

Exodus 2:23-25 (NRSV)

²³ After 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. ²⁴ God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵ God 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)

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." ³³ They 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? ² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; ³ and 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.

¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And 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)

²² But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But 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.

We celebrate God's gift to us of liberty and freedom. In Christ we are free! Liberty is the way of Jesus, for love, to be love, must be freely given. We celebrate love's liberty.

July 4. The Declaration of Independence. Freedom. Liberty. . . . What does this holiday have to do with Jesus and the Good News of God's great rescue? The sampling of Scripture passages above testify to the centrality of liberty and freedom in the biblical witness. Let's go through them briefly.

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 in tyranny, not liberty (see 1 Samuel 8).

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

No discussion of liberty and freedom is complete without hearing the brief words spoken by Lincoln at Gettysburg on November 17, 1863.

More than a year before Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, effective Jan 1, 1863, declaring that all slaves in the rebellious states would henceforth be free.

Though written to celebrate a military victory, Lincoln's address was a moving tribute to the sacrifice made by so many for the ideals of democracy and liberty. Here is the full text:

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate...we cannot consecrate...we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government: of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

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 someone 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 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 to scroll to this very passage, for Jesus would prove to be God's anointed. Jesus would be the bringer of liberty.

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, free from their bondage to sin. Free to be free.

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.

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.

Freedom from tyranny?

Does this “law of liberty,” this law of love, extend to governing among earthly peoples and nations? After all, Jesus did not advocate the violent overthrow of Caesar nor did Paul urge the freeing of all slaves. Nonetheless, do we really imagine they would not applaud the birth of democratic governments and the abolition of slavery? Let’s take religious freedom for example. Here are some thoughts from Michael Novak:

“In thinking about these questions [of religious freedom] at the time of the American Founding, such figures as Thomas Jefferson, George Mason, and James Madison expressed the belief of most Americans that the world was made by a benevolent Creator and Governor Who wished to extend His friendship to all human beings and Who wished to be thanked and worshiped in spirit and truth and purity of conscience. In other words, this God could not be deceived by mere outward acts, but saw directly into the human heart. Here is how they expressed it in the Virginia Declaration of Religious Liberty of 1776: “That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed by only reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore, all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity towards each other.”

The argument contains four affirmations: the *greatness* of the Creator; the *duty* of the creature to recognize, be grateful to, and adore that Creator; the *freedom* of soul that the Creator endowed in humans for such acts; and the *friendship* with humans that God desired. With these affirmations as its base, The Virginia Declaration—like the famous Remonstrance against the Governor of Virginia circulated for signatures by James Madison some years later—made the following argument: Every rational creature, contemplating the great gifts bestowed by the Creator, is conscious of a duty to give due worship to that Creator, in spirit and in truth, in the pure light of conscience, under no coercion whatever. Since this duty is sacred, and prior to all other duties either to civil society or to the state, since it is a duty owed by the creature directly to the Creator without intermediary, this duty also implies a right. Since this duty goes beyond any earthly power, it must entail a right to exercise that duty, which may be abridged by no earthly power. It is an inalienable and an inviolable right. It is prior to every other duty. It must be exercised in conscience and without duplicity or coercion, in the direct sight of the Creator. . . The religious foundation for religious liberty, therefore, begins with the nature of God. [emph. added]¹

Indeed, the foundation of all liberty begins with the nature of God. The triune, inherently relational God of love has created us to love him and one another – and that love must be freely given or it is not love. God created us out of love, for love, and has saved us in love. The long arc of human history has well-demonstrated that sinful humans tend to the denial of liberty to others and the accumulation of power to themselves. Living in God’s way, in his kingdom, requires that tyranny be resisted in all its forms. Whether it be the tyranny of kings who take, the tyranny of majorities, or the soft tyranny described by de Tocqueville that always threatens well-meaning democracies. Love’s liberty is the fount of all liberty.

¹ From Michael Novak’s essay, “The Truth about Religious Freedom,” in *First Things* journal, March, 2006, p. 17-20.

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

This is an overly ambitious study, as it is hard to deal with this topic adequately in so few words. Nonetheless, these ideas have been on my mind for awhile. You might begin to sort through this topic by tackling these questions in order:

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, which was one 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?
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?

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>

