

Give Us Free

Luke 3:1-6

The Longing for Freedom

The 1999 film, *Amistad* tells the true story of a group of slaves overpowering their captors aboard a vessel called the *Amistad*. Having now taken over they think they're sailing east to freedom, when in fact they're sailing north into bondage. Not too many days later, the United States Navy overtakes them, and places them in custody where they await trial. Here these human beings are in bondage, slavery, being oppressed. Finally, things reach a crescendo in the film when one of the enslaved African's bellows out from the depths of his soul, "Give us free". He had a longing for freedom.

A part of what it means to be human, to be made in the image of God is to have this longing for freedom. It's who we are. In 1971, Marvin Gaye surveyed the sociological landscape of our country and world, and in his own way said, "Give us free." He put pen to his longing when he crooned, **mother, mother, mother/there's far too many of you crying/brother, brother, brother/there's far too many of you dying** (IMAGE OF MARVIN GAYE PLEASE). And then things reach the peak when frustrated with the war in Vietnam, the oppression of black people and violence in the streets he bellowed out the question that would not only cement his legacy, but would resonate with my people, *What's Going On?* Marvin had a longing for freedom.

Historical Context

The cry- give us free- and Marvin Gaye's longing for freedom expressed in his song, *What's Going On*, are exactly the sentiments of the Jews when we come to our text this morning. It's interesting the first thing Luke does is to give us a sense of timing for what follows- it's the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Tiberius is the emperor of Rome, and we can guess with a fair degree of certainty that it's around the year 29A.D. It's also important to remember that the Jews are in bondage to Tiberius and the Romans, in a long period of oppression and exile that's lasted for centuries. There's a longing in the Jews for freedom.

If you took the time to read the first two verses of our text carefully, you would also discover that Tiberius is just the first of seven rulers Luke lists. Some have even suggested that this list is arranged from the most powerful to the least powerful. While there's some truth to this, what's really important to remember is that all of these rulers did harm to the Jews in their own way. Tiberius was especially cruel, going as far as to begin deporting Jews. Pilate took money from the temple treasury. Herod was despised by the Jews for being a friend of Rome, and turning his back on his own people. Philip was also seen as being partial to the Gentiles. And while we know little to nothing about Lysanias, we do know that Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests of the Jews, were not humble, gentle leaders, instead they were seen as being harsh as well on their own people. Don't you see? The picture Luke is painting is a comprehensive one of oppressing the Jews, only serving to heighten the longing among the people of God for freedom.

The Jews longing for freedom is also ours. All of us long to be free. We felt this in 2020, didn't we? 2020 felt like our spirits were experiencing a level of claustrophobia, manifesting itself in a collective anxiety. We experienced long stretches of quarantine life, trapped as it were in our own homes, maybe even bringing up some real interesting marital dynamics. Some of you college students felt this spiritual claustrophobia where one of your biggest dreams of going off to college and meeting a ton of other people was either flat out denied, delayed or severely diminished. We saw this longing to be free racially, too, in 2020. I'm guessing if you are white here, and would call yourself a follower of Jesus, you saw the racial tragedies and something in you said, enough, when will this end? And for sure if you are a person of color you felt this. I watched as my oldest son watched these tragic events, and with tears in his eyes wondered aloud, "Where is God?" Hear his longing to be free?

But this longing to be free is not just true sociologically, it's even more profound spiritually. This is why we turn to the things of this life to find a sense of freedom and escape, only to realize that nothing in this life truly sets us free. The great writer, C.S. Lewis puts his finger on this frustration and longing for freedom when he wrote, "If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world." –C.S. Lewis. Don't you what Lewis is saying? Not only are we frustrated when our feeble attempts at freedom come up short, but these failings are meant to drive us to the only source for real freedom.

