle of Delphi, but the story doesn't tell us. She was likely quite valued, not only by her owners, but by those who worshipped the Greek gods.

Notice that this Pythian spirit isn't wrong about Paul and Silas. She speaks the truth about them.

It's not unlike the man with the demon Jesus encountered in the synagogue. The demon was the only one to truly recognize who Jesus was. Demons recognize the most high God, even if others do not.

Paul casts out the demon. His motive seems to be mostly annoyance. But his action upends not only her livelihood and the livelihood of the her owners, but really upset the whole Greek mythological system. Paul's action was a direct challenge to the god Apollo. And Paul's God won...at least at that moment.

But the battle isn't over. On charges of disturbing the city, Paul and Silas are thrown into prison...deep into prison. The inner cell...dark...foreboding...reeking of human waste and suffering.

Prisons in these stories have their own symbolism. They are places where that ongoing battle against the powers of evil are waged. Deep in this prison cell, the battle between the gods rages on.

It would be hard to deny that it seemed the Greco-Roman god was winning.

And how do Paul and Silas fight this battle?

They sing. They sing.

Song has long been a sign of resistance to the forces of evil. Thursday was my day off. Sometimes I do productive things on my day off and sometimes I watch Netflix. That was

my choice Thursday morning. I'll sometimes use my downtime to watch a movie I've been meaning to see and just haven't gotten around to.

Thursday as I went through Netflix, I saw the movie *Twelve Years a Slave*. It was going to be leaving Netflix at the end of the month so I decided to watch it.

It's the true story of Solomon Northup, a free black man from New York who was kidnapped while on a trip to Washington and sold into slavery.

It's a very good movie...graphic and horrific but important. Many of the scenes were of the enslaved people working either in cotton fields or sugar cane fields.

Often the work was accompanied by singing. It was the typical call and response of African singing. Most of the songs in this movie weren't actually spirituals, but had the same pattern.

You're all probably familiar with the Spirituals...song of faith sung by slaves while they worked. Some of the most famous ones – Go Down Moses and songs about crossing the Jordan echoed the journey to freedom for Moses the Israelites.

Some – like Wade in the Water and Follow the Drinking Gourd contained coded messages for movement along the Underground Railroad. The spirituals were songs of hope in a seemingly hopeless situation.

Whatever the words, singing for enslaved people was a profound act of resistance to the horrors and degradation of slavery.

Some of the spirituals took on new meanings during the Civil Rights era. Later we're going to sing Kumbaya. It too is a song of resistance. Its origin is disputed but it likely arose out of enslaved West Africans in the Gullah region of the Carolinas.

The song has been widely lampooned in more recent times as an unrealistic solution to the problem of evil. Political figures from President Obama to presidential candidate Herman Cain have used it to bash what they saw as unrealistic hopes of unity. Cain said singing 'Kumbaya' is not a foreign policy strategy.

Perhaps the song's detractors have underestimated the power of song.

Song was also an important form of resistance to evil during the Jim Crow era. One of the most haunting is *Strange Fruit*, recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939.

A graphic image of a lynching, it's not for the faint of heart. But by exposing evil for what it was, the song was a profound act of resistance.

Lift Every Voice and Sing, sometimes called the Black national anthem, was a song of hope sung into the teeth of the oppression and violence the formerly enslaved people and their descendants suffered during the Jim Crow years.

The Civil Rights Era saw a wealth of songs – Kumbaya had a resurgence during the Civil Rights Era. Songs like We Shall Overcome, Blowin’ in the Wind, and a host of other songs have continued to be popular songs of resistance.

We watched a documentary at the Ross last night called the Art of Dissidence. It was about the dissidents in Czechoslovakia during the Soviet occupation. Music was an important part of that movement.

Here’s your trivia for the day....there was a rock band that formed after the Soviet invasion called Plastic People of the Universe who sang songs of liberation.

When churches protested against the surge and activities of immigration enforcement officers in Minneapolis, quite often, they too sang.

The Bible has songs of resistance. Mary, in her song after the Angel Gabriels’ announcement sang

God has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things

and sent the rich away empty.

The slave girl in today’s story is one of those lowly. We don’t know what happened to her after this. She was freed from the demon. But did that make her life better or worse? Does she have another way to make a living? Does this end her exploitation by her owners, or does it get worse?

We’re never told. But with Mary, we can sing resistance against the powers that enslave. We can trust that the words of liberation in Mary’s song came true for this woman as well.

Paul and Silas, in a battle between the gods of Rome and the Risen Christ fight back not with weapons of violence or escape plots, but with song.

And God acts. God acts to bring freedom. An earthquake sets them free. But they don’t run away. They stay. And then God acts to bring the jailer and his family into the family of God.

With Paul and Silas, with Mary, with countless Christians in past centuries up to the present, we sing.

In the midst of a world torn by division and hate, we sing of love.

In a world rocked by violence and war we sing songs of peace.

In a world where people suffer from poverty, racism, sexism, and all the isms...we sing songs of justice.

We sing songs to glorify God when the world glorifies power and wealth.

Song says there is a different reality than the one that seems so obvious. Every Sunday we sing songs of praise even when we're not always sure what God is doing.

We sing laments when our hearts are heavy with grief. We sing songs of resurrection when death so often seems to win. We sing of the same things generations past have sung of – freedom, hope, salvation.

We sing songs of a God who loves us...a God who was willing to die to save us.

Maybe we don't think of our singing each week as an act of resistance against the forces of evil in the world. But it is.

We sing because we trust that God is acting in our world, even when it's hard to see.

We sing because we trust that God will bring justice to bear against injustice.

We sing because we trust that God will free us from the powers of sin and darkness...that God will free us from the dark inner cells we find ourselves in, whether through our own actions or the actions of others.

And we sing because we know that whenever and wherever the world screams death, God...and God's people...will sing life.