

Advent Midweek #3 ~ 2024

The Incarnation and its Divine Ripples ~ Slavery or Freedom

Romans 6:15-23

John 8:31-43

Slavery is a toxic word in America. The stain of our history continues to inflame passions, inspire embarrassment, and create rifts between people who would otherwise be inclined to unity. Man enslaving man is despicable. Man enslaving man is a repeated theme in human history, sweeping every imaginable people group into both sides of the unhappy equation. Slavery is brutish. Slavery is confining. Slavers have no moral authority. Slavers are unjust and they answer, seemingly, to no one.

How many of y'all believe that you are autonomous, a free and unconfined being? St. Paul didn't feel that way. He lamented that he was sold as a slave to sin (Romans 7:14). A son of Adam, St. Paul's sinful nature was brutish, confining, and seemingly inescapable. His pen cried out in anguish: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24).

Our theme for this Advent season has been *The Incarnation and its Divine Ripples*. Like heaving a great stone into still water, the Incarnation of the Son of God has produced ripples that extend to the very borders of human experience. God becoming man has touched every part of your soul. The conception, nativity, life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Son of God has created shockwaves that have reworked what it is to be man – male or female. Freedom or slavery – can you picture the contrast? Freedom or slavery – do you have a preference?

The elders and I are reading a book titled Just Words. It's a clever title and an admirable book that focuses on specific words in Scripture that explore how the Gospel is communicated. The author speaks about metaphors as the vehicle for us to understand what God has done in Christ. Metaphor, you'll recall, is defined as a linguistic tool that makes a comparison, using a familiar idea and applying that idea to something else in order to make that something else more vivid. Trevor is a couch potato. That's a metaphor. Cecilia is drowning in work. Jackie has a heart of gold. I like the book well enough but I'm beginning to ask myself one question – where does the metaphor end and reality begin? Slavery or freedom – do you think that it's a metaphor for understanding what Christ has done? Slavery or freedom – do you believe that it's not a metaphor, rather that it is a profoundly true spiritual reality, so true in fact that other encounters with slavery vs. freedom are based on this one transcendent reality?

Jesus said that He has come to set us free. Do you believe it? Some of His opponents were diametrically opposed to that idea. "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" (John 8:33). Jesus had an answer for that. It is radically simple, the Lord's answer; debate it if you can. "Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin'" (John 8:34). Full stop; no need for embellishing that statement; no need for in-depth exegetical analysis. Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Is it a metaphor or is it real, plain-on-its-face real in a defining sort of way? Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. That sounds like a pretty inclusive statement to me. Is it you? I know that it's me, but is it you? Adam sinned and he became a slave to a brutish,

cruel, merciless taskmaster. Adam spawned a race that was enslaved to Satan and Christ came to set us free. You are a son of Adam, a daughter of Eve. Your experience in this world has corroborated this truism – everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

It was not for a minor infraction that God became man. It was not to put a band-aid on man's somewhat scrubby nature that the Son of God leaped off His royal throne to be born of woman, born under the law, born in our poor flesh and took up the form of a servant. This monumental movement was made to rectify a catastrophic malady. "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). That too sounds like a pretty defining statement. Free from sin (lust, greed, pride, hate, deceit, gluttony). Sin would have to be mastered... by someone. Satan; he would not let loose His grip on humanity without being forced. Someone would have to master Satan. Death; death is brutish. A coffin is pretty confining. Someone would have to master death. Can you conquer those things? Can the runway glam model on the world's catwalk break sin's dread oppression? Can the banker, the lawyer, or the cop stand up to Satan and force him to loosen his grip around humanity's neck? The latest podcaster, the TV talking head, the ascendant politician – who's going to save you from death?

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, the Lord Christ came into this realm to bring freedom to your soul. Your soul! In a marvelous reversal, the Messiah, the one truly free man, sets you free by being confined. Sin confined Him. On the cross the Lord Christ bore sin in all of its terror and He determined not to flee, but absorb it, take it. Satan unleashed his attack. This is your hour and the power of darkness (Luke 22:53). After our Lord triumphed over Satan in the desert, St. Luke tells us this: "And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). That opportune time was our Lord's arrest, His trial, and His passion. Satan unleashed his fury and Jesus allowed the devil to do his worst. If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. That is Christmas. The Incarnation and its Divine Ripples invades this world in every quarter, bringing freedom wherever God's Word is preached in its truth and purity and His sacraments are administered according to His command. That is His will, His ministry, His freedom in action.

Do you recall Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah? Their names were changed to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, likely in homage to the gods of the Babylonians. Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah wouldn't engage in the Babylonian idolatry because they were free, free in the fullest sense of the word. So Nebuchadnezzar threatened to throw them into a blazing hot furnace. Nebuchadnezzar threatened three believers with death unless they bent the knee to a false god, a god of slavery. Listen to the words of freedom pulsate out of their response: "...our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Daniel 3:17-18). That is the sound of freedom. The sound of freedom is heard from your mouth when you confess your sins, when you profess the faith in the words of the Nicene Creed, and when you sing the Agnus Dei.

Jesus is the Lamb of God and He has set you free. That freedom makes you bold, confident, humble, strong, gracious, and forgiving. If God has set you free, no one, and nothing, can enslave you. Sin, death and Satan were forced to answer to Christ. By His death and resurrection He defeated them and you are free. Christmas makes you free indeed.