

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Reformation Sunday

October 25, 2020

Psalm 46:1–11 (ESV):

- 1 God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- 2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
3 though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah
- 4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
- 5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.
- 6 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
- 7 The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah
- 8 Come, behold the works of the LORD,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.
- 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.
- 10 “Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!”
- 11 The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

First Reading: Revelation 14:6–7 (ESV):

The Messages of the Three Angels

6 Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. 7 And he said with a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

EPISTLE: Romans 3:19–28 (ESV):

19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

The Righteousness of God Through Faith

21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. 27 Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

THE GOSPEL - John 8:31–36; Matthew 11:12–19 (ESV):

The Truth Will Set You Free

31 So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” 33 They

answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’”

34 Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. **35** The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. **36** So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Matthew 11:12–19 (ESV):

12 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. **13** For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, **14** and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. **15** He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

16 “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

17 “ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’”

18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ **19** The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

Sermon 41 – Reformation Day

“Slaved”

John 8:31-36

Dear friends,

John in this brief excerpt explores two concepts: Freedom and slavery. There's others to be found around it but those are the two central ones. The questions to ask here are pretty simple. Who is enslaved or free? What are they enslaved by, if anything? How are the enslaved made free? What is the result of all these things? Finally, what are these words for us Christians who know the score about all this? Jesus talks about freedom and we have it, but what do we have, and how do we use it?

John records this short discussion after an increasing sense of escalation in the relationship between the Jews and Jesus. These two are clashing together with ever-growing level of tension. They are quickly realizing that they are not what they thought each other to be. The Jews are realizing that Jesus has no interest whatsoever in following the rules they've laid out for Him. He's not being the Messiah they thought He would, and He keeps saying stranger and stranger things as the book of John goes on. Particularly in chapter 6 and beyond, Jesus gets borderline gross in how weird and offensive He is. He has talked about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. He's talked about being the source of eternal life. He has talked, God forbid, as if He were actually God Himself, which the Jews are having a difficult time tolerating. For their part, the Jews are continuing to completely miss the point of the entire Old Testament, ignoring the testimony of the prophets, and in their stubborn adherence to their own brand of Jewishness, have put themselves in the position of God. That is what unbelief does, in the end. It sits in judgment of God, even when He walks and talks, and says, mmmm not good enough, mmmmm not doing it right, mmmmm that's not what I believe. So these two parties have little patience for each other, less time, and as they continue to collide, they begin to realize it. You know that moment where you kinda do a little reflection, and you realize that you have utterly exhausted your patience with something or someone? That moment when it hits, and you're like, I hate this. I do not ever want to see this person again? That's what this whole part of John is. Many have believed in Jesus, but many more have not, and Jesus not three verses later is going to tell them that they're devil-spawned, so this is a dysfunctional relationship to put it mildly.

“31 So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Even the believing Jews are having these problems, and it bears in mind that these are the mildly convinced ones, and they're still wrestling with what Jesus tells them. Jesus gives them reassurance, but they don't seem to take it as such. Abide in God's word, and

the truth will set you free. Freedom is a beautiful concept, a pleasing word, but so ill-defined sometimes. This isn't the case here, Jesus will eventually tightly define what this means, but He kinda dangles it in front of them at first to get them to ask about it. At first, the Jews take this as something offered that they don't need.

But they do need it, and that is what they wrestle with. Freedom in general is a precious thing because it is indeed so rare. We enjoy civil liberties that are found in few other places, and we are still far from free, because we are bound by the constraints of our life. True agency, the ability to chart the course of our life, is so much less in our hands than it feels like because largely of our circumstances. You must eat, you must live, so you must work. In order to do that, you must find a place to work, even in this age where such things are uncommon. That work provides you not just with paycheck but usually the health insurance you need for your medical needs. Thus, you have essentially tied yourself to a place and to an occupation, and leaving that is not something taken lightly, its a huge risk. We are bound to our jobs, bound to our leases, with chains of necessity. The freedom to just hop in the car and go is not ours, the freedom to change career, change location, change destiny, is largely in the hands of others. I'm not complaining about this precisely, I'm just pointing out that freedom in its purest essence is something even our free society denies us because of the limitations of the human condition. Sin makes need, sin creates lack, sin makes our dependency on the life-giving food and healthcare we need a deadly dependency. If we don't eat, we starve. You don't have health insurance, you are in some serious trouble, you could shatter everything else you need to live. You all know this, but have you ever stopped to reflect on how limiting the simple need for a house and a job is? That is a massive barrier to the expression of freedom as we understand it, let alone how God understands it.

