



Stand by Me

Acts 16:16-26

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Washington Street UMC
January 23, 2022

In the history of our faith, there are many saints whose legacies are worth studying. We stand today upon the shoulders of those who have carried the weight of faith before us. Whether those individuals are well known, like St. Francis of Assisi, or lesser known, like the Venerable Augustus Tolton, the witness of the church today owes a debt of gratitude to those who have preached, proclaimed, and witnessed to the love of God in ages past.

Over the next six weeks, we are going to be looking at the life and hymns of the Rev. Dr. Charles Albert Tindley. Dr. Tindley is revered as the “Prince of Preachers;” a pastor in the Methodist Church in the early 20th Century, he served in Philadelphia and helped grow into prominence what is known today as Tindley Temple United Methodist Church. Along with his prominence as a preacher and pastor, Tindley is known for his hymn writing. Still today, a handful of Tindley’s hymns exist in our own United Methodist Hymnal, while others are found in hymn books across denominational lines, including the African American Hymnal and the Songs of Zion.

Over the coming month and a half, we’ll be looking at some of Tindley’s hymns in shared study with Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church. Beginning next week, we will be offering some time for shared small group discussion on Sunday afternoons, allowing for a time of joint learning through community with the members at Roberts. I’ll share more information about those small groups in this week’s weekly email, and hope you’ll reserve some time next Sunday afternoon to join a zoom call as we dive deeper into the hymns and life of Dr. Tindley.

While we will look more at his life in the weeks to come, I wanted to give a quick introduction to Dr. Tindley as we begin this worship series looking at some of his hymns.

Charles Albert Tindley was born on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 1851. In an autobiographical statement, Tindley indicates that after his mother died when he was just five, his father hired him out to work on the properties of local land-owners. In a biography written by his youngest son, Elbert Tindley, his son writes that Charles served as a slave in those years following his mother’s death.¹ He was forced to live apart from his father serving on the property of a white land-owner.

As a child laborer, his son writes, Tindley would pick up pieces of newspaper he found alongside the road, and would burn pine knots at night to provide enough light to study the letters and words on the newspaper clippings. Some years later, he arrived in Philadelphia where he worked at first as a building contractor and sexton. He continued to study at night, making his way through a number of seminary courses en route to his ordination in the Delaware Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1885. He served a number of churches in the Conference, and served as a Presiding Elder – what we know now as a District Superintendent – before he arrived at the Old Bainbridge Street Church in 1902.

The church grew so quickly under his pastoral leadership that they soon procured a new location for a new church building. A new physical building was completed by 1924; Tindley retired in 1932, leaving the church with over 10,000 members on the rolls.

The song we'll be singing today from Tindley is "Stand By Me," which was first published in 1905, just a few years after he arrived at the Old Bainbridge Street Church. Though the inspiration for the song is not recorded in any history books, the lyrics offers us some insight as to its purpose and invitation. The language of the song pulls from a number of scriptural texts – including Jesus calming the raging seas in Galilee. To talk about the song's invitation to "stand by me," I will be pulling from verse 4, which references our scriptural text today in Acts 16, offering, "In the midst of persecution, stand by me. When my foes in battle array, undertake to stop my way, thou who saved Paul and Silas, stand by me."

The text in Acts 16 indicates that Paul and Silas were in Philippi on their way to Macedonia. As they were heading to the place of prayer one morning, they came across a slave-girl who had been occupied by what our text calls a spirit of divination. She had an ability to see what others could not see, and is defined in the text as a "fortune-teller." The spirit that occupied her was evidently so good that her fortune-telling capacity had become quite the money-making endeavor. But, as we have discussed before, women in society at that time were generally held as possessions by men – often a father or a husband. In this case, the woman is owned by masters who have enslaved her, relying on *her* spirit of divination for *their own* source of income.

Now, today, we may look at someone who claims to be a fortune-teller as a hoax. Whether they use Tarot cards, magic orbs, or the lines on your palm, many in this line of business are simply dismissed. Yet, in this story, we're told the woman has a spirit upon her. This is not a spirit like the cheerleading squad under the Friday night lights – "we have spirit, yes we do, we have spirit, how 'bout you?" ... no, no ... this is an actual spirit. She has been overcome by a spirit with the capacity to *know* the details of other people's lives.

How do we know this spirit has the ability to foresee the details of another's life? I'm glad you asked. It's plain in the Scripture: the text provides us evidence. The girl followed Paul and Silas, and she kept crying out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She knows something about these men that they have not yet stated of themselves.

She does this on consecutive days. Every time Paul and Silas come walking through the town, she falls in line behind them and this spirit, which has overcome her, leads her in what becomes an annoyance. Paul is done with the spirit's badgering.

Paul turns around and says to the spirit ... take note, he's not talking to the girl, he's talking the spirit that has possessed the girl ... he says, "'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour."

