

Sunday December 8th, 2019
Advent II

PRAYER: O God, in Jesus you revealed to us your spirit. Now send your spirit upon us. Too long we have judged by the sight of our eyes and decided by the hearing of our ears. Too long we have shunned wisdom and understanding. Now we pray for the descent of your spirit that we might: see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and understand with our hearts. Then we shall turn from ourselves to you and our neighbours. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: The voice crying in the wilderness calls us to prepare the way for the Lord. Among the competing sounds of society God chose to reveal his will. Amid this ever present clamour we yearn to be heard in our cries for mercy. As we offer our tithes and offerings, let us ask God for a clear mind to know the way we should go and the causes of Christ we should generously support as we seek to prepare for Christ's coming.

PASTORAL PRAYER: God of steadfastness and encouragement, you are a source of new life. When your creation moans in labour and your people cry out for compassion, you cause a sprig of hope to spring forth from a stump. You bring deliverance to the needy and justice to the oppressed. You cause your Spirit to rest on the faithful, bestowing wisdom, knowledge, and might. As a branch from the root of Jesse stands as a symbol of hope for your people, may nations respond by seeking to do your will, so that all our dwellings may reflect your glory.

Made wise by your prophets, help us to abide by your judgment. Cleansed with the water of baptism, may we not fear to confess you as our God. Not even a sparrow falls without your knowledge; may we also be mindful of your creation. You have planted in us the vision of shalom or peace, when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and none shall hurt or destroy. May we act on that dream to make peace here on earth. You send us the Christ who calls others to follow in his way; may we proclaim him the way of our lives. You assure us that you will not leave us alone; with that confidence may we become bold in our faith. When we are confronted with poverty, give us the courage to act to free those who want. When we are aware of the lonely, let us be quick to provide comfort and companionship. When others face death, may our presence bring courage and help us to fill the void. Where pain hinders movement, give us compassion to console those afflicted. As the shoot springs forth from the stump, let our actions cause it to break out in blossom that all who hear of your love may come to rejoice in new life.

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Isaiah 35:1-10 and Luke 1:67-79

Series: God's Christmas Gifts.

Part 2: "Release for the Captives."

David Naster tells a great story of a sheriff's office in Colorado that received a call about a cat that was trapped somewhere in a house. When the deputies arrived at the scene, they were greeted by a very concerned woman who described the cries of the distressed cat. She then guided the deputies to the spot where the sound of the cat's crying apparently was coming from.

The officers found a wall with no apparent openings, so they were stumped on how to get to the trapped cat. The woman said the deputies could tear into the walls and floorboards and even signed a release absolving them from responsibility for any damages. They tore into the walls but didn't find anything. They tore into the floor boards. No cat. They began tearing into other places in the house and still, no cat.

Finally, the deputies figured out where the sound of the cat was coming from: the screen saver on the family's computer featured a loud meowing cat as a reminder that the computer was still on. One of the attending deputies said, "We never even asked her if she owned a cat. We just assumed she did." (A Treasury of Humour) Assumptions are powerful things, and we all should realize how incorrect many assumptions are.

Last week's sermon was about God's Christmas gift through Jesus of "good news to the poor" and this week we examine God's second gift of "release to the captives" and "the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors". Our inspiration for this little series of sermons is found in Luke 4:18-19 where we read of Jesus describing his purpose and ministry, by attributing Isaiah's prophecy to himself.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has appointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors, and that the time of the Lord's favour has come.

Just as the deputies, who tore up that woman's home looking for a fictitious cat because of false assumptions; we too can carry false assumptions about this passage in Luke 4 that can get us to make the wrong interpretation. Perhaps, because of our own cultural conditioning, we might see this promise as referring to people incarcerated in prisons. People like Colonel Williams or Paul Bernardo. That is to say, people who have been locked up because they committed a crime.

Now, if we follow this particular assumption of what we think Jesus means, it can cause us no end of personal struggle. We can become very conflicted, because it seems Jesus wants these notorious folks released, but we might desire justice and punishment for their crimes. Every so often, the real fear is raised that some child killer like Clifford Olsen could apply for early release, and frankly this terrifies us. We worry that our justice system and parole boards are far too lenient.

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I can see why we make the assumption Jesus is referring to such prisoners. In our current society, the only real encounter we potentially have with captives is in the form of criminals, and maybe to a much lesser extent, prisoners of war. However, these are not the captives Isaiah was talking about, nor was Zechariah talking about when he said in our Gospel lesson, “we have been rescued from our enemies”. It is also not what Jesus is referring to when he applies this promise to his ministry.

In the biblical context, there are two groups of prisoners that these passages could apply to, and maybe in Jesus’ mind, both groups represent a larger, spiritual truth. Isaiah, and almost certainly Zechariah, had in mind the exile of the Israelites. Isaiah’s prophecy came at a time, when many Old Testament prophets consoled the Hebrew people who were dragged off as captives to Babylon. Isaiah’s words were meant to console and bring hope to the long-suffering exiles.

Zechariah, in prophesying about Jesus, and his own son John’s connection to Jesus, took this same theme, but applied it to the Roman occupation of Israel. The general point here being that the prisoners in question, were being politically and ethnically oppressed, and were in real danger of losing their unique identity. In both Babylon, and in the days of the Roman occupation, the Jewish people felt hopeless and perhaps that God had abandoned them.

The second type of prisoner, possibly being considered in Jesus’ words, ties in with our theme from last week; poverty. For much of human history, people who were unable to pay their debts, were sent to debtor’s prison, until they could repay what they owed. Frankly, this never made sense to me, after all how do you earn money to pay your debt when you are incarcerated. This type of imprisonment happened in Jesus’ day and even as recently as in Victorian England; a situation Charles Dickens described in his books.