Again, this is because of sin. We were supposed to live with free range of this Earth, working its plenty, mastering it and administrating it on God's behalf. We were supposed

to live free from it, human beings had nothing to fear on Earth in the Garden of Eden. Now, we fear for jobs, our future, our safety, and those fears limit us. Sin broke creation and chained it to fear. Chained it into place. All these realizations are true for us modern people who have cars, airplanes, Internet, and bicycles. How much more true it was for ancient people who didn't often go outside the town they grew up, let alone the county. When a foreigner could be someone from the next town over. Freedom isn't free, and the price of freedom is not eternal vigilance, the price of freedom is freedom itself. We sabotage our own understanding of what freedom even means because we are so inwardly focused, so turned toward the self, that we see only *our* freedom and *our* use of it. Jesus is about to expand that.

“33 They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” This is so hilariously inaccurate it serves as a great example to what I just said. The Jews have spent much, much more of their time as slaves than they have as free people. It becomes especially egregious when you consider that the Jews are at this point a client province of the Roman Empire, with Roman soldiers and all. They pay their taxes to Caesar, which means they are not free. This is not to mention the Babylonian Exile, the Book of Exodus, and all the other examples that come to mind. So why are they saying this? Because these Jews, the ones Jesus is talking to, don't see themselves as enslaved. They can vote on town issues, they can speak up, they can worship at the temple free from fear of pagan reprisal. They think they're free, but even by human standards they're not. Let alone God's standards. The human condition is to not even see the full extent of the problem, let alone consider or appreciate any solution. God has to rescue us from this, which thanks be to God Jesus demonstrates. **“34 Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”**

Everyone who sins is a slave to it. Illumination. This is your problem. It isn't political, it isn't civil, it isn't even personal, it is genetic and congenital. Sin is your problem. Just as true for us, we know this, but we don't always think of the extent of the limitations of it. We are bound by death and bound to a dying world that seems to think death is completely normal. That is slavery. One day, you will die and then everyone will forget you as they themselves die. One day, all the work you do, how fiercely you loved, the sacrifices you made, they will all be just gone. That exceedingly grim reckoning of human existence we definitely need freedom from.

The freedom of the Christian, Jesus says, is the freedom from death, futility, and ultimately, the constraints of the Earth itself. It is the freedom to consider all of this a passing phase, one of the bad days, the night that shall come before the dawn. No one else has that freedom. They think they do, but they're deluding themselves, they really are, and as mean as that feels to say, it is quite serious. We alone can look upon all this, can look back on our lives, and say with contentment that it was what it was, that the future will be what it will be. Why? Because we are free from sin, and in being free from sin we are free from having to reckon with it all, having to explain it all, to make it last, to make sense of it. That's freedom. We don't have to justify it, we don't have to square the deal, and I've had a real problem these days with trying to do that, trying to make it all work out in a good way so you don't have to look back in anger or regret. Neither of those things is necessary, because our future is assured, secured, and he who controls the past commands the future, and he who commands the future conquers the past. I'm pretty sure I just quoted someone but frankly I can't remember. Jesus puts it all in His hands. The Son sets you free, and you are free indeed. Life is what it is, and it can be what it is, because Jesus is our life and our goal and our reason. Life was what it was, and sometimes it was really good, and you wish it was again. Sometimes it was really bad, and you get scared that'll come again. We Christians can look to Christ, give thanks He gave us the

good, and realize why He gave us the bad, because He is who sets us free from both. We don't have to make it happen on our own.

We do indeed do evil, and that is the final reminder. That Jesus is the cure for this inward focus, this turning to the self. It's hard to see beyond the self, beyond the family, the town, the country even. We don't know it all, we don't know nearly enough, but Christ does. He frees us from the need to obsessively focus on our own interests. He protects us so we don't have to so aggressively. He ushers out of a place focused on me-me-me-me-me-me and frees us to focus on him, her, or them. The outsider, the neighbor, the alien, the poor, the widows, and so on.

We are Sons of the Son, we inherit that which He bequeaths to us by His death. By His life, we inherit His own life, His reasons, His love, and His care. As silly as it was for the Jews to pretend to be free, as silly as it is for us Americans to do the same, neither reflects true freedom. True freedom is being called by Christ's name, being treated as God's sons, and so we are.

Amen.