

**Sermon for Sunday, August 14, 2022**  
**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Traveling With the Spirit - “Unexpected Roadblocks”**  
**Rev. Dr. Rolf Svano**  
**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa**

**Acts 16:16-34**

Recently my wife and I came back from a three-week trip to Norway, a trip that had been delayed for two years. It was so good to be together with family again. We celebrated the wedding of a cousin in Bergen. We cruised up the coast of Norway to the top of Europe to see the Midnight Sun. And while it rained or was cloudy much of the time, Norway is always beautiful no matter the weather. Part of our trip was to travel to Eastern Norway to visit my wife’s cousins near Drammen. We traveled by train. Summer is a time when railroad tracks are often under repair. For that part of the journey, we would have to get off the train and take a bus. And that works just fine - as long as you take the right bus. We got off the train pulling our luggage behind us. I went up to a bus and asked the driver, “*Går denne bus til Hønefoss?*” Is this bus going to Hønefoss? He said “yes” and so we got on not realizing that it was a local bus and not the express bus we were supposed to take. We arrived in Hønefoss all right, but as we approached the train station, we saw our train just beginning to pull away. Our hearts sank as we realized we had missed our train. The next train would come in six hours, right at midnight. So, what do you do in Hønefoss, Norway, for six hours? We met some nice people who were kind and helpful. We walked into town and found a nice place to eat. My wife discovered a church nearby with modern award-winning architecture. We decided to check it out. As we approached, we noticed that the lights were on. We opened the door and discovered there was a concert in progress, so we sat down in the back of the church and heard one of the best hardanger fiddle players in Norway. It was a moment we will never forget, a moment made possible by a mistake getting on the wrong bus.

No one goes through life without experiencing some unexpected roadblocks or detours along the way. Life doesn’t always go according to plan. Accidents can happen. Cancer can side-track your plans. Covid certainly changed all our plans the last two years. Sometimes life changes because of mistakes we have made. Sometimes life changes because of the bad choices of others around us.

So, what do you do when bad things happen and life doesn’t go according to plan? Our reading from Acts can give us some direction. As we have been working our way through the book of Acts, we have repeatedly seen that the Holy Spirit is the one in charge, giving directions to Jesus’ followers. But sometimes following Jesus could evoke opposition and hostility, just as it did to Jesus himself. That’s what we see in our reading today. I have to admit, I have a lot of questions about this story. I don’t understand the slave girl with a spirit of divination who would tell people’s fortunes and make her owners money. But I do understand slavery and owners who profit off the labor of their slaves. And when you speak out and challenge that unjust system, those who profit from that system are going to push back. And push back they did. Paul and Silas were dragged before the court and falsely accused. They were stripped of their clothing, beaten with rods and thrown into prison. The author goes into great detail saying that they were put in the innermost prison cell with their feet in stocks.

What would you do in that situation? Would you give up? Would you despair? Would you question the wisdom and justice of God and wonder if this 'following Jesus stuff' is really worth it? The author tells us what Paul and Silas did. They **"were praying and singing hymns to God and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened."** Was this coincidence or part of a divine plan? We aren't told. But the end result was that the jailer became a Christian and he and his whole family were baptized.

Now there are some who would say this was all part of God's plan. They claim that God is in control, and everything happens for a reason. I know there are people who find comfort in that view that God is in control. But I don't find it comforting or helpful at all. If you want to claim that God is in control and give God the credit for all the good in the world, then you must also give God blame for all the bad in the world. But I don't want to blame God for all the bad that happens. That's not the God revealed in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. To be sure, there are parts of the Bible that can be read that way. But let's turn to Paul himself and his own understanding of how God works in the world. In Romans 8:28 Paul says this, **"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."** Paul doesn't claim that God is controlling everything that happens. Paul is saying that no matter what happens in this world, no matter how bad, God is able to bring about a good purpose. God did that with Jesus by raising him from the dead. In our story in Acts, God did that with Paul and Silas. And God can do that in your life too. Maybe some bad things have happened in your life. One thing I know for sure is that God was with you and God is able to use those experiences to bring about something good in the world. When roadblocks come your way in life, you might even hear some wonderful hardanger fiddle music.

In 2015, I had the opportunity to travel to Greece. There was a group of thirty of us who were traveling in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul. We went to many of the places mentioned in the book of Acts. In fact, we visited the ruins at Philippi. We saw the very place where Paul and Silas were thrown into prison. I have a picture of me standing at that prison door. We couldn't get into the prison because the door was locked. I for one was glad that I was locked out, and not locked in. Our guide directed us to a shrine nearby. It commemorated Lydia, the first European convert to Christianity. Next to that shrine was a little amphitheater built along the banks of the river where Lydia was baptized. We gathered for a brief worship service there and read this story. Then each person had the opportunity to stand by the river as I splashed water on their forehead with these words, 'Remember your baptism, child of God.' Remember who you are, chosen and beloved by God. No matter what happens, no matter how good or bad things get, never forget that.

I think that's what Paul and Silas were doing that night they spent in prison. They were praying and singing hymns to God. They knew no matter how bad things were, they were beloved children of God. And God would see them through. I quoted from Romans 8 earlier. Just a few verses later Paul wrote this: **"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."** When life throws us unexpected roadblocks, may this be our faith and our hope.