

Liberty and the Big Story

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

July 4, 2010

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Exodus 2:23-25 (NRSV)

²³After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

Isaiah 61:1-2 (NRSV)

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

John 8:31-33 (NRSV)

³¹Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." ³³They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?"

2 Corinthians 3:1-3, 17-18 (NRSV)

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? ²You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; ³and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

James 1:22-25 (NRSV)

²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

God created us to be free. In our still sin-wracked world, others often strive to deprive us of this liberty. But what is this freedom for? To what end are we created free?

Today, we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence. This Declaration, signed under the threat of death more than 200 years ago, proclaims that all persons must be free of tyranny that seeks to deprive of them of their God-given rights, including life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is both a declaration of "freedom *from*" and "freedom *for*."

For the last seven weeks we've heard the story of God's purposes in and for this world. You wouldn't be off the mark if you said that the overarching story of the Bible is a story of freedom and liberty, both freedom *from* and freedom *for*. So let's connect some dots and discover what I mean.

Created to be free

When God creates the humans in Genesis 1 and 2, they are created free. God gives them a beautiful place to live and to work. They are free to enter God's presence, even walking with God in the evenings. We know that they are free because when they are tempted to rebel against God; they are free to make that bad choice. Their choice of rebellion over faithfulness had tragic and horrifying consequences, but the choice is theirs to make.

You might ask why they are free to make such a life-destroying choice. Later in the story, we reminded by Jesus of what God's people learn at Mt. Sinai after the Exodus: God's two most important teachings for us are that we are created to love God and to love one another. And the undeniable truth about love is that for love to be love, it must be freely given. Genuine love cannot be coerced or paid for. True love, the love God desires from us and for us, must flow from a free and willing heart.

The loss of liberty

The irony in the garden is that when Adam and Eve use their freedom to rebel against God, they destroy much of that very freedom.

First, their rebellion separates them from God and each other. They can no longer enter into God's presence; instead, they hide from God when it comes time for the evening walk. It is as if an opaque veil is draped over them, such that they cannot even see God much less walk with him. They have trapped themselves within a prison of their own making.

Second, rebellion and separation lead to envy and murder, to exile and slavery. All the horrifying wrongs that we humans due to one another can be traced to the rebellion in the garden.

Thus, even when God chooses another man and woman, Abraham and Sarah, through whom God will rescue his creation, God's purposes have to move forward through a world filled with violence and war, slavery and oppression. Can the genuine life-sustaining freedom of the garden be restored? That is the overarching question that arches across the Old Testament. The sampling of Scripture passages above testify to the centrality of liberty and freedom in the biblical witness. Let's go through them briefly.¹

The Exodus

First, we have the Exodus, when God liberated the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. The Pharaohs had enslaved the descendants of Abraham, subjecting them to difficult, forced labor. God saved his people from Pharaoh, leading them to freedom on the far side of the Red Sea. Ever since, Jews across the globe have celebrated the Passover, a freedom party, remembering and recreating the time when God had brought them to freedom. They were to be a people subject only to God. But that wasn't all, according to God's Law, every fifty years the people were to celebrate Jubilee by freeing all slaves owned by the Hebrews. A few centuries later, when the people wanted an earthly king, God warned them that kings were takers, that kings would lead them to tyranny, not liberty (see 1 Samuel 8).

Such stories of struggles for freedom and the threats to liberty – personal, political, and economic – ought to evoke in us the words of Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." These are oft-forgotten, or at least oft-ignored, truths.

Exile

The Isaiah passage above was written during the Israelites' exile in Babylon, when it seemed they had lost everything as a consequence of their own abandonment of God. It was as if God had tossed them in jail as punishment for their sin and thrown away the key. Yet, the prophet brought the Good News that they would be rescued, that God would one day

¹This study draws heavily on the study from July 5, 2009.

anoint someone who would throw open the prison doors and set the captives free. This anointed one would bring freedom and liberty to the oppressed. Tellingly, when Jesus begins his public ministry he rises to read from the Scriptures and opens the scroll to this very passage. Jesus would be God's anointed. Jesus would be the bringer of liberty.

Jesus and the Spirit

Moving on to the Gospel of John . . . The context for this passage is sin. Jesus is the light of the world. Those who trust in him will know the truth and that truth will set them free. Free from what? Free from sin, the beast that threatens to overwhelm us, destroying our relationships with God and one another. Some of those listening to Jesus are mistakenly trying to understand Jesus through the prism of the Exodus. They had long ago been freed from Pharaoh, hadn't they?

