

Jesus Has Set You Free

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. ¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. ¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

On Friday Americans celebrated their independence from Great Britain. When the founding fathers of this nation drew up the Declaration of Independence 232 years ago, they listed reasons why the 13 United States of America ought to be a free and autonomous nation. “Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive... it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.” The people of America felt that the King of Britain had exercised a rule of tyranny over America, imposing taxes without consent, establishing standing armies in times of peace, cutting off trade, depriving citizens the benefit of trial by jury. The people of America wanted freedom.

In his book *The Story of American Freedom*, Eric Foner makes the observation that the citizens of early America had a contradictory view of freedom. The United States had a vision of their new nation as an asylum for freedom in a world overrun by oppression. Yet the United States, a nation conceived in liberty, harbored a rapidly growing slave population, disproving the founders' confident affirmation of freedom as a universal human birthright.

In Scripture the Holy Spirit reveals to us the rights that all humans have by birth. There are none. Scripture clearly states that since Adam and Eve’s fall into sin, all babies are infected with a sinful condition (Ps 51:5; John 3:6). This sinful nature makes all human beings enemies of God (Rom 8:6,7). This total corruption of sin earns all humans death (Rom 5:12). According to Scripture freedom is not an inherent human right. In fact, Scripture speaks about our slavery to sin, death and the devil (Rom 6).

In our lesson from St. Luke, Jesus speaks about freedom from slavery. In chapter 4 St. Luke records a story about Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth. This account takes place at the beginning of Jesus’ three year earthly ministry. Luke tells us that Jesus had a habit of regular worship attendance. On this particular Sabbath day, the Jewish day of rest, he entered his home church and stood up to read the day’s scripture lesson. The synagogue attendant handed Jesus a scroll of Isaiah. The Teacher unraveled the scroll to chapter 61. In those verses the prophet Isaiah predicted freedom for Jewish captives. 150 years after Isaiah lived, the army of Babylon would march the Israelites nearly 1000 miles away from their home. They would sit in exile for 70 years. But they had the promise from the LORD’s prophet that they would be set free and go home.

Isaiah’s prophecy had two fulfillments. Not only did he give his people hope of freedom from captivity, but more importantly, he caused them to look forward to the promised Messiah who would bring them spiritual freedom from their spiritual captivity.

Imagine that you are one of those Jews from Nazareth, sitting in the synagogue, listening to the words of the prophet. And after Jesus is done reading the lesson he looks up at the congregation and says, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” It would take a few minutes for it to sink in. Then you think, “Yes,

Jesus has preached good news. I saw him give recovery of sight to the blind. He has released the oppressed.” Then you would have fallen out of your chair. This is a 700 year old prophecy fulfilled today! This is way cool!”

The evidence was obvious. Jesus restored vision to blind eyes, but more importantly, he gave sight to the spiritually blind; those wandering around in the darkness of unbelief. He revealed himself as the Light of the world. He proclaimed good news to the poor; the good news was that they were rich beyond their wildest dreams. The inheritance of heaven was theirs by faith in him! Jesus released the oppressed. Many who suffered from physical ailments and demon possession were healed, but more importantly those suffering from the shame of their sins were set free from their guilt through the message of repentance and forgiveness. Jesus proclaimed freedom for the prisoners. Not a freedom for the Jews from the tyranny of Roman rule, but liberty from the slavery of sin and the prison of hell.

Stanley Willner knows what it is like to be a prisoner. Stanley was a duty officer on the SS Sawokla when it was torpedoed in the Indian Ocean on November 29, 1942. Willner and his fellow mariners spent 3 months on a German ship before being turned over to the Japanese in Singapore. After being held in Singapore for a few months, the American mariners were sent to one of the most notorious prisoner-of-war camps run by the Japanese. For three years, they were starved and worked as slaves building the infamous Burma railroad project which included the Bridge over the River Kwai. Willner began to keep a small notebook in which he and other POWs recorded their experiences. He is certain that if the Japanese had found it, they would have killed him on the spot. The writing helped him deal with what was a horrific confinement. "They literally starved us. I wasn't a big guy to begin with, but by the end of the war I had gone from weighing 135 pounds to just 75 pounds."

