

Title: Liberty for the Oppressed
Text: Luke 4:16-21
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Ernest Hemingway was the brilliant but troubled American novelist who took his own life at the age of 61. Alongside novels like *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway also wrote what is recognized to be the shortest complete story written in English. It is six words long:

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

This brutally simple narrative contains elements of death, loss, brokenness, and a longing for peace. It is powerful in the way it communicates the truth of the human condition and our broken world.

We live in a broken world. A world where babies die and hopes are dashed. We live in a world marked with disappointment and death, pain and sorrow, grief and loss.

Over the last four weeks we have heard some inspiring stories from people whom God has used in powerful ways. The ground out of which these stories have emerged is the soil of a broken world.

For a couple of years Tahme Johnson served the people of Liberia and Sierra Leone as a nurse. Her story reminds us that our world contains too many failed states that pour misery onto their citizens.

Beatrice Skippen serves as a chaplain in our prisons. Her service reminds us that just below the surface of our society lays violence and despair.

Geoff and Margaret Prentice served the people of Samoa as teachers. Their story reminds us that we live in a world of huge inequality – where a stick of chalk in a Samoan classroom is more precious in Samoa than a laptop is in an Australian classroom.

Through Advent and Christmas we celebrate the fact that, acutely aware of the brokenness of our world, God did not ignore our pain, but rather launched a rescue mission to restore and renew this broken world. This rescue mission took the most unexpected form of a baby born to an unwed mother in an obscure province of the mighty Roman Empire.

This baby became a man and as a Rabbi – a teacher of the law – stood up in his home synagogue in Nazareth and read from the prophet Isaiah:

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 set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
(Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus stunned the congregation that was gathered by saying that the promise of freedom and liberation in these words was fulfilled by him.

Today we focus on the last of these four promises: liberty for the oppressed.

People in Jesus' day were crying out for liberty from oppression. For centuries Israel had lived under the yoke of foreign empires – Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and now Romans. They longed for a Messiah, a savior who would lead a revolt to overthrow the despised Romans.

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Jesus would disappoint most of Israel in refusing to violently overthrow Rome.

Most would miss – and many still miss – the fact that Jesus is the great liberator from oppression far deeper than the awful practices of a foreign superpower. Jesus liberates us from the power that made the brutality of the Roman Empire possible.

In short, our world is broken by sin – human rebellion against God. Sin is the root-cause of all that ill our world, like environmental degradation, war, famine, disease, violence and inequality. These things and others are symptoms of the deeper and profoundly spiritual disease of sin.

Since our parents Adam and Eve turned their back on God and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, humankind has ignored God and the laws he has written on every heart and turned its own way

Years ago a high-rise hotel was built in Galveston, Texas, overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. The hotel was actually built over the water. When the hotel was about to have its grand opening, someone thought, *What if people decide to fish out the hotel windows?* So they placed signs in the hotel rooms, "No fishing out the hotel windows." Many people saw the signs and ignored them. It created a huge problem. Lines got tangled. People in the dining room saw fish flapping against the picture windows. The manager of the hotel solved it all by taking down those little signs. Not one was left. Now no one checks into a hotel room thinking about fishing out of the windows.

The bible puts it this way:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.
(Romans 3:23)

Put another way, all of us have ignored the signs and have fished out the window.

The eighteenth century German scientist Johan Wolfgang Von Goethe put it this way:

None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free.
(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

Sin is the great oppressor of our world. And it is liberation from sin that Jesus promises and ultimately fulfills.

At Christmas time we look back and celebrate the liberation from sin made possible by the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Look back with celebration

The film *Three Seasons* is set in postwar Vietnam. In the movie Hai is a cyclo driver who is in love with Lan, a beautiful prostitute. Lan lives in grinding poverty and longs to live in the beautiful world where she works, but in which she never spends the night. She hopes that the money she makes by prostitution will be her means of escape, but instead the work brutalizes and enslaves her.

In the movie Hai enters a cyclo race and wins the top prize. With the money he brings Lan to the hotel where she usually meets clients. He pays for the night and pays her fee. Then, to everyone's shock, he tells her he just wants to watch her fall asleep. Instead of using his power and wealth to have sex with her, he spends it to purchase a place for her for one night in a normal world, to fulfill her desire to belong.

Lan finds such grace deeply troubling at first, thinking that Han has done this to control her. When it becomes apparent that he is using his power to serve rather than use her, it begins to transform her, making it impossible to return to a life of prostitution.

The message of Christianity is simply this: God used his power not to punish us for our sin, but to liberate us from it. God purchased our freedom not with money, but with the life of his son on whom the punishment that should have been ours rested when he died on the cross. God liberated us from the greatest of all enemies when Jesus burst forth from the grave and triumphed over death.

We can receive or reject the liberation Jesus offers us. The choice is ours.

The door to liberation is opened as we confess our sin, our culpability in being part of the cause of the brokenness of our world. The Apostle John puts it this way:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.
(1 John 1:9)

Pastor Lee Eclov tells of how he was reading a paper headline that made him really angry. The headline read:

Guilty Plea Sets Inmate Free

Below the headline was a picture of a man embracing his sister. He had been imprisoned for eight years and had cut a deal with the authorities in which the time served satisfied his sentence. The headline, picture and story made Eclov mad. He was thinking, 'Typical, another criminal gets off with a plea for mercy.'

