

Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death!

Perhaps it's the time of year, with the end of school just half a day away for our kids in Edmonds School District and the Fourth of July holiday for most of us grown-ups just right around the corner. Or, perhaps it's an old story much loved in my family of origin. Maybe, it's a little of both. But as I read the lectionary verses for this week back on Monday, the theme and title of my sermon for this morning came to me almost immediately. All of our lectionary passages, you see, have something to do with the way our loving God restores us to free and abundant life, breaking the chains of whatever may enslave us. All of our Scriptures for the morning deal with the way God sets our souls at liberty on one hand and the spiritual death that separates us from God on the other. Life, it seems, continually presents us with the choice between accepting God's freedom or falling back into bondage and despair. We choose between liberty and death.

It really doesn't have much bearing on the topic but I'm going to tell you this story anyway, just so you'll know why Patrick Henry's famous phrase comes so readily to my mind when themes of liberty and death commingle. My dad, as a youth, was a leader in his small rural Missouri high school. A letter athlete in football, basketball and track, an honor student and the lead in both the junior and senior plays, he was also well known for the sort of spirited hijinks that could be expected from a nice Baptist boy in the early 50s. It seems that in a lull in Senior Government class, when the teacher was writing an onerous assignment on the blackboard, one young wag rose from his chair and proclaimed, "Give me liberty or give me death!" "Who said that," the outraged teacher demanded. "Patrick Henry," my dad replied. "And who said *that*," asked the teacher, now angrier than before. "Dave Boyer," replied a less than helpful classmate. All three young men were summarily sent off to the principal's office, law still trumping grace in most classrooms.

But as Paul wrote to the Galatians, in God's eyes, the discipline of the law has been superseded by the grace that comes through faith, God's gift to us. Through the life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, God has set humankind at liberty. This has been God's plan for us all along, despite our willful rebellions, despite our foolish choices, despite our propensity for turning a deaf ear to God's loving voice. God created us free and with that freedom, we are almost inevitably enslaved by our own choices or the actions of others. Despite God's loving care, we seem to choose, be attracted to, or be surrounded by death. Let's consider the other lectionary verses this morning and I'll explain what I mean.

Our psalm for the morning is actually two, which are actually one. That is to say, the reading from the Psalms in this morning's lectionary is the whole of both Psalm 42 and Psalm 43, which most scholars are now convinced were originally one psalm. The psalm speaks of the longing for God, a hope based in God's ultimate presence despite God's seeming absence during a time of trouble. The language is beautiful and evocative: "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"'" The psalmist knows the bitter experience of dealing with scoffers during mourning. At a time of trouble, the writer feels even more separated from God, more surrounded by death, because of the mocking of others. It is a problem that should ring true for us. As we weep for the tragedy in the world, for those killed, maimed or left homeless by tsunami or earthquake or hurricane or fire, as we grieve for the innocents slaughtered in Darfur or the continuing violence in the Middle East or for the brave women and men who come

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home shattered or not at all from Iraq and Afghanistan, or simply for the pain in our own lives, do we not hear the taunts? “Where is your God? If there is a God, why doesn’t He act? What kind of God allows such things to happen?” It is enough to bring us very low, enough to make us feel abandoned and enslaved to grief, captive to our tears. Three times in these combined psalms, the author asks, “Why are you so cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted in me?” Life is hard; we feel the grinding of everyday troubles and the horror of world events upon the core of our beings. But just as the poet asks the threefold question, so the answer is also provided thrice: “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.” Despite the looming chains of despair and the readiness of other people to lock them down tight, the psalmist knows the sure liberty of God’s gracious response: “O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.”

