

Text: Acts 16:25-34 (Epiphany 1, Series B, January 21, 2018)

Theme: It Really Is . . . Phenomenal!

Virtue (basic truth): The beautiful simplicity of salvation – faith in Jesus – really is phenomenal.

Malady (our problem): Sinners either downplay or dismiss the magnificence of simple salvation.

Telic Note (goal): By means of this sermon, the Holy Spirit uses the account of the jailor of Philippi to refresh our own hearts in the joy of salvation and in the blessing of baptism.

Propositional Statement (aim): My generation notoriously over-uses exclamations; we call things awesome that are hardly awe-inspired. But, in view of God’s grace to sinners, today we want to gladly grasp the fact that *salvation by faith really is phenomenal!*

Specific Law in Text: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved” (Acts 16:30)?

Specific Gospel in Text: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

Doctrinal Thought: Salvation is still by the grace of Jesus through faith in Jesus.

Sanctification Thought: *“Lord Jesus, you are the only name given to men by which we must be saved; and how beautiful that you made your name known to us. By your Spirit grant our hearts to stay refreshed in your forgiving mercy and in your saving grace. Hold us close with the confidence of our salvation in you. Comfort us in the truth of our baptism. Bless our lives to bear fruit to your unending glory. In your name we pray. Amen!”*

Acts 16:25-34

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ 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.

²⁷ 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. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

³¹ They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.”

³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴ 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.

“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12); but in that Name, God’s grace and peace are ours! Amen!

Not the most keen observation, but every generation is responsible for avenues of construction and areas of destruction. And, I suppose, we could talk all day on what *“the Builders”* actually built and on what *“the Gen Xers”* finally nixed; we could chat about what *“the Boomers”* really blasted and what *“the Millennials”* strangely manufacture. But, instead I’ll just tell you what my generation – sometimes called *Xennials*, sometimes called *Gen Y* – has managed to de-construct. Our spoken language – and it’s most evident in our use of over-exclamations. Two examples:

- Taco Bell has a new burrito; *awesome!* Yes, beans inside a tortilla are *awe-inspiring*.
- Eagles are in the Super Bowl; *fantastic!* Yes, it’s an unknown event *existent in the mind*.

It’s not as though *awesome* and *fantastic* and words like them don’t connect; they’re hyperboles, overstatements that have worked their way into our daily conversations and conversational tones.

Know that sounds like a strange intro; but it really does connect to our Foundation Lesson from Acts 16. Here’s how: account before us really is *beautiful*; lessons it teaches really are *wonderful*; insights it instills really are *magnificent*; and the simple truth it is relentless to lay on our hearts *really is . . . phenomenal*. This record is not just an excited story related now by a preacher from a generation notorious for over-exclamations. But by the Spirit’s preserving grace, *it really is phenomenal*; it really is *“highly remarkable”* and *“extraordinary;”* especially as complex hearts and hard lives celebrate the simple truth even our afterlife is sure by the grace of Jesus, through faith in Jesus. Let’s make sure we see that; let’s make sure we smile at it.

Just the first two verses: *“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ 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”* (Acts 16:25, 26).

I’ll say it with a smile: whole scene is phenomenal. Two missionaries – Paul and Silas – had been in Philippi for several days (Acts 16:12). They announced the Good News to Lydia by the river and her heart was opened to and through that Gospel (Acts 16:13, 14). After that, Paul casts out a demon; and that gets them thrown in prison. Beaten. Flogged. Celled. Shackled. Carefully guarded (Acts 16:22-24). But instead of being miffed, they make music; instead of hurling insults and harboring resentment, they sing hymns; instead of pungent anger, prayers ascend! An earthquake. Doors open. Shackles loose. Prisoners free. A phenomenal scene!

Unless you’re the jailor in charge. And unless you, by Roman custom and Roman law, are the one to carry and endure the escaped criminals’ sentence. It’s phenomenal . . . unless the anxiety

was so great that the easiest thing for you to do is draw your sword and end it all – at least make it look like criminal uprising. Unless situation and circumstance combine to make suicide the most attractive answer. When that's the case, more phenomenal than an earthquake is: fear.

Understand that, and suddenly it makes crisp sense that when *“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.”*²⁸ But Paul shouted, *“Don't harm yourself! We are all here!”*²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved”* (Acts 16:27-30)?

