

Sermon Series: Philippians -- Good News

March 2, 2014

Title: Taming the Snake

Text: Acts 16:16-40

Summary: Where does salvation come from? From the gods we make for ourselves, or from the Creator of the world? The people of Philippi were about to find out, when Paul and his team silenced the Underworld with the Name of the world's true Savior.

The Python

A Voice from the Underworld:

Like many ancient civilizations, the Greeks had a story of a great flood which temporarily covered the earth. In their story a dangerous and destructive monster emerged from the mud left over from the flood. They envisioned this monster as a snake and named it Python.

Python was a fearsome creature that ravaged the countryside, destroying crops, sacking villages, and polluting streams and springs. The god Apollo went into the serpent's lair and, as Homer wrote: "he killed the fearsome dragon Python, piercing it with his darts." The dead serpent rotted in its cave, its body giving off hallucinating vapors.

But Apollo wasn't done with Python. He established a temple above the snake's lair. The vapors from the dead serpent came up through a crack in the temple floor, and a priestess known as the "Pythia" sat on a tripod above the crack, inhaling the hallucinating vapors. Every so often she would mumble an utterance which, when interpreted by a temple priest, served as an oracle from Apollo.

The Temple of Delphi, as it was known, became one of the most important oracles in the Greek and Roman world. Desperate for a word from the gods, people would travel great distances and offer lavish gifts for a word from the underworld.

Encountering the Python:

Knowing this story helps us understand the significance of a strange encounter that Paul and his team experienced while living in Philippi. Luke writes:

Acts 16:16 NIV

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and the rest of us,

shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

In the original Greek, Luke describes the slave girl as having a "pneuma pythona," or "Python spirit." In other words, she was seen as being inspired by the gods, perhaps even Apollo, in much the same way as the priestesses in Delphi. As such, she was of enormous value to her masters. She was a conduit for a Voice from the Underworld.

What is even more interesting, however, is what the Voice from the Underworld had to say about Paul, Silas, Timothy and Dr. Luke:

Acts 16:17 NIV

She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

Salvation, rescue, healing, deliverance from the evils of life -- these were the things that people most needed and sought after. Wasn't the Emperor himself called the "Savior of the world?" People regularly sought out the Python spirit for a tiny bit of saving. Now the Python spirit was -- through this poor possessed slave girl -- announcing a new path of salvation, one directly connected with not Apollo, but Zeus, the chief of the gods.

Heaven speaks to the Underworld:

The people of Paul's time saw the cosmos as consisting of the Heavens, where the gods lived, the Earth, where people lived, and the Underworld, a shadowy place of darker spirits and the abode of the dead. You couldn't go up to Heaven to meet with the gods, but at times they might send messages from the Underworld -- thus the appeal of the Python spirit.

But the people of Philippi were about to learn that the true God, the Creator of the Cosmos and all that is in it, had done something new -- something not dependent upon ancient myths of floods and serpents, or hallucinating vapors and mumbo-jumbo. He had sent the world's true Savior from Heaven into the world.

Luke tells us:

Acts 16:18 NIV

She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

Heaven spoke to the Underworld, and a slave girl was set free from the Python spirit. This was not the work of Apollo killing the ancient serpent; it was the work of Jesus, God's Son, bringing God's salvation.

The World's True Savior

A new kind of Savior:

Paul would one day write to the Christians in Philippi:

Philippians 2:6-11 NIV

**Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;**

**rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.**

**And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death —
even death on a cross!**

**Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.**

Here was a Savior who became a slave.
Here was a Savior who did not kill the serpent, but was killed by it.
Here was a Savior who did not remain a shadowy voice in the Underworld, but rose again.

And Paul reminds the Philippians that all of creation, and all spirits, will bow to this Savior Who is the world's True Lord. The hosts of Heaven will bow; the human race will bow; the inhabitants of the Underworld will bow. And all will acknowledge that "Jesus Christ is Lord."

By announcing Jesus' Name, Paul dethroned the ancient Python spirit. Heaven spoke through Earth right into the dark foundations of Creation.

Backlash:

Empires never change hands peacefully. Paul's announcement to the Philippian fortune-telling business that Jesus was the world's true Savior and Lord brought immediate pushback from the dark forces that enslave this world:

Acts 16:19-21 NIV

When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities.

They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

The old order of things would not go down without a fight! At the end of the day Paul and Silas -- the two men who most looked like foreign Jews -- were beaten and imprisoned.

Acts 16:23-24 NIV

After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

The men who had routed the Underworld's Python spirit, were now themselves locked up in an underground cell.

"What must I do to be saved?"

So what do you do when you've been beaten to within an inch of your life, then thrown into a dank, underground cell? Luke tells us that Paul and Silas simply went on announcing the coming of the world's true Lord:

Acts 16:25 NIV

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

It was right in the middle of their impromptu praise and worship that an earthquake struck:

Acts 16:26 NIV

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.

The jailer, no doubt a retired Roman soldier, was caught completely off guard.

Acts 16:27 NIV

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.

Paul and Silas could see his silhouette against the night sky -- sword already placed at his throat. Now it was the jailer who most desperately needed a Savior. It was Paul, not any Python spirit that offered him the gift of God's salvation:

Acts 16:28-31 NIV

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."

The jailer had undoubtedly heard what the girl with the Python spirit had been saying. He had also gone to sleep listening to the strange songs sung by his beaten and bloodied prisoners. So, when disaster struck he only had one question: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Taming the Snake

What does it take to "tame the snake?"

What does it take to "tame the snake?" For the ancient Greeks of Paul's day it meant the sun god Apollo daring to walk into the snake den and kill the serpent. But its presence would always be felt in the vapors that wafted up from its remains. The Underworld could never be truly tamed.

Jesus chose a radically different path from that of a hero god. Instead of slaying the old serpent, He gave His life for you and me -- taking our place in the dreaded Underworld. For three days His body lay, cold and dead, in the tomb beneath the rocky outcrop where He was crucified. This was His way of being our Savior.

1 Peter 2:24 NIV

“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”

And on the third day He walked out of that tomb -- Victor over Death and all of Death's minions. This was His way of being our Savior.

Taming the Snake in our world:

God has called you and me to be the ones through whom He "tames the snake" in our world. And that means two things:

- We announce a very different Savior from what our culture is trusting; and when we do, there is bound to be a backlash.
- We must be willing to walk with people in their dark, desperate places so that they can discover the world's true Savior.

It does no good for us to try to fight this world -- and the dark powers that rule it -- on its own terms. We can argue all day about whether or not we should be forced to bake someone a wedding cake or take pictures of their wedding. But such arguments will never "tame the snake" that holds our culture captive.

The only way you "tame the snake" is by letting Jesus do what only Jesus can do. When we show His love and compassion, even for those who have mistreated us, then His Spirit can speak God's love and forgiveness, majesty and power into those places where this world's spirit has ruled.

Funny the difference 12 hours can make: at sunset the Philippian jailer was locking Paul's and Silas' feet in the stocks in the deepest cell of his prison. At sunrise he was feeding them breakfast. He was a newly baptized follower of Jesus. He was living proof of the power of Jesus to save. One day he, like Lydia, and perhaps even the slave girl who had been infested with the Python spirit, would hear a letter written by that strange ambassador of King Jesus -- Paul the apostle. In that letter Paul would remind them of something that each of them had experienced:

**Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.**

What part of this old, broken world might Jesus want to tame through you?