**3rd Sunday after the Epiphany – Year C – January 27, 2013 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on Isaiah 61:1-6 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**Christ has set you free**

**I. Free from your sins**

**II. Free to serve him**

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, 3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. 4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. 5 Strangers will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards. 6 And you will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.*

“Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty I’m free at last!” This past Monday at Hope Lutheran Church in West Chicago, 36 pastors belted out the words of the African-American spiritual as we began our pastors’ conference. Appropriate, don’t you think, that on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, we sang about freedom.

Do you know where Martin Luther King Jr. got his name? Martin Luther King Jr. was born Michael Lewis King. The story goes that his father, the Rev. Michael King Sr. made a visit to East Germany in 1934. King Sr. was so inspired by the life of Martin Luther, the protestant reformer from the 1500s, that he changed his name from Michael to Martin Luther King, Sr. It was Junior who then followed his father’s footsteps and changed his name from Michael Lewis to Martin Luther King Jr.

When you ask people, “Who is Martin Luther,” many refer to the social reformer from the 1960s, not the reformer of the Christian church in Germany from the 16th century. There are differences between King Jr. and Martin Luther. One was concerned about social reform and civil freedom. The other preached spiritual reform and spiritual freedom in Christ.

While it is beneficial to pursue civil freedom for all citizens regardless of color, it is spiritual freedom in Christ that is true freedom. What truly frees us from tyranny, racism, and brings unity and peace, is not found in social reform, but in Christ Jesus. We will learn through our lesson in Isaiah 61 that Christ has set you free: free from your sins, and free to serve him.

A recent report stated that more than 80,000 people in United States prisons were in solitary confinement – many of them indefinitely. The report said that the decision to put a man in solitary confinement indefinitely is made at internal hearings that last about 20 minutes. They are closed-door affairs. No one can witness a hearing. In California, some inmates cannot have a lawyer present in the room. The inmate cannot gather or present evidence in his defense. He cannot call witnesses. Much of the evidence is confidential and thereby impossible to refute. (*The Week, 1/18/2013: The Cruelest Punishment*)

Have you ever felt as if you were in spiritual lock-down? Maybe even today? It happens to most, if not all Christians. Typically there are different prisons who keep us locked up. The first could be called “natural affliction prison.” Natural afflictions are disease, depression, sickness, pain and suffering and death. Natural afflictions do not discriminate age, gender, or skin color. My youngest sister, Sarah, is 24-years old and will soon have to undergo surgery to have a defibrillator implanted. Not too long ago we prayed for the family of a 13-year old boy from Rineyville who died of leukemia. Soldiers struggle with PTSD, not just those who deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan but those older veterans from Vietnam and Korea. All natural afflictions caused by the presence of sin in the world and in our bodies. It feels as if we are in prison, the physical prison of our own bodies and minds - and a spiritual prison, because we question God on the necessity of such sufferings.

Another prison might be called “moral afflictions prison.” Your teachers at school, your friends, your neighbors, your coworkers, even family members have different moral standards – they do not live their lives using God’s law as their standard but rather live the mantra, “Whatever you believe is true, that is truth for you. Don’t tell me otherwise.” We have to live and work and study with people in this sinful society that believe this way. It’s a struggle to live my Christian faith, to stand firm on truths of the Bible, and to live according the rules God set for me, because not too many others do. And I feel like I’m in solitary confinement. I’m the only one who lives this way. I am isolated from everybody else. It feels as if I’m in a spiritual prison –because I struggle every day to live the way God wants me to and fall so many times.

When I fall, I feel that I am chained by guilt, guilt of my past sins, guilt of the present sins and temptations that I struggle to conquer, but I cannot. My heart is tempted to go in one of two ways: I despair because I feel there is no way out of this prison; or I may be tempted to say, “It’s not worth the fight. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”

King David found himself in spiritual prison when he wrote, **“Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long? Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love.”** (Psalm 6) King David shows us the way to freedom: the LORD’s mercy and unfailing love.

The LORD shows his mercy and unfailing love in our lesson from Isaiah, **“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.”** Isaiah prophesied these words about the coming Messiah. 750 years later, Jesus sat in a synagogue in Capernaum, read those same words and said, **“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”** Wow! If someone predicted 20 years ago that 49ers and Ravens would meet in this year’s Super Bowl, and that brothers would be the head coaches of those opposing teams, you would be astounded! Even greater news, best news we could ever hear, Jesus has come. He came to proclaim freedom for you. Jesus came to release you from your prison and to set you free.

Your despair and depression, your guilt and shame, your doubt and uncertainty –Jesus allowed your sins to put him in prison on the cross. Because his Father made him guilty of your sins, the innocent one became the guilty one and received your due court sentence.

