

“Round Midnight”

The 7th Sunday of Easter, 2 June 2019

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

Matt Matthews

Acts 16:16ff

It happened around midnight. Paul and Silas, jailed, shackled, bruised and bleeding from having been beaten by rods, should be fearing for their lives. But at midnight, bodies shackled, spirits not, they are praying and *singing songs of faith*.

Can you imagine? Prayer, yes, but *singing*?

Hold that thought.

Midnight is a figuratively dark time.

Midnight is when the end of the semester has drawn near and you haven't read your textbook. There's little chance you're going to pass the exam. It's midnight. Your time is up. Nothing but shadows and gloom. A million students a year feel those feelings.

Midnight is when you ask the girl out and she says, "What's your name again?" Midnight is when you're embarrassed. Midnight is when you've said or done something that you wish you could take back. But you can't.

Midnight is when the phone rings and you get the news that your best friend has been in a terrible car wreck. You can almost smell the twisted steel over the phone.

In immigrant detention centers in the Southwest, it's always midnight. For Syrian refugees, it is always midnight. So, too, for many of our brothers and sisters in the Congo.

We speak of the "midnight of the soul" when our heart is breaking, when we are afraid, when we are in the throes of a crisis of faith. Jesus knew about the pain of such a dark time; in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed before his crucifixion that "this cup" pass him by. Gladys Night and those Pips

sing about taking the midnight train to Georgia. And if your true love doesn't come with you on that train, it's a lonely, lonely ride. Midnight can be a time when you feel like a motherless child. Midnight can be a time when your pockets are empty and your hope is gone.

Know what I mean?

It's appropriate to pray at midnight.

But sing?

Paul and Silas pray, and, amazingly, they sing.

We expect the prayers. "Oh God, help me!" "Are you running with me Jesus?" "Have mercy on me, Lord God." We expect the prayers. *But songs? Singing?*

To sing in the face of danger is truly an act of audacity—or faith.^[1]

The night couldn't have been more dramatic or full of danger. Midnight could not have been any darker. But two men, beaten and jailed, are secure in God's hope.

Can you imagine?

Can you imagine facing such dire odds and being filled to overflowing, nevertheless, with God's hope? Yes, you can. I've watched you face great odds with that kind of hope, with that kind of blessed assurance.

Brian Robinson was facing a dangerous heart surgery with a long, painful recovery, if he survived. He seemed calm, so I thought he was a good actor. I asked before they wheeled him away, "Are you worried, Brian?"

"No," he said. And I sensed he wasn't acting. "Remember the creed we shared on Sunday in worship?" I nodded. He said, "I believe it."

Question and Answer Number One, from The Heidelberg Catechism:

Q.1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A. That I belong---body and soul, in life and in death---not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

“Are you worried, Paul?”

“Silas, are you afraid?”

Maybe they felt fear. And maybe they were worried. But they also were lifted by faith in the God for whom there is no darkness. And so, whatever else Paul and Silas feel, they fill their night with song and praise. They stand out as witnesses to that jailer and to all who have read the story ever since. God is with us, for us, beside us, and we need not fear. So, we sing, with joy, God’s praises.[\[2\]](#)

Paul would later write:

“We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance produces character. Character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:2b-5).[\[3\]](#)

When all seems hopeless and lost, prayer and song put us in touch with the living God . . .

Case in point:

Ben Weir, when he was held hostage in Lebanon by the Islamic Jihad, the forerunner of Hezzbolah, was afraid and felt lonely. But he also knew

feelings of comfort and fullness. He'd set aside bread from Saturday night's meager meal; and on Sunday morning—the LORD's day—he'd have communion by himself—by himself with the fellowship of saints gathered round, Ben and Jesus sitting at table together, a taste of things to come in the here and now, the sweet in-breaking of the Kingdom of God.

Ben Weir was bound in chains to a radiator in a bare cell in a Beirut hovel. He used the links of his chains as a protestant rosary, something to help him count his blessings by, remember the many faces of those he loved.

And as the jailer who was so impressed with the quiet confidence of Silas and Paul, Ben Weir's captors were impressed with him, with his faith, and with the God who sustained him. Ben got to know them. Talked with them. He prayed for their families; his captors began to share with him their sorrows and fears that held them captive. As Ben strived to love his enemies, John's word that "Perfect love casts out fear" began to dawn in his heart of hearts. And fear's shackles melted.

And he sang in jail, and he prayed long, long prayers. And that dank cell was a garden of color, the air was golden with the fragrance of God's spring. Darkness was like light. Midnight like morning.

Troubled times? Yes.

Fear and real danger? Yes.

But peace and comfort, too. And warmth in the cold. And growth, and freedom in the Spirit of the Living God. And dancing that ten thousand chains could not restrain. So, of course, there was singing.

Of course, Ben Weir sings. And before him, other giants in the faith sing:

Moses sings (Ex 15:1).

Miriam sings (Ex 15:21).

Deborah sings (Judges 5:1).

The morning stars sing (Job 38:7).

Floods clap their hands and the Hills sing (Psalm 98:1).

Cherubim and Seraphim sing (Rev 4:8).

The disciples sing (Mt 26:30). Elders, children, the persecuted, the redeemed, nations sing.

Mary upon hearing of the incarnation through her very flesh sings (Luke 1:46).

The church sings.

Of course Silas sings. Of course, Paul sings.

And of course, we join these singers of the faith. Midnight comes. Midnight intimidates. Midnight closes in.

And we sing. We sing praises to the God who sustains us, whose hand leads us, whose right hand always holds us fast (Psalm 139).

To God our Creator,
To God our Redeemer,
To God our Sustainer . . . *we sing.*

^[1] Many of the survivors [of the Titanic] said that Hartley and the band continued to play until the very end. One second-class passenger said:

Many brave things were done that night, but none were more brave than those done by men playing minute after minute as the ship settled quietly lower and lower in the sea. The music they played served alike as their own immortal requiem and their right to be recalled on the scrolls of undying fame. (Wikipedia).

^[2] Paul and Silas remind us that God is with us in the deepest part of the night, as the bells of midnight have long-past rung and their echoes hang like fading cries. God is with us when the sand has run out of the hourglass. God is with us as we sit shackled to whatever it is that binds us.

And, so we sing.

We sing because God will not forsake us. We sing because God will deliver us from all those midnight things that make us afraid. We sing because God has never failed us yet.

Midnight comes for all of us.

So, we sing.

^[3] Bonhoeffer. Mandela. My Dad.