Maybe you feel like a prisoner. Because you are so busy, you feel enslaved by your job, family, home and possessions, even your church, all of them demanding time and energy. As a Christian there are times when you feel like a prisoner. You are held captive by your own sinful habits. We heard in St. Luke's Gospel that Jesus made it a regular habit to attend public worship. Maybe you have not made worship a regular habit, and it bothers you. Satan knows this. He knows which sins you are most susceptible to. He places those temptations before you constantly. Everyday you fight that battle. Some days you win. Other days you fall. And once you have fallen it is so easy for you to continue to fall. You miss church one Sunday, and then the next, pretty soon you've missed several week. Maybe it's lying. You tell one lie and you feel bad about it. But then you tell another one, and pretty soon it's natural. Or maybe it's greed, love of your possessions, gossip, hatred, anger and pride. And you feel that you are held captive by your sins. You feel like a prisoner of Satan. And there's no escape. The guilt over those sins enslaves you. You commiserate with the apostle Paul when he describes his struggle in Romans 7, **"I have the desire to do good, but I can't do it. The evil I don't want to do, I keep on doing. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"** Who will set you free from temptation, from the prison of your guilt, from the burden of your sins?

In a 1991 interview, Alan Zimm, a native of Poland, describes his liberation from Bergen-Belsen, a concentration camp in northwestern Germany.

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/media/oi.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005131&MediaId=1090>

Exactly at nine o'clock the gate of the camp opened up and a jeep with four military police, the English dressed up in the white belts and the white gloves and the red hats. They sit in the front of the jeep, four of them with machine guns. And a truck with loudspeakers behind them, and he said, "My dear friends..." in every language. In German, in Polish, in Yiddish, you name it. "From now on you are free. You are liberated by the Allied forces. And the Germans have nothing to do to you anymore. You are free people." Everybody was crying. It was such an emotional experience. It's hard to describe it. The people were jumping and hugging and kissing. And everybody was running to the jeep. They went down and they lifted

up the MPs on their shoulders and carried them all the way around the block. And still people did not believe. There were a lot of people still afraid.

Your Lord Jesus says to you, “My dear friends, from now on you are free. For I have come to proclaim freedom for the prisoners. I have come to release the oppressed.” Jesus can make this claim because he won your freedom. The Son of God came down from heaven to earth to wage war against the Axis of Evil. He engaged in a face-to-face battle against Satan. He willingly allowed the ancient serpent to tempt him with every kind of sin, the same temptations you and I face everyday; greed, pride, the love of possessions, gossip and lying. Your Savior never fell. The Son of God confronted your sin head-on. He freely took the guilt and shame of your sins on himself and allowed your sins to take their consequence out on him. He allowed the torments of hell to imprison him on the cross. He allowed death to swallow him up, but not forever. Before he rose from death, Jesus descended into hell to proclaim his victory over Satan and his kingdom. To declare his victory over death, he raised his lifeless corpse, which had lay in a tomb for three days, and physically came out of his grave.

The good news that Jesus proclaims to you today is that his victory is your victory. His victory became yours through your baptism. Through washing with water and the Word you have been given the freedom Jesus won over Satan, sin and death. When the Tempter comes around and whispers in your ear tell him, “Go away. I am not your slave.” When you feel oppressed by your sins of habit, let the good news of Jesus’ victory release you from your guilt. When you face death’s icy grip, Jesus’ victory will assure you that you have been released from death’s dungeon. You have been given a home in heaven. Let that good news release you from your fear of death. You are free people of God.

Some of those prisoners who were liberated from Bergen-Belsen were so excited for their freedom they jumped and sang and danced. As Lutherans we probably won’t do that here today since we’re so reserved and stoic. But there are ways we can show our appreciation to our Savior for winning our liberty. We will reject the evil that Satan parades before us and cling to the good that God would have us do. We will make worship a regular habit, just like Jesus did. We will get rid of our hate and anger, our gossip, lies and sins of pride. Instead we will forgive, speak the truth in love and build each other up. When we fall again and again, we will return to our Savior in repentance and seek his forgiveness and ask for him to empower us to live for him.

Like the MPs who were carried off on the people’s shoulders we will lift Jesus up and carry him around the block and share him with those who are oppressed by their sins, who have no hope of heaven, who are blind in unbelief, who feel like they are spiritual prisoners in Satan’s death camp. We will tell them that Jesus has set them free.

This week we celebrate independence. We take time to thank those who fought for our freedom, for those who continue to do so. We pray that our Sovereign Lord God and Savior will keep our country free from tyranny, that he would continue to grant us the freedom to worship him without fear of harassment. Today and everyday thank your Savior who fought for your independence, and won for you a place in heaven, the land of the free, where you will no longer be harassed by your spiritual enemies. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for setting me free. Amen.