A pastor at our conference shared this story with us: when he was a new pastor in Chicago, he was driving to someone’s home. He was so intent at looking at the directions on a piece of paper, that he pulled down the road, looking for the house number, when he glanced up and saw blue lights flashing in his mirror. Puzzled, he pulled over. The police officer walked up to window and said, “I can’t believe you just did that!” “Did what?” “You turned down a road that clearly says, “Do not turn. Do not enter.” And I was right behind the whole time! I have to write you a ticket! You can pay it, or go to traffic court. If I don’t show up, the judge will dismiss it.” That pastor was guilty, wasn’t he? But he went to traffic court, the officer didn’t show up, and the judge threw the ticket out as if the pastor had never committed a traffic violation. Some years later, that same pastor was pulled over again for going 4 MPH over the speed limit. When the police officer checked his information on the computer in his squad car, he said, “I would hate to ruin your perfect driving record. I won’t issue a ticket today.” There was no record of him being pulled over. The judge had expunged his record.

This is what God has done for you. When the Heavenly Judge took his seat in the courtroom, unlike the police officer who didn’t show up, Satan did, and pointed out every sin you have ever committed. But Jesus showed up to court, too. He didn’t blame us. He took the blame, as if he committed all those sins. The judge declared to you, “You are free to go. You are innocent because this man has taken your guilt.”

Like a man sentenced to die, Jesus took all your guilt, all by himself. Because he took your guilt, he also took your punishment. He paid the hefty fine that accompanied that ticket of sin – into prison he went – into the prison of hell on the cross, the prison of suffering God’s wrath and anger, and to execution. Jesus died. The chains of the grave wrapped tight around his lifeless body. Because Jesus died, the wrath of the judge was appeased. He is no longer angry with you. The punishment of Jesus’ death was satisfactory. The judge will not punish you. He punished his Son Jesus. You are free to go.

President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free." Despite this expansive wording, the Emancipation Proclamation was limited. It applied only to states that had seceded from the Union, leaving slavery untouched in the loyal border states. It also expressly exempted parts of the Confederacy that had already come under Northern control. Most important, the freedom it promised depended upon Union military victory.

Your freedom is not dependent on anything you must do. Your freedom was won by Christ Jesus. The proof is in his victory. Jesus’ resurrection victory is proof! He burst death’s chains when he rose again, proving that the judge accepted his payment of death. Jesus freed himself from death. You are free, free at last! Free at last! You are free from the guilt of your sins. You have been freed from hell, you have been freed from your grave, you are free to rise again, free to live in glory with Jesus forever.

Even though we must wait to be freed from these bodies of sin, we will suffer here below. But we will not be slaves to despair and depression. Suffering and doubt will not define who we are. We will not be slaves to our guilt. We are free in Christ. We will not be slaves to temptation or sinning – we are free to serve Christ.

Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I’m free at last! This freedom in Christ does not mean that I can do whatever I want to do. Just because the judge threw out your traffic ticket, doesn’t mean, “Sweet, now I can make illegal left turns into one way streets anytime I want.” This freedom in Christ motivates us to be more diligent when we drive down the street, not to make illegal left turns. Our freedom from sin means freedom to serve him who set us free from sin. We serve not out of obligation, but thankfulness.

In our lesson, Isaiah was writing a letter that would be read by Jews who would be returning home to Jerusalem after spending 70years in exile. The Jews had become prisoners of the nation of Babylon because they had continued to disobey God’s law. God had disciplined them, they had repented, God had forgiven them, and they came home rejoicing, eager to serve the LORD once again. They rebuilt the temple so they could worship God, and more importantly, so the LORD could come to them through his Word. All the people used whatever gifts they had to make this happen.

But Isaiah saw something unusual. He saw strangers working the fields, foreigners shepherding the flocks in Israel. He saw Gentiles, non-Jews, as priests. In the Old Testament God had set aside only Jews from the tribe of Levi to serve as priests. Isaiah saw Gentiles serving as priests, using their gifts and talents, the treasures and abilities to serve the LORD in their new freedom.

The prophet Isaiah was looking ahead to today, Faith Lutheran Church in Radcliff. He saw a congregation full of Gentiles, non-Jews, serving as priests. You, set free in Christ, have been set free to serve as priests for Christ. A priest proclaims the word of God. You will bring others to this place so that they might hear this message of spiritual freedom in Christ. A priest prays for the people. You will pray for the people of this congregation. You will pray that more people may be brought to hear freedom in Christ. A priest brings offerings to the LORD. You will bring the best of your sacrifices - your talents and skills, your treasures and time – offerings that are used to bring this message of freedom to more and more people...

…so that they can join us in singing, “Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty I’m free at last!” Amen.