

"Freedom"

Exodus 6:2-6 and Luke 4:18

A Sermon by Dr. Jim Davis

First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

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Two weeks ago, I was with my family. It was Thursday evening. And all five of us were together, a rare occasion these days. And because we were all together, we decided to do something together. We decided to take a walk. And we decided to take our walk in one of our favorite places, the movie store! We went to Blockbuster!

And as we took a walk, looking at the scenery on the shelves at Blockbuster, my eyes suddenly saw a field of tall grass. It was on the cover of a DVD case. And two men were in the field. One of them was standing with his hands in his pockets. He was dressed in clothes from around 1930. And he had a beard that looked like it came out of the backwoods. But I could tell, as soon as I looked at him that it was Robert Duvall.

The other man was next to him. He was sitting down on an old wooden box. And he was dressed in dark clothes. Looked like an undertaker, which it turned out in the movie, he was. But he had a funny look on his face, a kind of curious, serious look, the kind of look only Bill Murray can give you. Robert Duvall, Bill Murray; two great actors; and that was enough for me. I reached out, took the DVD off the shelf, turned it over and read this:

"For years, townsfolk have been terrified of a backwoods recluse known as Felix Bush. People say he's done all manner of unspeakable things - killed in cold blood, that he's in league with the Devil, that he has strange powers - and they avoid him like the plague.

Then one day, Felix rides to town with a shotgun and a wad of cash, saying he wants to buy a funeral. But it's not the usual funeral Felix wants. No, he wants a funeral, where anybody who's ever heard a story about him will come and tell it. And all he wants to do is sit and listen and take it all in."

And as I read the synopsis, I was taken in. I was hooked. So I showed the movie to Carolyn, and she remembered that we'd seen a trailer for it last summer.

So she nodded. We paid for it, took it home and turned it on. And for the next two hours, we were both taken in by a story which turns out to be mostly true.

It's a story about a man who's spent most of his life living by himself, living with a mule and a memory that's kept him imprisoned.

But that's what memories can do, isn't it? They can imprison us. And the bars they use to imprison us are called regret. And the walls are called remorse and guilt.

And it doesn't matter if the prison is dingy, or whether it's a pretty nice place. In fact, in the movie, after Felix tells a black pastor friend of his that the log cabin he built with his own hands has been his prison for the last forty years, the pastor nods at him and says, "pretty nice prison." And Felix responds, "Yeah, but it's still a jail."

And I've got a feeling that a lot of people would probably understand what he means when he says that. I think the woman at the well that we met two weeks ago in John chapter 4 would understand. She knew what it was like to live in a prison of shame before she met Jesus. I think Peter would understand. For he knew what it was like to live in a prison of guilt after he denied Jesus for the third time. And I think Moses would understand. For he knew what it was like to live in a prison of failure as he wandered for years in the wilderness, herding sheep. And maybe, maybe you understand too. Do you? I know I do.

You see the truth about us all of us is this. As human beings we all live with memories, don't we? And some of our memories aren't pleasant. They carry a lingering sense of regret, and they remind us, every once in a while of decisions we made, or things we did, or words we said that have left scars on our soul.

And though a scar will heal, in time, it never completely heals, does it? It always remains a scar. In fact, if you look it up, there's a reason for that. Turns out a scar is formed by a different kind of tissue. It's stronger than the skin that surrounds it. And when your body is trying to heal a wound, this tissue called fibrosis will literally imprison the wound and enclose it. And in time the wound will heal. But the scar will.

And you can have scars on your body, or scars on your memory. They're both real. And you can't change them or take them away. But there's someone who can. Someone who wants to. And he's the only one who can heal the scars in your soul and release you from their prison.

In fact, to do so, He says, is part of His mission. His name is Jesus. And last week you and I began to look at a few lines from the Gospel of Luke that Jesus spoke in a Synagogue in Nazareth. We called it the mission statement of the Messiah. And we discovered that in spite of the fact that Jesus owned it, this

mission statement was not in fact something he invented. It was something he found.

And he found it in the Book of the prophet Isaiah, in a chapter that describes the work that God promised to do through His Servant, the Servant of the Lord. Through him, God told Isaiah, I will redeem men and women and free them from their prisons.

And as we started to unpack the mission statement of the Messiah last week we found out, it has pieces. And we found out that each of the first four pieces are similar. For each of them begins with a picture, a description. And the picture is a picture of all of us.

These pictures though aren't the pictures we usually paint, the way we usually see ourselves. No, these pictures show us how God sees us. And when God sees us, these pictures say, He sees us as we really are: poor, prisoners, blind, oppressed. That's the picture God sees, the reality not of our physical condition, but of our spiritual condition. And though our appearance may never show it, as the Bible says. The Lord doesn't look on the outward appearance. God looks upon the heart.