Maybe we don't hear it as quickly, but that desperate cry for help comes from a hopelessly lost condition (Franzmann, 1360). Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth still speaks (Matthew 12:34). How Paul knew what his jailor was about to do, we don't know. But why Paul cried out we do know: because that jailor was one for whom the Son of God was born, too; and his soul was just as precious to God's Son as any. Spiritually captive falls before the physically un-free, phenomenal fear asks the phenomenal question: *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved”* (Acts 16:30).

Maybe not to the sword-in-hand extent as the jailer, but we've all asked that same question. Naturally, the man wanted to do something to merit his salvation, to measure his standing with God; his sinful heart craved a specific work and cried for a specific task – just like ours do every time we try to fix our relationship with God by something we credit to ourselves as *good*; and just like we do every time we try to assure ourselves that what we did wasn't that offensive to the Divine, that spiteful to our brother, or that loveless to our sister. Jailer knew he needed saving; he craved salvation assurance; naturally he figured it was up to him – because every other religion and every other line of religious thought would have us believe that it is.

Prison lights on, Paul and Silas refuse to leave their jailor in the dark. “Saved? Same way for all: *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household”*” (Acts 16:31).

Phenomenally simple! Not one word about doing this deed or making this decision; not one *“turn your life over to Jesus and let him take the wheel;”* not one *“make these amends”* or *“promise to never again.”* Not even 12 simple steps. Simply . . . beautifully . . . phenomenally: *“believe in the Lord Jesus”* (Acts 16:31). Awesome! Trust that the One born in Bethlehem really is God from God and Light from Light. Fantastic! Know it to be true that the Anointed in the Jordan really is God's beloved Son. Wonderful! See him as he is: the Savior of All, the Forgiver of All, the Redeemer of All, the Friend of Sinners, the Maker, the Messiah, the Christ, the Only One in whom salvation is found. Beautifully simple. Graciously phenomenal!

And so is what happens next: “*Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.*”³³ *At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized*” (Acts 16:32, 33).

On break from the night-shift, he brings the accused-uprisers home (imagine how that went over with the wife!); and his spiritually shackled heart is freed and his salvation is sure as Paul and Silas “*speak the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house*” (Acts 16:32). The phenomenal grace of what Jesus did for the world is explained and applied to his whole house – just like we preach and teach it here! The Good News of the Christ who was anointed to save – and did! – is laid on his heart – just like we lay it on hearts here! And, through that same Good News, the Spirit pours the gift of faith that simply sees Jesus as the Savior – just like he does here. And right with it, the confident joy of baptism – the visible and personal Gospel where trust is created, innocence robes, and heirs are announced. He washes Paul & Silas’ wounds, he and his family are washed of their sins in baptism. Physical captor is spiritually and eternally free. The needing forgiveness, forgiven; the searching for salvation, is sure! Phenomenal!

But the account doesn’t end there, either. It could; and our hearts would be glad in that, too. But the Spirit inscribes one more phenomenal detail we don’t want to miss. Listen:

“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” (Acts 16:34).

The News of forgiveness and salvation-sure in Jesus changed the jailer’s heart and it brought forth fruits of faith in his life. He didn’t have to bring Paul and Silas home; but how could he not welcome those who shared the message that set him free? Didn’t have to feed them – massively inconvenient at pre-dawn – but how could he not gladly display such hospitality?!

Phenomenally, via the message of Jesus, “*pagan cruelty and callousness is changed into Christian mercy and tenderness*” (Lenski, 682).

Christians, you know the same grace as the jailer – same joy, same salvation, same forgiveness, same calm of heart through life’s turbulence. Welcome to label me a *Xennial* and to call my vernacular *Gen-Y-ish*; but I’ll conclude this with a purposeful use of our spoken language.

- God has set you free, and has forgiven you in the truth of the Gospel. That’s *awesome!*
- God has robed you in innocence and made you an heir of eternity with him in baptism – and nothing can change that, nothing can rob you of that. That’s *fantastic!*
- God has changed your anger to joy, your fear to assurance, your turbulence to tranquility, your heart to rejoice and to share the eternity he won. ***That really is . . . phenomenal!***

Amen!