The reading from the Old Testament this morning is one to which I referred on Pentecost morning. It’s the 19th chapter of I Kings, the story of Elijah the prophet and his encounter with God on Mount Horeb. Elijah, you may remember, has triumphed over the prophets of Baal in a famous contest to determine which god was real, Baal or Yahweh. Given two identical altars, with identical sacrifices and wood to burn them, the prophets of Baal are not able to call upon their god to miraculously kindle a fire and burn the sacrifice. Elijah goes them one better by dowsing all the wood on Yahweh’s altar with enormous quantities of water, even digging and filling a moat around the altar. But at Elijah’s prayer to God, fire miraculously appears and consumes meat, soggy wood and even the water in the moat. Elijah then proclaims an end to the drought which has plagued the land for three years and miraculously outraces King Ahab’s chariot back to the city of Jezreel from the site of the contest.

But back in the city, Elijah is given no time to exult in his mighty deeds for the Lord. Instead, he is forced to flee when Queen Jezebel threatens to kill him for what he has done. A day’s journey into the wilderness, Elijah throws himself down and tells God he will go no further. In The Message, the passage reads, “He came to a lone broom bush and collapsed in its shade, wanting in the worst way to be done with it all—to just die: “Enough of this, GOD! Take my life—I’m ready to join my ancestors in the grave!”” God provides him with food and water and Elijah miraculously walks for forty days and forty nights to a cave on Mount Horeb where he collapses again. “Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”” Elijah is tired, isolated and afraid. One almost expects him to ask God to kill him again. He is certainly intent on feeling sorry for himself, despite the astounding feats he has been able to accomplish with God’s help.

But again, at least part of Elijah’s story should feel familiar to us. At the end of a time of extreme effort, even one which has brought stellar success, it is easy to collapse into exhaustion and depression. Very often, when it seems we should be on top of the world thanks to our accomplishments and the blessings of God, our victories turn to ashes in our mouths. Sometimes it seems like no matter how much we have achieved, it is never enough. The chains of our own expectations, forged in death, drag us down. And if we are facing seemingly insurmountable opposition and hostility, why then if even the great man of God is not immune to depression, that

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little death of the spirit, what chance is there for us? The forces that oppose life, that run counter to God's will, often seem all too powerful. In our brokenness, the grace and power of God seem overwhelmed by danger and the apparent inevitability of death.

At the end of I Kings 19, God responds to Elijah's very real need for human companionship by sending him Elisha, his apprentice and eventual successor. The prophet goes on to speak God's word and perform mighty acts for years to come. But before that happens there is that curious interaction between God and the prophet on Mount Horeb and I believe that it points out another way in which we allow our frailties and errors to separate us from liberty and abundant life in God. After Elijah issues his complaint to God in that cave, God says to him, "'Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.'" Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence." The LORD, of course, was in the sound of silence, the "still, small voice" of the King James Version. Sometimes, we are blinded to the presence of God in our lives because we look for God in the wrong places. We look for God to come into our lives in big, dramatic ways. Our culture, after all, has trained us to believe that bigger is better, that the more flash and noise accompany an event, the more important it is. God's ways are most assuredly not our ways. Our liberation from despair and grief can come in small, almost unnoticed ways. Jesus did not ride into Jerusalem on a white charger, breathing fire from its nostrils but upon the colt of a donkey. Just so, we are set free from death by noticing the small things, the everyday gifts of God – the smile of a friend, the hug of a child, the beauty of a sunset, the poem that makes our breath catch, the song that makes us cry. If we wait to receive our liberation from death and sin from a God who comes as a fire or an earthquake or a mighty wind, we may wait in vain. We will have been chained by our own faulty expectations.

The Gospel in this morning's lectionary also deals with liberty and death and it is a story that also may be familiar. In verses 26-39 of Luke chapter 8, we find the story of Jesus and his disciples in the land of the Gerasenes, a gentile enclave east of Galilee. Upon landing on the shore, they are confronted by, as Luke tells it, "a man of the city who had demons... For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs." When Jesus asks him his name, he famously answers, "Legion, for," Luke writes, "many demons had entered him." Jesus casts out the demons, they take refuge in a nearby herd of pigs, who go mad and drown themselves in the lake. This is the first reported case, by the way, of deviled ham. At the report of the swineherds, the people of the city come to see what has happened. Luke writes, "When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid." Indeed, they were so afraid that they asked Jesus and his disciples to leave town.