Initiated by God's Grace

So how do we find this freedom? How do we scratch the souls itch to be free? Our text tells us. Look with me at verse 2...Do you see the phrase, "the word of God came to John"? Now this phrase may not look like much to you, but boy is it ever significant! See the Jews had sinned greatly against God, and God had been patient with them begging them to repent, but they did not. So, when the last book of the OT, Malachi, closes, God also closes his mouth. In fact, the period of time between the end of Malachi, to the beginning of Matthew is known among theologians as the 400 silent years (actually 460 years) where God does not speak. He doesn't send a prophet. There's no direct revelation. God is silent. So get the picture, not only are the people of God being oppressed by ruthless regimes and rulers, there's also a pervasive and devastating sense of God where are you? Hello? Are you there?

So that, when Luke says that the word of God came to John the Baptist, the last of the great prophets, this is a landmark event! God is opening up his mouth and speaking! AND! AND! AND! There's nothing, I mean nothing in the text to even remotely suggest and indicate the people of God had repented, or done something to deserve God speaking. God speaks, even though his people had not changed. You know what we call this? Grace!

Where does the road to freedom begin? It doesn't begin with our performance, or our trying harder to find freedom on our own terms. It begins with the grace of God- God's unmerited, performance-free favor. I don't know if you've read the NYT bestseller by Bryan Stevenson called, *Just Mercy*, but it's a riveting book. Bryan Stevenson is

a lawyer who represents clients who have had their freedom taken from them as they have been incarcerated for crimes they did not commit. Now these clients can't afford Bryan. They don't have the resources to make themselves free. In walks this Harvard Law School graduate Bryan, who does for these people what they could never do on their own- he gets them their freedom, purely by an act of grace.

This is exactly what God does for the Jews, and what he longs to do for us- make us free. But there's a breakdown in my illustration. The breakdown is the people Bryan worked with didn't commit the crimes, however our lawyer- Advocate Jesus- works with us who are locked up, but we did commit the crime! Through our own doing, our sin, we have found ourselves in bondage, like the Jews. In bondage to our idols of status and success, in bondage to addictions, in bondage. And it's while we are in bondage that we feel frustrated, unable to get ourselves out. No problem, Jesus says even though you are guilty, I will make you free by the grace of God. What amazing grace, and he offers this freedom to each of us today!

Accessed Through Our Repentance

The longing of our text is for freedom. To these sinful, covenant breaking Jews, God speaks in an unthinkable act of grace, by giving his word for them to his prophet John. But what was the word God speaks? Look at verse 3...The text says, "And he went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". How do we have our longing for freedom satisfied? God's grace, and our repentance.

What exactly is repentance? It's the Greek word *metanoia*, which simply means a change of mind which leads to a change of behavior. Repentance is not just confession, but a commitment to lean on the grace of God to genuinely change. Confession *says* I'm sorry, repentance *shows* I'm sorry. Do you see it? God's word says a lot about the need to repent: **Romans 2:4**. God's grace and repentance work together. Paul shows us that grace stimulates repentance.

Some years ago a wealthy businessman was concerned with the poverty and crime he saw in a California community. He noticed that most of the people in the community were living well below the poverty rate. So he had a thought- what if I gave many of these individuals \$500 a month, just because, and see what happens? He did this for 18 months. At the end of that period it was revealed that drugs and crime actually went down, and people's emotional and mental health actually improved. Now please don't think I'm sitting here giving any kind of economic, governmental advice. That is so not the point. What I want you to see is that these people were given a consistent gift (grace) that changed their behavior (repentance). Grace stimulates repentance. And when we experience the conjoined twins of grace and repentance we are experiencing freedom!

Listen, I've been at this pastoral thing for a long time. I've never met a happy adulterer. I've never encountered a joyful drug addict. And I've never met anyone who has a sustained deep joy while living in bondage to sin. I have

met people walking the road of repentance who are the freest people on earth. Where grace and repentance are found, so is freedom.

