

The First Sunday After The Epiphany
January 11, 2009
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Acts 16:25-34

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 everybody'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 family 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 family. (NIV)

There are certain questions in life that we might call critical questions - questions that are really, really important. There are questions where the answer determines a great deal when it comes to our future. Questions like: "Will you marry me?" "Did I get into my college of choice?" "Am I pregnant?" "Did I get the job?" "Do I have cancer?" I think we could all agree that these are critical questions. How these questions are answered will have a great affect on our lives.

While these are questions and there may be others you could think of that we might call critical, there is one question that is way more important than all the rest. We hear that question asked today in our lesson. The answer to this most critical question not only affects our lives, it determines our eternal future. Christian friends: thank the Lord He does not leave us grasping for the answer! Listen carefully to God speak today for: **God answers the most critical question of all for us. In Jesus. In baptism.**

How does one get to the point of asking life's most important question? Let's look at the circumstances under which it was asked in our lesson. How would you feel if you were telling others about the Savior and because of it you were attacked, stripped and beaten? What emotions would you have if you were sharing the good news of Christ crucified and risen and because of it orders were given for you to be severely flogged? What would your attitude be after being beaten, hit thirty nine times with a whip with metal spikes, and tossed into a dark inner cell where you were bound and carefully guarded? What would you be doing after a day like that? How would you respond?

This was the case for the apostle Paul and his fellow worker Silas. And how did they respond to all this? "*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.*" Isn't that awesome? After all they just went through, they prayed and sang and praised their God. While they were giving glory to God in the midst of their trials something else was happening - "*other prisoners were listening to them.*" We can only imagine what those who heard must have been thinking. All that they had been through and yet they are happy. They are praying and singing hymns. Where does their

joy come from and what makes them so different? I'm sure the guards had seen many different reactions from flogged prisoners, but I highly doubt this was ever one of them.

And this is how God sets the stage to use His servants to answer the most critical question of all. You heard the rest of the story. God causes an earthquake and the jail is open and the chains fall off. The jailer realizes the prison door is open and decides he doesn't want to suffer the fate of his prisoners at the hands of the brutal Romans so he grabs his own sword and is ready to kill himself. Paul and Silas yell for him to stop, tell him they are still there, and order that he not harm himself. They turn on the lights and then it happens. Then he asks the question. He asks the most crucial, important, critical question there is or ever will be: "*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*"

While the question may have been a bit flawed, the answer certainly was not. The answer is God's answer. God answers that critical question not with what we must do or how we must feel or in what ways we should act. Instead the answer is - *Jesus*. The way to eternal life is Jesus. The one way to be saved is Jesus. *They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household."*

Now let's change gears for a moment and think of the day of Jesus' baptism. Imagine standing there by the Jordan River with a bunch of sinners. Picture them all out there to be baptized by John. They are all there because they recognize their damning sinfulness and they are seeking to be baptized and have their sins washed away as God promised. But then here comes Jesus, standing there in the Jordan with the rest of the sinners waiting to be baptized. There is Jesus waiting for the Spirit to come and descend on Him. Do you see why this is such a startling picture? Do you understand why John didn't want any part of baptizing Jesus at first? Here stood the sinless One. Here stood God whose sandals not a one of us is worthy to untie. Why was Jesus there to be baptized when He had no sins to be washed away? Why does Jesus need the Spirit when He is God? In the last verse of our Hymn we just sang the reason why: **Now rise, faint hearts: be resolute! This man is Christ, our substitute! (CW 89)**

At His baptism, we see Jesus taking our place under the law. Jesus steps in for sinners. We see the Holy Spirit anointing Jesus as the Christ. So when Jesus goes around doing good and only good - it is as if you and I went around doing good and only good. When God the Father proclaims Jesus as the Son with whom He was and would continue to be well pleased - it is as if God the Father was thundering His approval on us and calling us His children with whom He is well pleased. When God punishes Jesus on the cross it was God punishing Jesus for all our sins. When God abandoned Jesus on the cross God was abandoning Him there with all our guilt. When Jesus came out of His grave we came out alive with Him and we will never be abandoned to our graves when we die.

Are we really connected that closely with Jesus? We are - because God also gives us the answer to that most critical question in baptism. When we were baptized we were clothed with Christ. When we were baptized our sins were washed away. When we were baptized salvation became our free gift. When we were baptized God the Holy Spirit connected us to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We became children of God.

Now we can see why the jailer does what he does after getting God's answer to his question. "*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 family 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 family.” There were two washing that went on in that house that evening. The jailer began to wash the wounds of the Lord’s servants. But there was a far greater washing done by God. God washed away the sins of the jailer and his whole household through baptism. From the smallest to the oldest, everyone in that whole household was baptized. After all they were a part of all nations. The promise was for them and their children. Now they knew the most important answer to the most important question. They knew Jesus. They were connected to Jesus in baptism. They believed in God and now had a saving faith in Jesus as their Savior.

Like Paul and Silas, like the jailer and his entire household, by grace we know the answer to the most critical question we will ever face. We know Jesus. We know what God had done and does for us in baptism. Thank God for this! Also it would be good for us to ask ourselves that critical question each day and study His Word so we never forget God’s answer. But I also pray that we take from this another lesson. We never know when someone might ask that most critical question. What circumstances might God use to give us an opportunity? Sometimes it is a mild heart attack, a slight stroke, a minor accident, a virus, or a small tumor in someone’s life. Sometimes God may allow trials in our lives so we have an opportunity to let our lights shine so that others may listen and watch. Dear friends let your lights shine! Then others might ask us: “*What makes you different?*” “*Why do you have such joy even in trial?*” “*Where does that hope come from?*” “*Friend, what must I do to be saved?*” Then with God’s help we can point them to the answer: “*Jesus, my friend, Jesus.*”

For all the times we have sinned and failed and continue to fail to let our lights shine like we should, we go back to the cross and thank God that the answer is not about what we do, but it is all about whom we trust. “***Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household.***” Thank God for Jesus! Thank God for baptism! Amen.