

Free at Last (Luke 4: 14-21)
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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/free-at-last

I once heard a preaching professor say the best stories for use in a sermon are not those you find, but those that find you. Such a “story” once found us. In a “time long ago”, we found ourselves in a service with our pastor baptizing a man who forgot to share what came to be a pretty important piece of information: he was afraid of water. Suffice it to say, it was an uncomfortable moment for this man, our pastor, and the congregation. Two sisters were to sing a duet which immediately followed the baptism. Our organist segued from music for the baptism to the first notes of their special music, and without any introduction they began to sing...; (pause)... “When I think I’m going under, part the waters Lord”. Disconcerting as the moment was for all, there is a parable in that story if we will carefully consider a question.

When’s the last time you felt you were about... to go under”? Maybe last year or last month? Perhaps last week? Could it have been yesterday? Might it be this morning? Listen to me. Everybody’s been there. Everyone’s faced that.

- Grieving the loss of a loved one will do that to you. I know about that... so do you.
- Unresolved anger will put you there. I’ve experienced that... so have you. And, most of all,
- Sin leaves every one of us there... knowing what it means to think we’re “going under”, imprisoned by acts we’ve committed or attitudes we’ve condoned.

So, it’s no surprise when Jesus began His ministry, He had something to say to people about to “go under”, whether they were aware of it or not... whether they knew it or not. Reading from Luke’s Gospel, chapter four, verses fourteen through twenty-one we hear that... ¹⁴ Jesus [had] returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and [as such] news about Him [had] spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He was teaching 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. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and 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 proclaim 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 He BEGAN by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’”

Did you hear the last verse? “²¹ He BEGAN by saying to them ...” Question: Why begin here? Apart from the reason for His coming, Jesus knew people would remain...

- Imprisoned by grief without any hope.
- Locked up by anger unable to cope.
- Sentenced by sin’s unbreakable yoke.

Listen, freedom never comes to people who “JUST THINK they might be going under...”. Freedom comes to those who “KNOW THEY ALREADY HAVE”, and here’s the reason why.... Why would anybody cry out for deliverance... unless... until they know they’re captive?

Jesus finds no difference between “they” who lived then, and “we” who live now. The Bible says Jesus came proclaiming the good news... not just to them, but to us as well; and, since He came to proclaim good news, we must believe what He proclaimed to be set free. Two thoughts we see this morning in Luke chapter four, both of which are found in verse 18, that we receive when we believe the Good News about Jesus. When we believe what Jesus proclaimed...

The Good News about Jesus releases us from something that oppresses us.¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and...^b to release the oppressed...’ Luke 4:1 says “Jesus, full of the Spirit”, went into the desert and there was tempted.” Afterwards, verse 14 says He, “returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit”. And now, in verse 18 Jesus acknowledged the Spirit’s fullness and power by saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me”. Similar statements all, with this important nuance. That word “because” introduces the reason for Jesus’ birth, life, death...; and resurrection. ¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and...^b to release the oppressed...’

It’s been an interesting year, plus several months, hasn’t it? Our world has been devastated by a pandemic unmatched in our lifetime by its reach, one unrivaled in its impact (pause). Our country has been demoralized by years of buried racial tension left unaddressed... (pause)... Our divisions remain deep, seemingly irreconcilable because they seem unrepairable. Substantial problems resist reduction to a single word, but perhaps here’s one that might fit: oppression. People who feel oppressed feel overwhelmed. People who feel overwhelmed feel overcome. And the reason why oppressed, overwhelmed people find themselves overcome is they’re... overpowered. Overpowered by circumstances they’ve faced; by choices they’ve made; overpowered by human nature prone to sin. It matters not who were are... to be human is to know what it means to be oppressed, overwhelmed, overcome, and overpowered; whether by problems like a pandemic, the riddle of racism... the difficulty of division, or more personal predicaments of our own making. Here’s, however Good News for us today. Jesus proclaimed freedom for the prisoners; so that through Him we might be released from oppression.

I love how the Bible describes the church at our best. “God sets the lonely in families... He leads out the prisoners with singing...” The word of the Lord, Psalm 68:6. What a wonderful picture of the church. Isolated by the loneliness of sin’s oppression; joined together by our faith in Christ who release the prisoners so we collectively praise Him knowing He has led us out.

Here at the beginning of His ministry Jesus found people just as He does still today. There is no “we” or “they”; “them” or “us”; those “then” versus those “now”. Jesus came to proclaim the good news [to all]. When we believe what Jesus proclaimed, we are released from something that oppresses us. This is the first thought we find in the latter part of verse 18. The second we find in the first part of verse 18.

When we believe what Jesus proclaimed the Good News about Jesus recovers something within us that we had lost. ¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor... recovery of sight for the blind...’

Years ago, in the early 1960's, my father-in-law worked multiple jobs to pay off the cost of two eye surgeries Ila underwent when she was six and seven years old. The result was successful, but she's been legally blind in the one eye ever since. That's one kind of blindness...; I found another the week before Easter as I prepared to pay for some groceries. The woman just in front of me said to the cashier, "Have a happy Easter". Well, that my attention, but less so than the response that followed. "Easter's just another day on the calendar for me".

People learn to live with some kinds of blindness. Indeed, such suffering has been known to produce a depth of character that blesses the world. Maybe Fanny Crosby would have written hymns like Blessed Assurance, To God Be the Glory, and Rescue the Perishing anyway..., but I think not. In her physical blindness she saw spiritual truths many never see. There remains, however, an unseen spiritual blindness that is deadly to the soul. Jesus knew that then. Jesus knows it today. So, whenever a person puts his or her faith in Him and commits her or his life to follow Him, there you will find a person recovering from his or her spiritual blindness..., and listen...for blind people with recovering sight... what words to believe; what sights to behold! As the old hymn sang... "Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life; Let me more of their beauty see, wonderful words of life..."

Born in 1954, I grew up here at FBC... carried into the nursery, learned of God's love at an early age sitting on Grandma Nichols lap...; this was my church home until I left for college in 1972. While growing up, I often witnessed, from the pew as a child; later from the choir as a teenager, a family with 10 kids that would arrive sometime after the service began... a good family, some of whom were friends of mine near my age. They would come down about midway and sit on the left. Years later I was at lunch with Tom Nelson, FBC's Pastor in the late 50's..., early 60's. Now a pastor myself, I asked if Tom remembered that family. He did. And he told me this story. He said one Sunday after the service had ended, the mother was the last to leave. She stopped and said, "Pastor, I'm so sorry we're so often late, but with all these kids it just takes a while to get everybody ready and drive downtown". I asked Tom..., "What did you say". Tom's sense of timing was, well, he paused a moment, smiled and replied, "I took her by the hand and said, 'Geneva, I'm surprised you make it at all'". And that's the point of the story from Luke's Gospel that finds us today..., isn't it? Imprisoned as you and I were, and as blind as we'd become, that we made it at all, but make it we do because of this good news.

- Jesus knew we were imprisoned by sin;
- Jesus knew we were blind and couldn't see.

So from the very beginning – not as some after thought that came later – but from the very start, He proclaimed; ¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim 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' ...[and so] ²¹ He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'"

May the Good News of this story that finds each of us be fulfilled in all of us... to put our faith in Him and believe...

- Good News Jesus spoke to His listeners then;
- Good News He still speaks to His hearers today.