

"Set Free"

Isaiah 40:21-31 & Mark 1:29-39

February 5, 2006

There are times when I am searching for a sermon illustration to help bring a little life to a point that I would like to make and I run across something that does not fit but that I enjoy enough that I have to share it even if it does not make the point I was looking for.

A father took his small son with him to town one day to run some errands. When lunchtime arrived, the two of them went to a familiar diner for a sandwich. The father sat down on one of the stools at the counter and lifted the boy up to the seat beside him. They ordered lunch, and when the waiter brought the food, the father said, "Son, we'll just have a silent prayer." Dad got through praying first and waited for the boy to finish his prayer, but he just sat with his head bowed for an unusually long time. When he finally looked up, his father asked him, "What in the world were you praying about all that time?" With the innocence and honesty of a child, he replied, "How do I know? It was a silent prayer."

Jesus is at it again in our Gospel text. He is setting people free. In Mark's telling of the story of Jesus everything happens quickly. Immediately after His baptism, Jesus is driven out into the wilderness to be tempted and having defeated the tempter, Jesus immediately goes to work as though there is no time to lose. He calls disciples and then begins to heal, beginning with the demons he cast out of the man in last week's Gospel text. Today's text follows immediately on the heels of last week's lesson. It is the Sabbath and the people were so amazed at the authority of Jesus over demons that they didn't even mention that it was against the law to heal on the Sabbath. Now, Jesus steps out of the synagogue and turns right, walks a short block to the home of Peter's mother-in-law. She has a fever and Jesus acts without hesitation to set her free. The people are again amazed at what Jesus does but they know the law and they wait for the sun to set and the Sabbath to be over before they come with their sick for Jesus to heal and cast out demons. The introduction to the text on your "Celebrate" scripture page tells us that the people expected a messiah to set them free from oppression. And everywhere Jesus went, it was happening. It says: "Disease, devils and death are running for their lives. The forces that diminish human life are rendered powerless by Jesus."

It is amazing stuff - no wonder the people were amazed and flock to see Jesus - no wonder they want Him to stick around and go searching for Him when He has gone off to find a quiet place to pray. I suspect that the same thing is true of us. Along the way in our history there are those who have experienced the presence of God in such a way that they have found new life and a new freedom in that life so that they have sought Him out and continually walked with Him. When you are basking in the joy of having seen or personally experienced the power of God to set someone free it is easy to understand why

you would be diligent about searching for Jesus and wanting to keep Him around. When you are Peter and are being served by your mother-in-law just moments after she has been healed of her fever - or you are related to one of the many who were healed or set free of a demon it is understand why you would do anything to follow Jesus.

But there are other times - times when our experience of life is very different - times when we are enslaved to disease or demons - times when it seems as though we have lost so much in life that it is hard to even look up, let alone believe in the power of God to set us free.

Our first scripture reading today is familiar. Many of you perhaps love the image at the end of the text that pictures us being lifted on wings like eagles and having strength restored to the weak. But, perhaps the context is less familiar. These beautiful words are written to God's people at a time when they have lost everything. Their homes had been destroyed in war. Many had died and those who remained had been carried off to a foreign land to be placed into slavery. * * * * * At our Wednesday morning text study [to which you are all invited], someone tried to help us imagine what that might be like. What if our country was ravaged by war, our homes and cities destroyed and we were separated from family and friends and taken to a foreign land where we live as slaves. Imagine how we might feel after years of such an existence after having lived in the prosperity and freedom that we now have experienced. Would we be equally as excited about following God and believing that he has the power to set us free? I can imagine that it would be very hard to remain hopeful, optimistic, faithful to God. * * * * * Into this very situation the prophet Isaiah comes to remind the people of who God is and what God does. 'Don't you remember - have you forgotten - haven't you even heard God is an everlasting God who has created all of the earth and stretched out the heavens. Don't give up hope! God will set you free and lift you up on eagles wings!'

It is one thing to believe and search after Jesus when you are experiencing the joy of His life giving power. It is another thing altogether when it seem impossible to see anything by slavery. And in fact there are so many that live enslaved and see no hope - no future. We may not experience the destructive power of war and exile as slaves but many experience similar losses in their lives. We grow older and strength fades, possessions have to be parted with, family members die and it seems as though there is no hope for the future. People get trapped in negative patterns of living, poverty, or sickness and it seems as though there is no way out - no hope. - - - But we hear the promise Don't you remember — have you not heard? The Lord is an everlasting God who gives power to the faint. He is a creator God who understands His creation and knows that even youth grow weary. And there, even in the most desperate moments God implores us to wait for Him - wait and see how He will renew our strength and lift us up out of our slavery on mighty wings like those of eagles.

Do you remember? Have you not heard? Have you not seen the power of God to heal and set free? Jesus could not wait to get on with the business that He believed was what He was supposed to be doing. He knew that He could not just settle in at Capernaum - there were people all over that needed to be set free. Early in the morning, Jesus is on His way,

connecting Himself to the power and will of God and then going on to neighboring towns with good news and freedom.

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