Then he realized that was what happened to him: "Guilty plea sets inmate free." This is what he goes on to say:

Freedom is not in a plea of innocence but in the admission of guilt. My story is different, but the headline fits perfectly.
(Lee Eclov)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and eventually killed by Hitler during World War II. He wrote many letters from prison to his fiancé. In one of them he said this:

A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes, does various unessential things, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside is not a bad picture of Advent.
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

During the season of Advent and Christmas we look back with celebration as we remember the birth of the one who delivered on his promise to liberate all of us from the oppression of sin.

But it doesn't end there. At Christmas time we are reminded that it is possible to live now with imagination.

Live now with imagination

Because, and only because, Jesus has liberated us from the oppression of sin we can live here and now with prophetic imagination – participating with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the renewal of Creation.

Every act of service – whether here or overseas – is an act of prophetic imagination.

Every act of generosity – from the smallest gift to the largest – is an act of prophetic imagination.

Every refusal to bow to injustice is an act of prophetic imagination.

And every act of prophetic imagination is a bold statement that says this broken world is not as it should be, or because of the hope that we have, will be.

Martin Luther King, William Wilberforce, Mother Theresa all were famous for their prophetic imagination. But here is the amazing thing; the power to live with such heroic imagination resides in all of us – all who claim Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Epaphras was a young man and a Christian during the early years of Chairman Mao's reign in China. He refused to sing the Communist Party songs, salute the Chairman's picture, or show his allegiance to any leader other than Christ.

Epaphras was soon arrested and sentenced to life in prison. A guard asked him why he was so happy all the time. Epaphras grinned and said, "Didn't the Lord tell me from the beginning to give up everything and carry the cross to follow him? This is the Lord's way. I am following him on the same path. Why should I be upset? Why should I complain? This is my biggest blessing."

Eleven years after Chairman Mao died, Epaphras, then 62, was surprised when prison officials agreed to set him free. But he soon discovered the reason for his sudden release: "The court cheated me," he said, "by changing my record to show I had recanted my belief in Jesus."

In response, Epaphras rented a cell-like room just outside the prison gates and kept himself under house arrest. "If I stay in jail," he insisted, "they will know I haven't recanted."

Epaphras went one step further to show how serious he was about not recanting—he fasted five days a week. Ever-smiling, he would say, "If I die from fasting and living under house arrest, then I die as a criminal just like my Lord Jesus Christ!"

After 15 years of fasting, Epaphras died at the age of 78, having made an emphatic, brave statement that true freedom is found in Christ alone. Believers all across China celebrated his life and mourned his death.

Epaphras lived with prophetic imagination because even though he was imprisoned by the communists he was truly free in Christ.

At Christmas time we look back with celebration and we are reminded we can live here and now with prophetic imagination.

Finally, at Christmas time we look forward with anticipation.

Look forward with anticipation

At Christmas time we celebrate the first advent – the first coming of Jesus. But we do more than that. We also look forward with anticipation to the Second Advent – the second coming of Christ.

At this moment in history we live in the now but not yet time.

God's kingdom broke into our world in the coming of Jesus. In his death and resurrection he won the victory over sin and death. But still we live in a world that is broken.

The bible speaks of our world groaning for liberation, for renewal and restoration.

And at Christmas time we know we can look forward with anticipation that everything that is right now sad will one day become untrue.

That process of renewal and restoration began the moment Jesus burst forth from the grave. It is aided and abetted by every act of prophetic imagination that we participate in. Every act of service, generosity and love in Jesus' name is a participation in God's renewal of creation. This process of renewal will be complete when Jesus comes again. Then the Jubilee trumpet will sound. Then the lion will lay down with the lamb; spears will be beaten into pruning hooks; death and crying and mourning and pain will be a distant echo; and God's glory will cover the earth and the waters cover the sea. Then, and only then, the whole universe will find sabbath rest in God.

Believe me when I say it folks; because of the story of Christmas we can look forward with keen, hope-filled and glorious anticipation.

There is a true story from the second world war of two Scottish soldiers who bailed out of an airplane behind German lines. They were captured and put in a prison camp. A high wire fence separated the Americans from the British, and the Germans made it next to impossible for the two sides to communicate. One of the Scottish soldiers was put in the American barracks and the other was housed with the Brits.

Every day the two men would meet at the fence and exchange a greeting. Unknown to the guards, the Americans had a little homemade radio and were able to get news from the outside, something more precious than food in a prison camp. Every day, MacDonald would take a headline or two to the fence and share it with his fellow Scotsman on the other side of the wire in the ancient Gaelic language, indecipherable to the Germans.

One day, news came over the little radio that the Germans had surrendered and the war was over. MacDonald took the news to his friend, then stood and watched him disappear into the British barracks. A moment later, a roar of celebration came from the barracks.

Life in that camp was transformed. Men walked around singing and shouting, waving at the guards, even laughing at the dogs. When the German guards finally heard the news three nights later, they fled into the dark, leaving the gates unlocked. The next morning, Brits and Americans walked out as free men. Yet they had truly been set free three days earlier by the news that the war was over.

Paul says this to the Galatians and to us:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.
(Galatians 5:1)