And when God looks, He sees the scars that are there, on our hearts, on our souls. And when He sees them, the Bible says, He can't hold back His compassion for us. So He promises one day to lift us out of poverty. He promises to restore our sight. He promises to rescue us from oppression. And He promises to free us from a prison we can't escape by ourselves.

In Florence, Italy, there's a school called L'Accademia di Belle Arti. Its origins date back to the 16th century. And the reason I know about the school is because when I was in college, I had the chance to visit it and walk through some of its galleries. And I'll never forget walking into one of the galleries and seeing four partly finished sculptures. I was curious about why they were only partly finished. So I walked over to learn more about them.

I learned the sculptures were made by the chisel of Michelangelo. They were meant for the tomb of a Pope. But for reasons which have always remained a mystery, midway through the task of working on them, Michelangelo stopped. He never finished them. So when you look at them you see pieces of marble with a hand sticking out here, a torso there, a leg, part of a head. But none of the human forms have been totally set free from the stones.

Together the sculptures are called, "The Captives." That's the name that Michelangelo gave them. And someone who looked at them wrote these words.

"As I look, a deep sense of longing stirs within me; an ache to be set free from all that imprisons my humanness, my wholeness. However like the statues, I cannot liberate myself. For that I need the hand of another."

And the hand of the Other who can liberate us is pictured in the pages of the Old Testament, in the story of the Exodus. Remember? Moses, whose own past imprisoned him in the wilderness, was set free, the Bible says, by God's voice. It spoke to him out of a burning bush and called him to go to Pharaoh and tell him to free Israel.

And Moses went, reluctantly the Scripture says. But he went. He did what God called him to do. He left the life's he'd lived for forty years. He walked across the wilderness. He entered the palace. He gave God's word to Pharaoh. And Pharaoh rejected it. So Moses turned back to God. And he asked Him, "Why Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me?"

And the words of our Old Testament lesson this morning are the words of God's response to Moses question. Listen again. "I have heard," God says, "the groaning of the Israelites. And "I am the Lord. I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm ..."

And as you read the rest of Exodus the promise of freedom comes true. And the promise resonates not only through the book of Exodus but throughout the rest of the Old Testament. The promise that God will give His people freedom is proclaimed over and over. For the God that Israel worships is a God strong enough to set his people free; free from slavery to the Egyptians, free from oppression by the Philistines, free from exile by the Babylonians.

But is God strong enough to free us not only from the present? Is He strong enough to free them from the past and the sins that scar their souls? One day, the prophets said, one day God would find a way to do that, when the Messiah came.

And Jesus, Luke says, came back to Galilee in the power of the Holy Spirit. And he returned to Nazareth where he had been brought up. And he went to the synagogue. And he took the scroll. And he read the promise. And he said, "Today's the day! God's sent me to proclaim your freedom, to release you from captivity. "

So the question this morning on the second Sunday of Lent is this. Do you want to be released? Do you want to be released from regret? Do you want to be released from remorse? Do you want to be released free from a past you can't change by the by a God who says He can heal the scars it's put on your soul?

Do you want to be set free? And before you answer too quickly, consider the story of Srey Mom. In 2004 Nicholas Kristof was in Cambodia. He was there on assignment for *The New York Times*. He was there to report on the prostitution industry in Cambodia. So in connection with his story he decided to try and buy freedom for two of the prostitutes.

He walked into a brothel and talked to two women. They told him they were there against their will. They told him they were willing to tell him their stories. So Nicholas Kristof asked to speak to the owner of the brothel and offered to buy them. The purchase of the first woman was easy. For \$150, Kristof bought her freedom. But for the second woman, Srey Mom, the owner demanded more money.

"After some grumpy negotiations," Kristof writes, "the owner accepted \$203 as the price for her freedom. But then Srey Mom told me that some time in the past she had pawned her cellphone and needed \$55 to get it back."

"Forget about your cellphone," I said. "We've got to get out of here."

"But she started to cry. I told her she had to choose: her cellphone or her freedom, and she ran back to her tiny room and locked the door. She refused to be freed without her cellphone."

And sometimes we do the something very similar I think with God's Messiah. He's been sent to buy us our freedom. In fact he's already bought it. And we know we can walk away with him and forget our past. But we refuse to do it because something, somewhere in our past is a regret we won't let go of.

And maybe that's where you are in your Christian life right now. You know the gospel. You know Christ has redeemed you from your sins. But there's something you can't let go of. Maybe it's not a cellphone you're still holding on to. Maybe it's a memory, a memory of something you said or something you did. Something you think can never be fully and finally forgiven. But if those are the kind of thoughts that are going through your head this morning, then listen. Listen to the first sermon that Jesus ever preached. Listen to His mission statement, the mission statement of the Messiah. Listen to what He wants to do in your life.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has sent me ... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners."

Let's pray ...