

Reformation B (10/28/2018)

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 46

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

Freedom is a potent word, and like any grand idea, it takes on a multiplicity of meanings. The root context of gospel freedom is the Exodus, an actual instance of political liberation. Israel's enslavement in Egypt epitomizes every form of oppression from which the truth of God's presence in Jesus intends to free us. God "breaks the cruel oppressor's rod"; God shepherds us out of captivity, through the gates of God's justice, and into the refuge of God's reign, a safe haven, especially for those who suffer persecution.

I can't think of Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," without recalling the story of his extended stay at Wartburg Castle in 1521 and 22. At the Diet of Worms, the imperial council where Luther refused to recant his gospel-centered confession over against the abuses of the church, the upstart monk was excommunicated from the church and branded an outlaw. Luther set out from Worms with all possible haste in order to evade capture and punishment. And his prince, Frederick, the Elector of Saxony, quickly devised a scheme to protect the reformer by staging an attack on his coach and ferrying him away in secret to the Wartburg. For nearly a year, Luther took refuge in the castle, assuming an alias and growing out his hair and beard as a disguise. And in spite of his disappearance from public life, Luther made good use of his time in hiding. It was at his desk in his room in the recesses of Wartburg Castle that Luther translated the New Testament from Greek to German, imparting the message of gospel freedom to a wider audience and making an important contribution to the standardization of the German language.

No wonder Luther translated the first verse of Psalm 46 the way he did in the title and first line of his famous hymn. "God is our refuge and strength," the psalmist

sings, “a very present help in trouble.” **For Luther, Wartburg Castle was quite literally a mighty fortress, a refuge from persecution at the hands of religious and political empire. Perched on a precipice high above the town of Eisenach, Luther’s safe haven symbolized God’s promised presence and help in the midst of trouble.**

This episode in the life of the reformer speaks to the biblical notion of freedom, a notion that is central to our Gospel from John today: “You will know the truth,” Jesus promises his followers, “and the truth will make you free.” Freedom is a potent word, and like any grand idea, it takes on a multiplicity of meanings. In the American context, for instance, freedom may refer to the rights that protect individual persons or communities against abuses of state power. The guarantee of voting rights regardless of race or gender is an example of this sort of freedom enshrined in the law. But, rightfully or not, freedom has also come to mean personal license, the right to live as one chooses with minimal restrictions or obligations. Freedom in this sense is highly individualistic, and the exercise of any one person’s freedom may pose a threat to another’s.¹

What does the gospel – the good news of God’s gracious rule – have to say about freedom? What does Jesus mean when he insists that the truth will make us free?

We tend to spiritualize or depoliticize biblical words like truth and freedom, sin and grace, faith and salvation. But we risk missing the very concrete implications of these words if we neglect the ways our theological convictions intersect with our lived experiences. In the case of freedom, for instance, the biblical

¹ See Richard Bauckham, “Freedom and Belonging,” Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 12, 14.

definition is grounded in the event of the Exodus.² **The root context of gospel freedom, in other words, is an actual instance of political liberation. Israel's enslavement in Egypt, a historical fact that Jesus' conversation partners in the Gospel have apparently forgotten, epitomizes every form of oppression from which the truth of God's presence in Jesus intends to free us.** "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he declares to all those gathered to hear him preach, "because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives... to let the oppressed go free...."³

For Luther and the reformers, the truth of the gospel meant freedom from the iron grip of the medieval church, an institution that was inextricable from political authority. **Luther insisted that grace was not the church's possession, a treasure to be sold to the poor. Rather, grace is a pure gift of God. And grace, like freedom, is not simply an idea, but an embodied reality. Wherever the promise of redemption is proclaimed and received, wherever the love of Christ is given and poured out for the life of the world, there is the grace of God in action; there is truth, and so there is real freedom.**

Of course, oppression continues to undermine God's gracious purpose such that real freedom remains out of reach for the poor, the captive, and the oppressed. Anywhere people are dehumanized on account of an aspect of their identity, anywhere desperation forces people to flee their homelands and seek refuge elsewhere, anywhere political or religious violence threatens the safety of individuals and communities, evil carries the day.

² See Gail R. O'Day, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 637.

³ Luke 4:18.

But, God is our refuge and strength. **It is the will of God to “break the cruel oppressor’s rod,” to borrow the language of “A Mighty Fortress.” It is the will of God to shepherd us out of captivity, through the gates of God’s justice, and into the refuge of God’s reign, a safe haven, especially for those who suffer persecution.**

Dear church, gospel freedom is a gift. It’s not something we acquire for ourselves and exercise independently of others, but a reality into which God invites us all together. As such, freedom is not a zero-sum game; your freedom does not necessarily restrict mine. Instead, by the grace of God we enable each other’s freedom,⁴ granting it generously to one another for the sake of God’s dream for the world, the dream that all people should have life, and have it abundantly.⁵

⁴ Bauckham, 17.

⁵ John 10:10.