In 1994 a man named Terry Mullen was talking to a friend about the West German terrorist organization known as the Baader Meinhof Gang. The next day his friend mentioned that there was an article in that day’s newspaper which referenced the gang. It seemed like quite a coincidence because the gang had not been prominent since the late 1970’s and had largely disbanded after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. From this sequence of events a term was coined known as the Baader Meinhof Phenomenon, which also sometimes goes by the name the frequency illusion. What it basically says is that when individuals become aware of something, like the Baader Meinhof Gang, they start to see it more frequently. This does not happen because the thing they are noticing suddenly begins to appear more frequently but rather because their brains are now in a place where they have the ability to see the thing that has been there all along. Whether it is a word that is learned or a particular type of car, a switch has been tripped in their brains which allows them to see something that has been there all along. What this suggests is that our brains filter out a tremendous amount of information and the most likely candidate for information that is filtered is something with which we are unfamiliar. And it is only when we become familiar with that something that our brain will start to notice those items. St Anslem of Canterbury famously said, “I believe so that I many understand.” In that statement he is acknowledging that we often have to do something before we can come to understand and in St. Anselm’s mind, the something that was necessary was belief in God. This had to first happen before he could begin to understand other things. Or in terms of my original illustration, if I don’t first know what the Baader Meinhof Gang is, I will never see anything about them because, on some subconscious level, my brain has decided that it is not worth noticing. And in our lesson from the Acts of the Apostles today we have an example of this, or a contrast of this. Not in terms of West German terrorist organizations but rather in terms of seeing God. And our story is framed by an individual who sees God’s presence and a group of individuals who do not see God’s presence.

The story starts with a slave girl, who has a spirit of divination, meaning she can tell fortunes and by so doing makes her owners a lot of money. This spirit leads her to follow Paul and Silas around repeatedly saying, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Paul, as might be typical, gets annoyed with her and in an effort to shut her up orders the spirit to come out. The spirit complies, but as a result of this the slave girl can no longer tell fortunes and is therefore no longer a money-making entity, which makes her owners very grouchy. And here is where the Baader Meinhof Phenomenon or lack of it starts to kick in. Her owners know she has a spirit of divination, but they did not hear what she says about Paul and Silas. Nor do they understand the power that must have been invoked in order to drive this spirit out of her. All they can see is that the gravy train has been shut off. They are reading the newspaper and not noticing the articles about the Baader Meinhof Gang. They do not see God’s presence. All they can see is that their divination business has gone to pot. There minds will not allow them to see what has just happened. But now let’s look at the second part of this story which takes place after the slave girl’s owners are able to get Paul and Silas thrown in prison.

Paul and Silas have been arrested for “disturbing the city.” They are then “stripped of their clothing and … beaten with rods.” And finally, the jailor puts “them in the innermost cell and fasten[s] their feet in the stocks.” While they are there an earthquake happens which results in the prisoners’ chains becoming unfastened. The jailor wakes up, sees the debacle that is unfolding and prepares to kill himself. Paul becomes aware of what is happening and shouts out and says, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." And it is at this point where the jailor begins to recognize something that the slave owners did not. He turns to Paul and Silas and asks, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" He saw what was going on and he reacted.

So here is the question for all of us: How can we be like the jailor and not like the owners of the slave girl? How do we open our mind to God in such a way so that we see God in all things? I think part of the answer lies in the contrast between these individuals. The first individuals do not see what God was doing because they could not get past their immediate desires – they had an income stream that had been cut off. Now here is the thing. Taking away the problematic part of this story, the owning and exploiting of a slave, they do have a fairly common human concern. Losing the clairvoyant powers of the slave girl is like losing a job or having your assets’ values crash in some stock market turmoil. The slave owners are like the seed sewn among the thorns in Jesus’ Parable of the Sewer. If you remember Jesus says about them that, “This is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.” The loss of their revenue stream so chokes the Gospel message that they cannot see it when it is quite literally right in front of them.

This seems to be the difference between the two – the strength of the attachment to their problems. When our mind’s are so fixed on us and our problems this is all we see. The jailer on the other hand initially only saw what was wrong. Or at least what he thought was wrong. He believed that all the prisoners had escaped. But in the moment he is about to kill himself, Paul shouts out to him and his whole view shifts. He starts seeing what it really going on. Now you could say that he is just happy that no one has escaped. And that is probably true, but he goes much beyond this. If he was simply happy that the prisoners had not escaped, he could have just thanked them and got busy locking everyone back up. But that is not what he did. He shifted so completely that he started seeing God everywhere. We read, “he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.” In the moment where he learned what had happened, he began to ask why it had happened. And in asking why it had happened he was able to see God’s miraculous power in all of this.

Years ago, I was driving south on Genesee Street with someone I worked with at Nashotah House. As we were nearing Exeter Street, he asked me where my parish was located. I pointed and said it is just up there. He looked and then turned back and said, “Huh, I had never looked up that hill.” This individual had lived in the area his whole life and yet had never lifted his gaze any higher than the internally lit sign that tells you how fast you are going. And that raises a question for us. Will we keep our gaze low? Will we keep looking at the pedestrian and mundane parts of the world or will we lift our gaze higher. Will we see what has been there all along but our brain has never bothered to expend the energy to notice? Because the fact of the matter is that God may be sitting right on top of the hill but we need to take time to look so that we may see him and be his, this day and forevermore.