

21 February 2018
Lent 1 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

Jesu Juva

“Return to the Lord . . . Who Redeemed You”

Text: Isaiah 44:21-28; John 8:31-36

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We heard some pretty incredible words from the prophet Isaiah tonight.

I have redeemed you.

The Lord has redeemed Jacob.

The Lord [is] your Redeemer.

I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist.

And because of that, the Lord calls all of creation to rejoice and sing. The heavens, the depths of the earth, the mountains, and the forest and every tree in it. God calls creation to rejoice because our Redeemer is also creation's Redeemer. Because creation, too, is subjected to sin and death. It is groaning, Paul says; writhing in agony, like a woman in labor (Romans 8:22). And so it, too, is longing for its release; its redemption.

God spoke these words through the prophet Isaiah as if it has all already happened; it is all past tense; that He has done this . . . although it wouldn't actually happen for another 700 years. But Isaiah is looking to the future, to when God would fulfill this promise. For He knows that He will. For when God makes a promise, you can speak of it as if it has already happened - and know that you are speaking the truth. For every word of God is true and sure. Every word of God will come to pass.

And this one, Isaiah says, will come to pass through the one God calls His shepherd. That is first of all Cyrus, the Persian ruler who more than two centuries later would set God's people free from their captivity in Babylon. But creation didn't rejoice over that. Creation knows that earthly kings come and go. The Lord sets them up and brings them down. But what Cyrus did was a pointer, a foreshadowing, of the even greater shepherd, our Good Shepherd, who would set us free from our captivity to sin and death. Or maybe better to say it this way: who would set us free from our *slavery* to sin and death.

Yes, slavery.

That's the way Jesus spoke to the Jews of His day, and maybe like them, you bristle at this way of speaking; that it's a bit much, a bit over the top, if not downright untrue. For

when Jesus spoke of this slavery, they responded to Him: . . . *we have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it you say, 'You will become free'?*

Well, because, Jesus says, you are slaves. *Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.* Jesus doesn't dodge that reality, as unpleasant as it may sound and seem to our ears. For when we think of slavery, we probably think of what we learned in school, of those who were enslaved here in America. Slavery didn't only happen here, but that's probably what we know best. And for those who were enslaved here, it was horrible and unjust and cruel. Surely, that's not us!

But I wonder if the slavery Jesus speaks of isn't even worse. For those who enslaved the body couldn't enslave the soul. Think of all the spiritual songs that came out of that time. But the slavery of which Jesus speaks is not just a slavery of the body, but of the soul. Those sins you do even though you hate them and don't want to do them. That's slavery - those sins are your masters, and they are ruthless.

Think about it. You despair though you know you should not despair. You lust though you know you should not lust. You rage though you know you should not rage. You pridefully ridicule even though you know that the very thing you mock in others is even worse in you. You disobey your parents though you know you should obey them. And what else? What else do you do that you loathe yourself for doing, yet you do it anyway? And then do it again and again? Is that not slavery?

And then what of death? If the First Commandment tells us to have no other gods, and a god is that which you fear, love, and trust above all things . . . what is more feared than death? And we're afraid of those things that often come with death - we're afraid of suffering, we're afraid of weakness, we're afraid of dependency. And so how hard do we try to avoid all of those things. Or if we cannot avoid them, bring them under our control, so we will die at our own hand, at our own time, in our own way . . .

Is this not slavery? A slavery that drives us deeper into slavery. A never-ending, ever-descending cycle, from which we cannot set ourselves free.

Which is why we need someone to do it for us. A Redeemer. A Purchaser. To set us free.

And that is the Good News that we heard from Isaiah tonight, that makes creation rejoice - that you have such a Redeemer. And the Good News we heard from Jesus tonight is that this one who sets you free is the Son of God Himself. And so this is no temporary or partial redemption, but full and complete and everlasting. For, as Jesus said, *if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.*

And so you are. Free. For as Isaiah said, those things that enslave us? What happens to them? Our Redeemer has blotted them out. *Our transgressions are like a cloud and our*

sins like mist. Our transgressions and sins and the death caused by them are blown away by the wind of the Spirit, and dissolved by the Son of Righteousness, just as the clouds and mist of the morning are by creation's wind and sun.

Of course, it wasn't as easy as all that. The Spirit only blows through the cross and the Son had to be extinguished on the cross before shining forth in His resurrection. But, Isaiah exclaims, ***the Lord has done it!*** Has done that very thing. The cross promised is the cross that has happened. And through His death and resurrection, the Lord who created all things has in His Son re-created us anew. He has freed us from our slavery to sin and death and given us new life. Us and all creation. Yes, the ruins of this world and of our lives will be rebuilt upon the cornerstone of Jesus, never to be torn down again. That we may live new lives, as children of God, with a Father, not a master, starting now and lasting forever.

So, Isaiah says, ***remember these things***. For no matter how things seem, no matter how bad things may get, ***you will not be forgotten***. Repent and return to the Lord who, as we heard last week is *gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love*; and as we heard this week, is *your Redeemer*. Who in His forgiveness sets you free, gives you joy, and is your life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.