It is a theme picked up again in Matthew 18, in the famous parable of the unforgiving servant, who after being forgiven a great debt himself, a debt he could never repay, throws a fellow servant into jail for failure to pay a much small debt. As we can appreciate, those who are indebted are vulnerable. They are open to oppression from the one they are indebted to. In the case of both groups of prisoners then, there is a real sense of hopelessness.

As this kind of prisoner, you are under the power of another person or group. This kind of imprisonment indicates that you are in a place where you don’t want to be. The exile could be: geographical, or it could be poverty, or one of many causes of poverty like illness or disability. In scripture, the theme of liberation from oppression is very prominent. No theme was perhaps more precious to God’s people than that of freedom.

In terms of Judaism, the great danger facing those under such oppression was that their faith and religious practices would be wiped out. The pervading culture would smother the distinctiveness of Judaism. This is the theme that is most prominent in the story of Daniel and Esther but also in almost every book of the bible. The freedom to worship God and to follow the destiny God prescribed for his people is being hindered.

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The oppression, and imprisonment, Jesus is talking about therefore, is the opposition and outright hostility to Christ's redeeming activity in promoting the Kingdom of God. I think we get the point that Jesus' promise of release to the captives certainly includes people suffering from persecution.

Yet, it also includes, I strongly believe, the pressure from secularism to remove Christian influence from society. Some of the hostility and opposition to Christian influence is very blunt and easy to see; such as our brothers and sisters in Christ who are imprisoned and killed for their faith. We also see very public demonstrations of outright hatred of Christians in activities like in the burning of churches in Indonesia.

In some countries it is outright illegal to gather for Christian worship. This is the case in countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran. We see this hostility, and we grieve, and hopefully we pray for those who suffer from it, but it's not the overt hostility that concerns me the most today, and exists in our Canadian context.

I am most concerned about the subtle ways, opposition to Christ and his people is being enacted, often without much fanfare or acknowledgement. Our faith is being downplayed and we are being encouraged by our employers, our friends, our families and certainly our materialistic society to see faith as a kind of secondary aspect to our lives. Maybe not all of us, but I am sure that some of you, like me, feel: powerless, vulnerable, hopeless and maybe even a bit fearful of what is coming next.

We are, in many ways, just as exiled as our Jewish forbearers were in Babylon. Many Christians do not feel at home in this current environment. Our sensibilities are being assaulted by TV, movies, the internet, and other media on a daily basis. We are becoming desensitized to violence and the inappropriate sexual nature of our culture. Please don't misunderstand me; I am not trying to be prudish here.

I am actually talking about spiritual erosion. The slippery slope, if you like. We are like the frogs in that famous old experiment. You know the one where a frog is placed in boiling water and it jumps right out, but a second frog is placed in comfortable room temperature water and the water temperature is increased gradually over a period of time so the frog doesn't even realize it is being boiled to death.

Perhaps, we are being slowly boiled to death, and we are not even aware of it. Can you see yourself as oppressed? Can you see how you are under the influence of others? Jesus said he was bringing release to captives and freedom to the downtrodden. Is this true and if so, how does it play out in our lives? How do we experience this freedom in a culture slowly eroding around us and trying to take us with it?

Maybe the first step is for us to begin to see what is happening; begin to feel the heat rising. To seek freedom, you first must see yourself as being in captivity. The second step maybe harder for us to deal with, and accept, but it is essential. We have to see our culture and society as hostile to the work of Christ.

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The viewpoint and moral compass we seek to live by, is rejected by society as being: out of touch, narrow minded and unfair.

When we seek to question the increasing liberalization of our society, we are called bigots or fanatics. When we seek to bring prayer into the public arena, we are accused of being offensive and insensitive. We are, increasingly, becoming exiles in our own neighbourhoods. To find our freedom we must rely on the one who grants us freedom; namely Christ Jesus. We must call on him to give us strength and discernment.

We must, stop apologizing for taking a stand, when the rest of our society seems to stand for nothing. Our freedom comes from acknowledging that God is the one in control of this world, not the social engineers. We have the freedom to not participate in the erosion going on around us. We don't have to watch when our televisions offend us. I don't have to shop on Sundays if I believe it is wrong.

No wonder Jesus said, "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your hand causes you to sin cut it off." Drastic measure, but he is saying to us all: you have the power to say "no". You have the freedom to be different than the majority. You have the freedom, with Christ's help, to make where you are, the home you believe Christ wants it to be. You have the freedom to make faith, the driving force of your life and not money or influence.

The great lie of any oppressor is to tell the people they oppress that they have no options or no choices. It is what abusers tell those they abuse. It is what slave traders told their slaves.

Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3, when faced with intense pressure to conform, we can say that no matter the consequences. we will serve only God. Maybe the most important thing Jesus liberated us from was this cultural lie. The lie that says people of faith: must conform, must comply and must shut up. We don't have to believe the lie or live like we do. At the very end of Joshua's life, he rises to address the people of Israel. He recounts all that God had done for them, including bringing them out of Egypt.

He says beginning at verse 14, "Serve the Lord alone. But if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, then choose today whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? But as for me and my family, we serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:14-15)

Who do you serve? Jesus has given us the freedom to choose. We don't have to live under oppression. We don't have to follow the gods of the majority of those around us; the gods of materialism, secularism and self-indulgence. We have a choice. We have by the grace of God the power to break free.