The spirit is the one who stated that Paul and Silas were there for the work of salvation, so we should not be surprised that what they have offered this girl is salvation. She is freed from the evil that had enslaved her. And, having been removed of this spirit, she has been freed of the evil that had led her

masters to enslave her. She's not just free, she's doubly free. We should praise God that this girl has been healed of the evil which had possessed her.

But not everyone was giving praise to God for the healing that just took place.

"When her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities." Their work of liberating this girl has led to their own incarceration. Dr. Willie James Jennings, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale Divinity School, notes, "Arrest, incarceration, and imprisonment have never been and never are neutral processes, functioning according to basic rules of justice and human utility. Incarceration," he continues, "is a process at the disposal of the rich and powerful, and here we see it unleashed against the servants of Jesus."ⁱⁱ

The masters of this slave-girl are non-plussed that their greatest source of income has been taken away from them, regardless if it means this girl – this member of society and community – no longer has to face the tormenting of a possessing spirit. These slave-owners cared more about their own well-being than they did she, whom they forced into labor for their own benefit. Such a model of business, which prioritizes the wealth of the owners at the expense of the laborers, has plagued humanity, and for certain our American society, for all of our known existence.

These slave-owners seized Paul and Silas for freeing their money-making slave. They dragged the two men before the market-place authorities and said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe."

Lest we think that our own nation is that much different from the Roman Empire, look at the argument these men are making. They arrest Paul and Silas and bring them before a public tribunal and claim that their so-called criminal offense is an affront to the whole of the Roman Empire. They don't say anything about their own economic downturn; they don't indicate that the only thing these men have done was to cast out a spirit from one of their own slaves; they don't acknowledge the personal implication of the situation. No, they make the individual political. They take their personal loss and declare it is a national issue. These men accuse the religion and cultural identity of Paul and Silas as being, not just their own problem, but a problem to the whole of the nation.

It is nationalism on display at its finest.

Never mind that what Paul and Silas did was for the betterment of community, ridding a member of God's created humanity from the evil that possessed it, their work of salvation is accursed by those who have lost their slave as a public, political, and national concern. As Dr. Jennings notes, "Disciples care about how bodies are treated and mistreated. Such matters are never minor for us."ⁱⁱⁱ And yet, as the witness of Paul and Silas mimics that of Jesus, the response of the community to such care will not always be met with appreciation.

The crowd joined in attacking Paul and Silas, and the judges in the market-square had the two men stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison. In the process of setting this woman free from her torment, Paul and Silas have landed themselves behind the bars of an unjust and economically-driven jail cell.^{iv}

There, behind the brick and mortar of the empire's cage for their free-labor-force, Paul and Silas began praying and singing hymns to God. Had Dr. Tindley written our song for today a couple thousand years earlier, I imagine it would have been upon the lips of these disciples. Perhaps it is their incarceration from which these words get their inspiration. "In the midst of tribulation, stand by me. In the midst of persecution, stand by me. When the storms of life are raging, stand by me."

The words of Dr. Tindley offer are a beckoning cry. They speak from an experience where one turns to God for strength and support. The words invite a recognition that things won't always be easy, that life won't always be fair, and that we won't always do that which is right in the eyes of God ... but that, in any of these times, in all of the ways life can present its difficulties, we acknowledge and rely on the support of God who has sustained us before.

This is why we look to the saints of the past, to be reminded that God has been faithful, and that we are not alone in our journey. We can look back to the witness of Paul and Silas, and stand upon the call to the work of salvation, even when it means upsetting the economic practices of the day, because we know that God will "stand by me." Even when the worst of nationalism speaks against our faithfulness as disciples of Jesus Christ who are engaged in the work of reconciling creation, we know that God will "stand by me."

The words of Dr. Tindley are not just passive words of hope, they are encouraging words of assurance. Just as Christ ruled the wind and water upon the raging sea, just as God knows the number of hairs on my head, just as the Spirit will sustain me in my aging frailty, I can trust that no matter what may come my way, God will be there to "stand by me." God has always been there, standing by me.

Paul and Silas prayed and sang, and there was an earthquake so violent the foundations of the prison were shaken, and the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. If you didn't think this story was about the freeing of those who had been chained before when the slave was unleashed from the shackles of her masters, now the whole of the prison has been shaken from its foundation and all those who had been found guilty by the unjust public courts in the market have been set free. Oh, my God, stand by me.

Tindley offers these words of hope and encouragement, of instruction and request, that we might claim the promise of what always has been, trusting in what will always be, that even when society may turn against us for being faithful in our call, God will be there to "stand by me."

Will you join me as we raise our voices together to sing in promise and proclamation, "Stand by Me."

ⁱ E. T. Tindley. *The Prince of Colored Preachers: The Remarkable Story of Charles Albert Tindley of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*. Wilmore, KY: First Fruits Press, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Willie Jennings. *Acts: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jennings.

^{iv} William H. Willimon. *Acts: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988..