But Jesus has another meaning of freedom in mind – liberation from slavery and sin *so that* his disciples could be free to love God and neighbor. Jesus takes us closer to the fully dimensioned understanding of Christian liberty. Such liberty isn't merely "freedom *from*", it is "freedom *for*"; freedom from the bondage of sin so that we can freely love. Augustine compared God's grace to medicine. The grace cures us of our blindness so that we can see the full glory of God.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul, like Jesus, takes up the cause of freedom. Here, it is the Law that is in view. The Law was given to God's people so that they could learn how to live in loving relationship with God and with each other, for the essence of the Law, Jesus says, is to love God and love one another. Yet, the Law could not defeat Sin. It simply lacked the power to liberate. Thus, the Israelites, no less than we, proved unable simply to love. Thus, Paul writes, the Spirit of God has written love on the hearts of believers, freeing them from the pursuit of the Law as their Savior – it is Jesus who has saved them.

But there is more from Paul. He is interested not only in the "freedom *from*" but takes us to the "freedom *for*." In Exodus 34, we are told that Moses' face would so shine so intensely after his meetings with God that the people couldn't handle seeing his face. So Moses covered his face with a veil. In 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, Paul evokes this story of Moses, saying that the Holy Spirit has set us free, hence no veil is needed; we can behold the glory of God. As Gordon Fee writes:

To put all of this another way, the emphasis in context is less on "freedom from" and more on "freedom for." What the Spirit has done for us in appropriating the work of Christ to our lives ("removing the veil") is to give us freedom, boldness if you will, to enter in God's presence and behold his glory "with uncovered faces"; freedom to be transformed into his likeness from one degree of glory to yet another. This is the glorious freedom of the children of God, made available through the Spirit . . .²

And, finally, we come to James, the half-brother of Jesus, who twice speaks of the "law of liberty" in his letter. What does he mean? James is speaking of what we might call the "law of the kingdom of God." In 2:8, he calls this the "royal law." And what is the law in the kingdom of God? It is the law of love, the law that is grounded in love of God and neighbor. James quotes Leviticus 19:18 specifically, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The law of liberty is the law of love – love and freedom are bound tightly together. Even God is bound by this law of love and liberty. Even God cannot force us to love him, for then it would not be love. God can't bribe us or threaten us; all God can do is to free us from whatever hinders our ability to love. But love itself . . . well, it *must* be freely given.

² From Fee's book, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*. 1994. Hendrickson Publishers. p. 313-314.

The Declaration of Independence

The heart and soul of America's democracy is embodied in this declaration, signed on July 4, 1776. The writer was Thomas Jefferson, who submitted a draft version to committee, which was then revised for the final vote.

Setting aside the much-debated topics of Jefferson's religious beliefs and the philosophical sources underlying the final version, we see in the Declaration's opening paragraphs several commitments foundational to liberty. First, there is a Creator. Second, all humans are created equal. Third, our creator has given us certain rights which include these three: the right to life, the right to liberty, and the right to the pursuit of happiness. These are not rights we grant to one another, nor that any government of any sort can grant to us. These rights are God's gift to us and it is only their realization that can be taken from us by others, much as Samuel warned the Israelites that their kings would be takers (see 1 Samuel 8).

"When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, -- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. . . ."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Jesus has revealed to us that God is inherently relational – one God who is a loving community of three persons in God's very being. This God of love created us to love. Do you agree that for love to be love it must be freely given? If so, how does necessary freedom influence your understanding of God, of your relationship with God, and of your relationship with others?
2. The Exodus, the pivotal story of salvation in the Old Testament, is a story of freedom – personal and political. How does this freedom story shape the rest of the biblical story? Why do you think that Jesus chose to bring his ministry to its confrontational climax during Passover week? How is the festival of Passover a big freedom party?
3. Given God's creation of free beings and his rescuing of his people from slavery and Jesus' rescuing of us from the tyranny of sin, do you think that God hopes for us to live in liberty in all the varied spheres of our lives? Are there any spheres of our lives, in which God would be ok with oppression rather than freedom? Are there ways that we contribute to the oppression of others.
4. Finally, if God has created us to be free, with a right to liberty, then what do you think God hopes we would do with this freedom? The really important question is not so much freedom *from* but freedom *for*. For what? How ought this play out in our daily lives.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

In this week's readings, we'll look at passages related to freedom and liberty.

<p>Monday, Psalm 146 Praise God for he is the one who sets the prisoners free (v. 7).</p>	<p>Tuesday, Leviticus 25 The Jubilee years. Every 50 years, all slaves owned by the Hebrews were to be freed. Also, the Hebrews were not to enslave one another.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Hosea 2:1-15 After pronouncing judgment on the adulterous Israel, God says that he will take her (Israel) into the wilderness and there God will "allure" her and "speak tenderly to her." Even God cannot force his people to love him and still call it love!</p>	<p>Thursday, Acts 13:16-41 One of Paul's speeches. Note v. 39. Jesus has freed us from sin; the Law of Moses could not.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Paul answers a question about whether it is ok for the believers to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols. They are to be careful not to misuse the liberty that they have been given.</p>	<p>Saturday, Hebrews 13:1-17 What does it mean to demonstrate mutual love? Note v. 5 – oh, to be free of the love of money and all it can buy!</p>