Possessed by Christ

But there's one more thing we learn about our longing for freedom, and how we get it, and that is true freedom is only possessed by Christ. Beginning in verse 4, Luke quotes from Isaiah 40:3-5. Look carefully at what he says in verse 4. When a King was coming to a town in antiquity, weeks or months before he got there a courier would come and announce to all the coming of the King. That town would then construct a smooth, level road or highway so that the King could come in great pomp and circumstance. What Luke is pointing out is that John the Baptist was the courier, simply making the people ready for king Jesus. Not only that, but Luke is pointing out that there was a lot of preparation work that went into making things just right for the coming of the Lord- paths made straight, valleys filled, mountains and hills made low, crooked straight, rough places level. Luke wants us to know Jesus didn't just show up, but there was a lot of behind the scenes work that went into him getting there at just the right moment in history.

I have a friend of mine who owns a duck hunting club in one of the most opportune places to hunt ducks. It's so opportune that my friend told me they got a call in the early 2000s from then VP Dick Cheney's office saying the VP wanted to hunt there. Now we all know the VP didn't just show up the next day. Oh no. My friend told me there was about 80 white house and secret service staffers who came months in advance to set up an office, and inspect the property. Military personnel were brought in who swam in the lakes and ponds to make sure everything was okay. These individuals prepared the way, and at the most opportune moment when everything was prepared perfectly then the VP showed up.

Paul picks up on this when he writes in Galatians 4:4 of Jesus, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law". The word *fullness* means at just the right moment. Yes God was silent, but he was not inactive. During the 400 silent years God was readying the world for king Jesus. God says when my son comes to announce the kingdom and preach the gospel I need there to be one unified language, so he raises up Alexander the Great who conquers the world and unifies the language. God says when my son comes I need there to be peace not a time of war, and ready access to roads that will make it easy for my gospel to spread, so he raises up the Romans who usher in the Pax Romana- a time of peace- and build the roads. Was God silent? Yes! Was he inactive? No!

And the same God who worked behind the scenes of world history to ready the world for Jesus, is the same God who is working behind the scenes in your life readying you for king Jesus and the freedom he possesses. Yes freedom comes by grace, and through repentance, but it is only found in king Jesus. That's why Luke ends our text by saying when king Jesus comes salvation will be available for all. What does king Jesus long to do this day? He longs to make you free. Jesus' work on the cross for you and I meant that we don't have to work to get God's grace.

The work's been done for us. Jesus' death means that I can die to any notion of me having to prove myself to be accepted! Jesus' burial means that as far as the east is from the west is as far as my sins have been separated from me. And Jesus' resurrection to new life means that I too can be raised to new life- a life marked by freedom- freedom from the opinions of others. Freedom from having to prove myself to a dad who was never there. Freedom from the lies of the enemy. Freedom from status. Freedom from zip codes. I'm free today! Why because of Jesus- for whom the son sets free is free indeed!

Two years ago I preached in Angola State Prison just outside of Baton Rouge. This is a prison where they keep the most violent offenders in the state of Louisiana. One of the prisoners I met was a man we will call Jason. About thirty years ago, Jason killed his wife and almost his son. It was a devastating crime. But thirty years later, it was obvious Jason was a changed man, so much so that the parole board recommended to the governor his release, his freedom. But there was one last hurdle. See, just because the board recommended his release, Jason could not get out and experience freedom until the governor signed his release paper. Not the governor's assistant or wife. Not the governors children...only one person- the governor. That's what we are saying here- only one person can truly make us free- Jesus. For who the Son sets free is free indeed!

But there's more. The reason why Jason had changed so dramatically was that while he was in prison he came to know Christ as Lord and Savior. He started leading Bible studies, and even wrote Christian based manhood curriculum. He was seen as the pastor of the prison. In other words, far before the governor signed off on his papers, Jason was already free because of Jesus. He didn't have to wait for freedom, he found it immediately. And that's you. You can have this freedom today!