I will not take the time this morning to discuss whether or not the man was truly demon-possessed or suffering from a type of multiple personality disorder and schizophrenia. I am, in truth, inclined to agree with Hamlet, who reminded his friend, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy," but I don't think that's the point. The man healed by Jesus was clearly imprisoned by compulsions, whatever their source and that is something that we can understand. We live in a society that both breeds and fears addictions –

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addictions to drugs, to alcohol, to sex, to gambling, to food, to shopping, to anything that we use as a crutch to help us get through the day. Those addictions chain us, imprison us, just as surely as the man often known as “the Gadarene Demoniac” was chained by his family and friends to prevent him from running wild under the influence of his affliction. Our loss of liberty may not be physical, but it is surely spiritual and emotional, as we think we simply cannot do without whatever behavior has enslaved us. But our loving God’s loving Son, Jesus, comes into our lives to tell us that we do not need to be bound to those things or behaviors forever. We can be free to live lives of grace and peace and true liberty. All we need do is share the Psalmist’s faith that God will release us and learn, as Elijah did, to watch for the workings of God in our lives in the very little, very quiet things.

The disciple formerly known as Legion understood who Jesus was and what he had come to tell the world. After his cure, he accepted the commission of Jesus to go and spread the good news of God’s love. But his neighbors, at least at first, didn’t get it. They saw what had happened and they were afraid. If this horribly afflicted one could become well and whole in such a fashion, then what might God do in their lives? How might their comfortable existences be turned upside down? Sometimes, we are enslaved by the ordinary, by the status quo. Sometimes we choose the chains that bind us because they are familiar. True liberty under God can be a fearsome thing. We might feel called to change our lives, give up the easy life for a life of striving to do what is right, struggling to change our world. Better to thank God politely for what’s been done and ask Him to run along now and go back where He belongs, into the church where we might come to visit Him on a Sunday. Who knows what sort of upheaval we might face if we accepted God’s gift of liberty? Better to slowly succumb in chains forged of death than to risk the unpredictable spirit of God in our lives.

Paul tells the Galatians that the liberty that God has given them as a result of their faith has freed them from many things they took for granted. The Law, he writes, imprisoned them. Now they are no longer bound by its exacting strictures but freed to follow God from their hearts. Nor are they bound any longer to the common divisions and expectations of their society. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The liberty of God is a liberty from racism, classism, sexism. We are free to stop seeing people as representatives of stereotypical groups, as Black or Asian or Hispanic or Euro, as white collar or blue collar, as Republican or Democrat, and to see them only as fellow members of the Body of Christ, each with their own distinctive abilities and their own distinctive needs. We are free to love and to minister to each other without regard to the fear of the other that our society is so quick to teach us. All of us are God’s chosen, God’s Beloved Children. That is a liberty which overcomes all chains.

In some ways, the title of this sermon is flawed, for we are not, like Patrick Henry, declaring that we must have liberty and will fight to the death for it. Instead, we are in the position of realizing that we are dying, indeed that we are spiritually dead if God is not in our lives, and that only the grace of God will remove those chains of death and give us true liberty. “Give us liberty and free us from death,” should be our cry. And in reply, we hear the Good News: that through Christ Jesus, we are freed from the bondage of death. Just as to the psalmist and the prophet, God offers us freedom from fear and exhaustion. Jesus said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Just as to the Gerasene man, Jesus offers us

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freedom from compulsion and addiction, the modern demons of the spirit. Like that sufferer, we have been naked to the forces of the world, now as Paul told the Galatians, we are clothed in Christ, prepared to live life as he did, truly free in God's grace. In Christ, we are freed from our own faulty expectations of God, freed from our desire for the world's false comforts, freed from the divisive spirit that separates humankind into warring clans. Our loving God has given us liberty and freed us from death. Thanks be to God!