

# *A Ray of Darkness*

by

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## Psalm 97

The LORD is king! Let the earth rejoice;  
let the many coastlands be glad!

<sup>2</sup>Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;  
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

<sup>3</sup>Fire goes before him  
and consumes his adversaries on every side.

<sup>4</sup>His lightnings light up the world;  
the earth sees and trembles.

<sup>5</sup>The mountains melt like wax before the LORD,  
before the Lord of all the earth.

<sup>6</sup>The heavens proclaim his righteousness,  
and all the peoples behold his glory.

<sup>7</sup>All servants of images are put to shame,  
those who make their boast in worthless idols;  
all gods bow down before him.

<sup>8</sup>Zion hears and is glad,  
and the towns of Judah rejoice  
because of your judgments, O God.

<sup>9</sup>For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth;  
you are exalted far above all gods.

- <sup>10</sup> You who love the LORD, hate evil;  
he guards the lives of his faithful;  
he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.
- <sup>11</sup> Light dawns for the righteous  
and joy for the upright in heart.
- <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous,  
and give thanks to his holy name!

Acts 16:16-34

One day as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a female slave who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. <sup>17</sup> While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” <sup>18</sup> She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

<sup>19</sup> But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. <sup>20</sup> When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men, these Jews, are disturbing our city <sup>21</sup> and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe.” <sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. <sup>24</sup> Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped.<sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."<sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.<sup>30</sup> Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"<sup>31</sup> They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."<sup>32</sup> They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.<sup>33</sup> At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay.<sup>34</sup> He brought them up into the house and set food before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

The day began as normal days do. They awoke, dressed, had a bite to eat, gathered their things and walked out the door. The sun was already bright in the sky, the weather hot and getting hotter. It was the kind of day you wait for all winter. A day that offers a foretaste of the days ahead, of summer and freedom, friends and fun. A day that should have produced memories and laughter, not gunshots and carnage. But that is what happened on Tuesday, May 24 in Uvalde, Texas. A massacre that stole 21 people from this world.

As I read the news coverage, and saw the photos of each victim, I wondered what I would say to you this morning. I wrestled with the right words, weighing how to address a moment so horrid and yet so frustratingly political. I began to despair that I would have nothing to say at all. At that moment the fault in my approach struck me, and it is somewhat embarrassing to admit, particularly as one of your pastors. I kept fretting, "what will *I* say," "how can *I* find the words"? When I start believing it is up to me to find the right words, that it is up to my insight to speak to something so awful, then I know I have put myself in God's

place. And if there is a moment when we need God to speak it is right now.

When I sat back down with this morning's text, a passage I had read repeatedly over the past several weeks, it spoke to me differently. Now, I noticed God's presence in darkness.

Paul and Silas began their day as they began most days. They awoke, dressed, and started out to the place of prayer. Along the way their routine was interrupted by a female slave. Like a street corner preacher, she points and yells, "I know who you are..." Day after day she does this, standing and shouting and it begins to wear on Paul. He's annoyed and tired from trying to keep his identity quiet, an identity that this female slave, this nobody, has ascertained. He commands the spirit out of her, to silence her as much as heal her. And in that instant, her entire life changes.

Later in the story it happens again. Paul and Silas are arrested for this act, fiercely flogged and thrown in prison. Then an earthquake opens the doors of every cell, freeing every prisoner. The jailer, to whom they had been entrusted, knows he will be killed as a result. The moment before he takes his own life, Paul and Silas's words bring forth salvation: literally and theologically. The jailer drops the sword and is bathed in the waters of baptism, he and his whole family. In that moment, his entire life changes.

Life can change in a moment. It did five days ago at Robb Elementary School. It did almost ten years ago at Sandy Hook Elementary School. It did when the doctor entered the room and asked you to have a seat. It did when your spouse said they no longer loved you. It did when the soldiers came to your door, flag and finality in hand. In these moments of darkness we are apt to ask, "where is God?" I know I have. I have read the newspaper and holy scripture and wondered at the sudden tragedies of life, and God's place in them. And my friends, overtime what I have come to believe is this: God is in the darkness. More than that, God is a ray of darkness.

