

“To Release the Prisoners”  
Luke 4: 16-22  
Epiphany Series: The Work of Christmas”  
January 27, 2019  
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

We live in the illusion of freedom. Most of us get up every day and go about our lives as we chose, or so we think, coming and going, making choices about everything from what we eat and what we wear, to what we do with our time (we call it “free” time), and how we allocate our resources. We live without the strain of compulsion or the anxiety of coercion. We can do *whatever we like*.... well.... sort of.... Within the limits of our time, abilities, financial resources, family commitments and responsibilities, obligations to self and others, laws, gender, health, age, race.... should I go on?

Without a doubt Americans *do* enjoy a generalized freedom that is matched by few other places on the planet and yet, we are no more immune to the constraints brought on by law, obligation or circumstance than any others. We tout our moniker: “the land of the free” and yet many of us are *not* free...many of us are far from it.

The people held in detention on the southern border, are they “free”? The children separated from parents, what about them? The people across the globe, and right here in our community, who don’t have a place to live or food to eat, would they consider themselves “free?”

On Friday, the 35<sup>th</sup> day of the longest government shut down in US history, the President announced he would fully open the government for 21 days, the time he has allowed for Congress to reach a sign-able agreement on border security. For a moment, I admit to breathing a sigh of relief. But when I exhaled I knew I had to inhale again; I knew I had to breath

in the toxic reality that this is not trustable moment. If an agreeable resolution hadn't happened in 35 days, then three more weeks might not be enough time. If I were a government employee I wouldn't dare believe that this was the end of it; I doubt I would think that I was "free."

And what about those in our nation who are actually incarcerated? How do they fit in our picture of what it means to be "free?" Do you know that "America incarcerates a higher percentage of its citizens than does any other western nation?... We imprison more of our own people than any other country on earth, including China which has four times our population...." Over two million people are currently locked in American prisons. [1] Or, to put the same figure another way: "The United States has less than 5 percent of the world's population. But it has almost a quarter of the world's prisoners." [2]"

*It gets worse:* "With some 80,000 prisoners in solitary (confinement), the United States leads the world in isolating its citizens as well as incarcerating them." [3] Solitary confinement is defined by many (among them the American Friends Service Committee, and Physicians for Human Rights) as torture.[4]"

*Do you know,* that "in only two states (Maine and Vermont), can prisoners vote in elections[?]... Given the disproportionate number of African-American men in US prisons, we might consider they (sic) ways incarceration functions as a tool of systematic, racialized disenfranchisement. [5]"

- *Are you aware,* that "1 in every 37 adults in the United States, or 2.7% of the adult population, is under some form of correctional supervision.

- In 2014, African Americans constituted 2.3 million, or 34%, of the total 6.8 million correctional population.
- African Americans are incarcerated at more than 5 times the rate of whites.
- The imprisonment rate for African American women is twice that of white women.
- Nationwide, African American children represent 32% of children who are arrested, 42% of children who are detained, and 52% of children whose cases are judicially waived to criminal court.
- Though African Americans and Hispanics make up approximately 32% of the US population, they comprised 56% of all incarcerated people in 2015. [5]

***Did we know? Did we know?***

The fact is, many of us are *not* free: in addition to those women, children and men who sit in US prisons today, *many* of us are held captive by fear or regret, others by grief or despair. While our words or action may not show it, many of us are bound by resentment, anxiety or self-hatred. If I asked you to put your cell phone away for 24 hours, could you do it? Can you stop answering your email, checking your Facebook page or ignore your Instagram account? And you think you're *free*?! The things that tie us down and hold us back are sometimes the results of others, and sometimes of our own making. Either way, they impact everything from the choices we make to the way we live our daily lives. We want to *think* we are free.... But, are we, really?

We cannot talk about freedom wrapped in the illusion that the "land of the free" is the land of all Americans. We cannot hear Jesus proclaim "release to the captives" without knowing who needs to be set free.

Jesus stands in front of his home crowd, in the midst of the synagogue who nurtured and knew him, and recalls the prophet Isaiah's words of liberation and hope, declares them *fulfilled, that day!* "Release of the prisoners, sight to the blind" ...these were familiar promises made in a long-ago time for a long-ago people. Jesus' hearers had come to understand these words as a yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecy, or maybe even a metaphor. Never did they imagine that they would experience their fulfillment.

And what about us? What does it mean for us to hear Jesus saying these same words today? Perhaps we should update this prophecy a bit in order to imagine its impact. What if Jesus came to declare universal healthcare and living wages to all who wanted to work? What if Jesus dared to impose gender equality, recovery for the opioid addicts, and welcome for any person of any nation or religion into the household of God? What if every impoverished person was promised an "extreme makeover" and every ostracized person a seat at the table? What if Jesus stood before us declaring these things and ended with, "OK, let's get started! *This begins now!*"

In all honesty, most of us would be horrified! Those who hadn't already checked out or walked out would be as disgruntled as those who actually did hear Jesus. Because the truth of the matter is that our status and economic security lies with the fact that others are in need. The truth is that we have built this economy on the backs of the ones we have deemed "less"; there is a clear line for those who dare to see it from enslaved Africans to the present for-profit prison system in this country; from drug addicts to drug companies. *Did you know? Did we know?*

Well now we do....and so we need to discern the work that Incarnation calls us to. We need to hear the call to not only to feed the hungry but to change a system that allows people to become hungry. We need to figure out not only how to pray for prisoners, or even visit them, but to break the racist chains of a system that thrives on incarcerating them in the first place. **“Today** this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”!

The good news is not *only* to those who are imprisoned, which in some way or form, is each one of us, but it is that Jesus fully expects that something *can be done* about the injustice in the world and intends to do it! The good news is not *just* a promise of long ago but a fulfillment in our own midst when we dare to extend that promise by our *own incarnation* of the Holy, by our own efforts at justice-making and liberation and attentiveness to those on the margins, the folks Jesus consistently favors over all the rest. The good news is that we too can be liberated from our prejudices and assumptions; we too can be freed from our selfishness and greed. And in doing this work we will find the freedom we so dearly seek, and the power to share it with one another.

My friends, the Emmanuel Light—God with us—shines even in the shadowy corners of our lives where we are not yet free. Open yourself to receive that which you long for, and in doing so, discover the capacity to give the same to those in need.

[1] Lisa Bloom, “When Will the US Stop Mass Incarceration?” <http://www.cnn.com/2012/07/03/opinion/bloom-prison-spending/index.html>

[2] Adam Liptak, “U. S. Prison Population Dwarfs That of Other Nations,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/23/world/americas/23iht-23prison.12253738.html?pagewanted=all>

[3] “Ending Solitary Confinement,” <http://www.thenation.com/blog/168860/ending-solitary-confinement#>

[4] <https://afsc.org/resource/solitary-confinement-facts>; <http://www.pen.org/blog/steve-champion-pen-prison-writing-award-winner-hunger-strikes-san-quentin>; <http://www.aclu.org/blog/prisoners-rights-criminal-law-reform/aclu-united-nations-solitary-confinement-violates-human>

[5] On this point, see especially Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 158-161.

[6] <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>