

What Jesus Brings: Freedom

Last week I began this series for Advent, leading us up to Christmas. Christmas, of course, Celebrates the birth of Christ, our Savior. But just what is it that is so valuable that He brings with His entry into our world? What can a baby born in a stable have for us, or for anyone for that matter?

What He brings is more than we can comprehend, actually ... not just in the astounding fact of His divine nature in human form, and in such humble origins. He brought us – not just as a babe but as a man, who was also the Lord – [Jesus] brings us the things we most need and may even desire without fully understanding. One of those things, an echo that resounds or whispers in the human heart, is freedom.

Stirring Acts

As a man, preaching from town to town, Jesus was known as a rabbi and teacher. Jesus went about the country healing those with infirmities, feeding the 5,000, and proclaiming God's forgiveness for sin. ... *and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick, John 6:2.*

Now it is no accident that hospitals are a Christian development. It is no accident that feeding the hungry and advocating for the poor have been a part of Christian ministry since earliest times. Jesus' words and actions are the inspiration. But there is more to it ... something we easily overlook in these vital ministries.

God's purpose is not simply to fill hungry bellies, or mend broken limbs. God's purpose is to reconcile all people to Himself, - as I spoke of last week. Jesus speaks of His healing and feeding as "signs" because they point to God's original purpose for us – to be whole and in full communion with Him. It's a restored relationship encompassed in Jesus' words: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.... Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment than these,* Mark 12:30-31. This is why Jesus was sent to us and, by the way, why Jesus is sending us. Now what does any of this have to do with freedom? Let me try to explain:

Divine Freedom

All of human history is touched with the echo of voices that speak of justice, spirituality, beauty, relationships, and freedom. Voices that all humans, in virtually all cultures, listen for and know, but are puzzled by.¹ It is no accident that the Bible – Old and New Testaments – is filled with the theme of freedom.

Israel's foundational story is their liberation from bondage. God called Moses: *Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment,* Exodus 6:6. That defining event became the sign of God's desire for His people to be free – from physical and spiritual bondage.

Jesus' healings were a replay of that release to freedom. And a woman was there who had been crippled for eighteen years ... *When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity,'* Luke 13:11-12.

Have you ever been in bondage to your infirmity? Naturally we think more about what we can't do, than what we can do. Have you ever been in bondage to guilt? It's a spiritual bondage, really. It arises from our greatest infirmity - our fallen state of sinfulness. Our Lord says to us, *Come to me, all you who are struggling and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest,* Matt. 11:28. He frees us from the burdens of our past. Jesus explained His calling and ministry with the stirring words of Isaiah 61. *The Spirit of the Lord is on me ... He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed,* Isaiah 61:1. Freedom for prisoners oppressed by the stifling effects of spiritual infirmity that results from a disconnect from our Creator. Spiritual bondage isn't necessarily the cause of all your problems (we all make some of our own). I'm just saying that spiritual bondage can keep us down and out. Look, during the Korean War the North Koreans soon discovered that captured American soldiers who had a strong Christian faith could not be brainwashed like others. They were too spiritually strong to be broken by severe physical privation and torture. Outside they were in hellish bondage, but inside they were free. Christians held in communist prisons and gulags testify to the same.

Okay, our church feeds the hungry, cares for those in need, and many of you do your part in the community. These works of charity and mercy are very good, ... yet still partial. Lasting transformation in someone's life flows from the freedom from sin Jesus brings. Set free from our sins we can see others as God sees them and act toward them as God would. This means a helping hand, plus a helping word on how Jesus frees us from the burdens of sin and the past. *So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,* John 8 :36.

Set Free to Join Jesus

Here's a sobering thought: the freedom Jesus brings is actually counter-cultural and that's why many people hesitate to follow Him, or just downright resist having anything to do with Him. Our culture has become dominated by the notion of the completely autonomous self – that's what is considered freedom. People define their own truth, their own sex, or whatever – the autonomous self.

Of course, if you believe humans are simply the product of the primordial, chemical, biological soup, which gave rise to millions of random mutations and the evolutionary process that resulted ... well then, sure humans can define themselves, define (or categorize) others, even define the meaning or non-meaning of life.