The psalmist says “Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart.” The freedom received by the female slave and jailer must have felt like the dawning of light. Before, both characters were shrouded in darkness. The “female slave” is used and abused, retained for her aptitude to make wealthy people more prosperous. The light of her uniqueness has been diminished for the profitability of her gifts. God reaches her in the midst of her darkness.

The jailer works the night shift. He receives Paul and Silas and places them in the innermost cell, a place where darkness prevails no matter the time of day. At the height of night – the text uses the Greek word mesa-nuk-tion, which means “the middle,” – literally at the middle of the night in the hardest to reach place in the prison, Paul and Silas pray, and God shows up. God’s ray reaches them even then, stirring the earth to free them, opening doors and releasing chains. The darkness that permeated their cell now moves to fill the jailer’s soul. But as he prepares to take his life, God shines again, flooding the depths of his miserable conviction through the voice of Paul and Silas, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” In a few verses the jailer goes from imminent death to new life.

What makes God so fond of darkness? So keen on breaking into the hardest to reach places, whether they be illegal profits, damp jail cells, mass murders, or our protected hearts? It is because God also dwells in darkness. Psalm 97 says, “Clouds and thick darkness are all around God; righteousness and justice are the foundation of God’s throne.” God can enter the darkness because God is already in it. Which means that even in the middle of the deepest darkness, justice and righteousness can exist.

The female slave was not just a female slave but a truth teller – a woman of righteousness. The jailer was not just an employee of empire, but a dedicated man caring for his family, willing to be convicted that he was wrong – a person of justice. God’s ray of darkness illuminates each of them, and in a moment changes them forever.

After this story we do not know what happens to the female slave or the jailer. Their stories recede from the book of Acts. We're left to imagine their future, which surely was different than their past. Yet we must admit that we know the comfort of familiarity, even if it is killing us. We know that even in the face of a life-changing moment, change is anything but guaranteed.

I borrowed the name of this sermon and the phrase “ray of darkness” from a sermon of the same title by The Right Rev. Rowan Williams, who preached it prior to his ten-year tenure as Archbishop of Canterbury, and head of the Anglican communion. Regarding the nature of the ray, Williams preached: “God’s ray interrupts our blindness and ignorance; it cuts through something as beams of light do. God is ‘the light of the world’ in his Son Jesus, yet that interruption, that light cutting through our darkness, is not a comfortable cleaning up of problems and smoothing out of our difficulties and upsets. On the contrary, it brings on a kind of vertigo; it may make me a stranger to myself, to everything I have ever taken for granted. I have to find a new way of knowing myself, identifying myself, uttering myself, talking of myself, imaging myself. In short, when God’s light breaks on my darkness, the first thing I know is that I don’t *know*, and never did.”<sup>1</sup>

My friends, we have been shrouded in darkness these past five days. The murder of 21 people, of 19 children has consumed us. But the darkness need not be final. God’s ray is interrupting the darkness. It is cutting through the noise and predictable proclamations. God’s ray shines a whole new light on the world. But before we can fully bask in that light, we will have to adjust to it. God’s ray will show us a different way forward, a way we never knew before, and it will be strange and bumpy. Like a plant, we may start to lean a new way in order to soak up more of God’s light. When we do, we may look different but we will be growing.

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness* (Boston, MA.: Cowley Publications, 1995), 100.

Now you might ask, how do we go about living in God's ray of darkness? Paul has an answer for us. Hear those words said to the jailer, spoken as God's ray flooded the innermost, darkest cell, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

Friends, believe. Believe God is at work in you and through you. Believe God's rays are permeating the world, from female slaves to jailers to preachers to you. When it is painful and disorienting and unsettling, believe you have been saved. Our God, who has a home in darkness, shines on you. So live a life that responds to that light. Be faithful and courageous, honest and attentive. Believe in justice and righteousness, the pillars on which God's throne is seated. It may take some getting used to, and you may become a stranger to yourself. But believe it is worth everything, and be assured that our God knows you and loves you. Just as God knows and loves those children and teachers from Uvalde, Texas. Friends, believe it. Amen.