

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me!” This childhood reply to taunts and jeers implies that words have no power to affect me or to inflict harm. While it may be a good response to childhood taunts, the basic premise behind that saying is absolutely false. Sticks and stones may inflict visible, bodily harm, but words have a different effect that is even more powerful and long-lasting. Words are powerful in the way that affect someone and do have consequences. We saw an example of that in our capitol this past week.

This morning we are celebrating the baptism of Jesus, and remembering our own baptism at the same time. When we think of baptism, our first thoughts probably go to the visible element of water, but the real power in baptism comes from the word of promise which is connected with that water. We are taking a closer look at the account of the jailer at Philippi to help us to understand how the Lord accomplishes His purpose of bringing people to faith. He might show His power in a very visible way, or He might show His power in a much less visible way. As we consider this account of the jailer at Philippi, we are going to SEE THE POWER OF GOD. 1) His power may be seen in nature, such as the earthquake. 2) But His power can also be seen in your baptism as it brought you to faith.

As Paul was on his missionary journey, the Holy Spirit led him to the Macedonian city of Philippi. This was a Roman colony. While in this city, a young slave girl possessed by an evil spirit followed Paul, proclaiming to everyone that he was a servant of the Most High who was telling everyone what they must do to be saved. After many days, Paul commanded the evil spirit to be cast out of her. When her owners realized that she would no longer be able to tell fortunes and gain them money, they had Paul and Silas arrested, beaten, and thrown into prison. *“After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.”* (23-24)

Even after all of this injustice, Paul and Silas did not lose their trust in God. **“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”** (25) Instead of grumbling or cursing their situation, they were singing God’s praises, with the rest of the prisoners listening to them. Then God intervened in a powerful way. **“Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody’s chains came loose.”** (26) With this violent earthquake, the Lord caused all the doors to the prison cells to open up, and also released the chains which were holding the prisoners. They could have easily escaped, but they did not.

The jailer, whose responsibility it was to keep the prisoners locked up, knew that the law required him to pay the punishment in the place of any prisoner which escaped. Believing that all of the prisoners had taken the opportunity to escape, he was ready to fall on his own sword, which was considered the honorable thing to do. But Paul stopped him before he could harm himself. **“Paul shouted, ‘Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!’”** (28)

All of this had a powerful effect upon the jailer. **“The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.”** (29) What caused the fear and trembling in the heart of the jailer? Certainly it must have been the power of the earthquake which made him feel helpless. The earthquake probably caused fear in his heart as the ground underneath him shook. Plus, there must have been hopelessness on his part because there was no way that he could do his job with such an unexpected event. So the first part of his fear could well have been fear of the punishment which was to come his way for the supposed escape of the prisoners.

Then, when Paul called to him and informed him that no one had escaped, his fear and trembling must have been over how this could have happened. He must have heard something about Paul’s message before this, so there may have been fear about what his God might do to him, punishing him for what he

had done to Paul and Silas. So he fell before Paul and Silas and asked, **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”** (30)

Standing before the power and might of God does cause fear and trembling in the heart. We feel helpless and desire to do anything which we might be able to do to appease His wrath. There are times when God does allow His power and might to shine through to make us realize that we are powerless before Him. Many things drive us to our knees before Him, asking the same question which this jailer asked. When we have a pandemic that upends our lives, when we feel out of control in our personal relationships, when politics drives us crazy, whenever we feel out of control before the power of God, we realize that we need His help and blessings. So God does use His power, even in nature like this earthquake, to let us see that we cannot do things by ourselves.

But there was something wrong with the jailer’s question. He asked, **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”** (30) He thought there was something which he could do for this powerful God to save himself. Paul pointed him away from himself to what God had already done for him. **“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your household.”** (31) There was nothing that he could do but to receive from God what Jesus had already accomplished for him.

The jailer did not have to worry about doing the right things or even enough of the right things to earn God’s favor. God was offering everything to him freely because of what Jesus had come and done for him. This was the message which Paul was able to bring to him. **“Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.”** (32) The power of God’s word was effective in the jailer’s heart, for He used this message of love and forgiveness in Jesus to create faith in His heart. He and his whole household were baptized that very night after hearing this wonderful good news.

This is certainly a much greater display of God’s power than even the earthquake that happened earlier that evening. The Holy Spirit worked through the power of the gospel to work faith in the heart of the jailer, as well as that of his whole family. And that filled their hearts with such joy. **“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.”** (34)

We have also seen the power of God. On this Sunday in Epiphany, we are to see the power of God. We do not have to look only at the power of God in nature, but look into your own heart. By Word and Sacrament, the Lord has worked upon your heart as well to look to Him for your salvation rather than to anything which you might do for Him. You see the joy and blessings of coming to His house each week to feed and nourish our soul from His word. The hidden power of the gospel brings joy to our hearts, as well as the life which lasts forever. We have received this powerful gift from God in our own baptism as well. It was then that God displayed His power, and His love, in making us His holy children. We received His promise on the day of our baptism that we were adopted into His family, and He made us heirs of all of His blessings for our entire lives. That adoption as children of God never changes. We are always receiving God’s blessings won for us by our Savior through His life and death here on earth.

There are two ways that God reveals His power to us. When we see His power in nature, whether it be a tornado, ice storm, blizzard, etc., we probably sit up and take notice, but in fear and trembling before Him, because that power could be used against us. But we can also see His greater power in our baptism, where He used His power to wash away all of our sins, create faith in our hearts, and make us His holy children forever. Our Savior and all the work He came to do for us has been revealed to us in His powerful word that has created that faith in our hearts. May we marvel at this loving power of God which brings joy and eternal life to us.