On the other hand, if you believe that we have been created by an all-loving God, granted life as His gift, then the freedom found in Jesus will make sense. What Jesus brings is the true truth that real freedom, and genuine meaning in life, is found in what you can do for others, not what you do for yourself. That's contrary to human instincts – certainly contrary the contemporary, narcissistic culture. But that's how God is and what God purposes for the universe. In a life lived for and with Jesus one can find freedom from all flaws, desires, impulses, strivings, and burdens of exalting the self (you'll always run up against another self who is more exalted). Instead, you realize genuine freedom and joy found in serving God's purposes. And the greatest purpose is showing others, helping others discover the freedom from sin that we know in Christ, because that's the foundation of real and lasting freedom.

Getting Started

***'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men'* Matt. 4:19. Somewhere in my past I heard the story about a man who was a phenomenal fisherman. (Maybe you'll find this amusing, or maybe you won't). He was so good that his fame spread far and wide. When everyone else was catching two or three fish a day he would come back with two or three hundred. Eventually the local game warden decided to investigate because it just sounded too good to be true.**

On a certain day, the game warden showed up at the man's door, identified himself, and asked to go fishing with him. The man was agreeable to that and off they went to the lake. When they got into the boat, immediately the warden noticed that something didn't seem right. The man didn't have any fishing poles or bait. He didn't even have a tackle box. All he had was a small duffel bag.

So off they went, chatting about this and that until the man maneuvered the boat to the middle of the lake. Without a word, he turned off the motor, reached into the duffel bag and pulled out what looked like a stick of dynamite. Before the warden could say anything, he lit it and threw it into the water. It exploded with a mighty roar and stunned fish by the dozens floated to the surface. The man calmly started his boat and began gathering the fish in his net.

The warden said, "Now see here. This is highly illegal." But the man just laughed and steered the boat to another part of the lake. He did the same thing with a second stick of dynamite and sure enough more fish floated to the surface.

By this time the warden had seen enough. He said, “Mister, you’ve broken so many laws I can’t even begin to count them.” The man just laughed and pulled out another stick of dynamite. The warden kept on talking. “This is illegal possession of dynamite, illegal detonation of dangerous material, illegal taking of fish, disturbing the peace and about a half-dozen other misdemeanors and felonies.” While the warden was talking, the man calmly lit the stick of dynamite and handed it to the game warden. As he did, he asked him the question fishermen always ask, “Are you going to talk or are you going to fish?”

Isn’t that really our problem when it comes to serving with Jesus? too much talking, not enough fishing. We act as if Jesus said, “Follow me and we’ll talk about fishing for men.” Maybe we read books and watch videotapes and listen to sermons (like this one!), and learn all about the loud-mouth speckle-bellied atheist and which bait works with the salt-water Pharisee. But we’re afraid to actually get started. We’re afraid because we don’t have an entire program prepared for someone in need, or we don’t know the entire Bible, or have all answers to all their questions. So here’s a way to start:

Last week I mentioned Rev. Foley Beach, Archbishop of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA). Here’s what he says about a Christian approach to people all around us: “Pour out your heart in prayer for them and the Lord will bring you to see them as he does.” So, the first step is to pray for people you know who do not know Jesus. Pray for someone until you see them as Jesus does.

Next ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to build relationships. That’s all. Just make friends with people. It doesn’t start with praying for someone to receive Christ. That’s the end. And it doesn’t start with inviting someone to church. That’s the middle. Focus on those people God has already placed in your life, and then do whatever it takes to build quality relationships. Friendship for friendship’s sake.

You don’t invite someone over for ice cream or dinner, you don’t engage a neighbor in conversation, so that you can hit them with the Four Spiritual Laws, or some religious pitch. No, you invite them because you want to see them as Jesus sees them, and let Jesus flow through you. *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,* Eph. 3:16. Build the relationship and let Jesus guide you.

Delivering the Gift

Christmas ... yes Christmas means many things to many people. To us it means that Jesus brought (and still brings) heaven to overlap earth. He brings us freedom from the sin and darkness we know of life so that we live in heavenly goodness, justice, forgiveness, and peace. He is the gift of freedom and hope at Christmas and ours is to share that gift. Even on the darkest days, we can see

light in people and the world around us, and His light that leads us to follow Him. He was sent for us and He sends us to bring light into this world.

What a powerful grace it is to be loved by our Creator who chose to be with us, refusing to remain distant. What a great privilege it is to be in service for Him who came in Christ so that we might be truly free.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word, 2 Thess. 2:16-17.

¹ N.T. Wright, in his talk at "Socrates in the City" 10/27/2006; quoted in *Life, God, and Other Small Topics*, Eric Metaxas, 2011, 204.