

“Freedom FOR”

Rev. Lucy Crain

Date: December 29, 2024

Scripture: Galatians 4:1-7



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

The week between Christmas and the New Year is a bit of a strange time. I don't know if it is the same for you, but I usually find myself equal parts grateful and exhausted after Christmas. I do like to sit in the quiet and look at the now mostly bare tree and ponder the joys of the season: rich worship experiences, fellowship with friends, and beautiful moments with family. I love having my "empty nest" filled again with baking, wrapping, laughter, and so much food! I forget how much young boys can eat! On the other hand, serving a church during Advent is both joyful and overwhelming. I sense you pick up on this, as several weeks ago, I received a Starbucks gift card with a short note that read: "to keep you caffeinated this season." Many of you offer encouragement and prayers and the staff is very grateful! But, I suspect most of you are a bit worn out as well. There are more meals to prepare, last minute gifts to purchase, and festive parties and late nights. In addition, many of you have pitched in around here: decorating the church, serving at extra services, and volunteering at Winterfest, Room in the Inn, Crisis Assistance, or in the Nourish Up pantry. Like me, you may be looking forward to a bit of a slower pace in the coming days. I am leaving for a week of vacation tomorrow and when my husband asked what I wanted to do while we are away, I simply replied "sleep!"

It is difficult to imagine though, that when I return from the beach, it will already be January and 2025 will be waiting - full of potential and possibility. We will celebrate Epiphany together my first Sunday back and then Monday morning, it will be go time! I am excited about a new year of ministry and all that it will bring. So I suspect, after a few good naps, I will spend some of my time away thinking and praying about how to shape my year both professionally and personally. Perhaps you will spend some time pondering your year ahead as well. Maybe you will be making some New Year's resolutions. Funny thing about resolutions, they often involve letting go of something or giving something up. It seems our society today might be cashing in on the resolution idea. We are bombarded by ads for a healthier lifestyle with foods and products that are free from all that is all that is harmful to us. We can purchase items that are dairy free, sodium free, sugar free, and gluten free. We are offered produce that is free from pesticides and meat that is free from steroids. Our hygiene products can be fragrance free and toxin free. We can purchase 100% cotton clothing that is free from synthetics and we can even wash those clothes in "Tide Free" laundry detergent. It seems the retail side of our reality is working hard to keep us free from all sorts of dangerous things.

In our scripture passage today, perhaps the apostle Paul is also both a bit weary after Christmas and looking to the days ahead with thoughts about freedom. He briefly retells the story of Christ's incarnation but sums it up in one short sentence. Paul is more focused on the future and what the miracle birth really means for the world. Paul spends a good bit of the chapter preceding our passage explaining that Christ came to live among us so that everyone can now be free from the law. The Hebrew law, or Torah, was given to the Israelites by God to regulate Hebrew society, religious practices, and the relationship with God and with others. It was very helpful in its time, but now Paul is claiming it was restrictive, exclusive, and no longer needed.

The phrase Paul uses in our passage this morning states that God sent his son not only to free the people from the law but even to redeem us from it. This implies that freedom from the law, and from the "elemental spirits of the world," is literally our salvation. The grace of God we find as heirs with Christ is nothing like what we can find in our earthly realm but something that only God, through Jesus Christ, can provide. Paul boldly claims we are no longer slaves to the things of this world but I think sometimes we don't even realize that we are free.

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As I have reflected on this scripture passage in this strange “in-between” week, I have wondered what I have been freed from, what I have been freed for, and how I can open my eyes and my heart to this gift of freedom. Anna, my amazing colleague, was kind enough to share with me the story of a man named Glenn Ford, who served 30 years in a Louisiana prison for a crime he did not commit. On the day of his exoneration in 2014, his lawyers wanted to celebrate with Glenn by taking him to enjoy his first meal as a free man.

Because it was early on a Sunday morning, many of the places they thought of going were closed, but as he and his lawyers made their way down the highway, Glenn saw a “Hot Now” sign and decided warm, fresh doughnuts sounded delicious. So they pulled off, and the two lawyers got out of the car. They got almost to the door of the restaurant before they realized Glenn was not with them. The men turned around to see him, still sitting in the car, behind an unlocked door. After nearly 30 years in captivity, it hadn’t occurred to Glenn that he could open it himself.

There is a saying that, “a familiar captivity is more desirable than an unfamiliar freedom.” Bizarre as it may seem, we humans sometimes opt to sit, like a prisoner, behind an unlocked door, which opens to a more expansive, abundant life. Our captivity may not be anything as severe as Glenn’s experience, but yet it is still restricting us from the life abundant that Christ came into the world to offer us.

The choir sang a beautiful anthem earlier based on a poem entitled, “The Work of Christmas” by Howard Thurman, an African American theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. It appears in his 1973 book, *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*, and is meant to express Thurman’s spiritual perspective on the “in-between” days following Christmas. Thurman is now honored for many areas of his work, yet he never thought of himself as a leader or a scholar but rather a mystic. If you are like me, you might be aware of the word “mystic” yet it is a difficult concept to describe. While exploring Thurman and this beautiful poem, I decided to look up the official definition of mystic and the dictionary states that it is “a person who seeks, by contemplation and self-surrender, to obtain unity with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute.”

That definition actually sounds a bit like our passage today. “Absorption” is very similar to “adoption.” If Thurman had studied Paul’s word to the Galatians and was trying to live as an heir with Christ, adopted into the family of God, why would he decide to live as a mystic? The stereotype I have heard is that mystics close themselves off from the world in remote monasteries and read and pray all day. However, if “The Work of Christmas” is Thurman’s way of interpreting the gospel message and the Christian freedom it brings, then he sought unity with the divine by loving as Christ loves. Thurman believed in a freedom that is more than just a release from the things that enslave us but an invitation to live in freedom for the work of the kingdom. Through Christ’s birth, we are not only freed FROM something, we are freed FOR something. We are freed for the future that God wants for us, perhaps an unknown future waiting behind an unlocked door for us to embrace.

When searching and praying for the perfect example to illuminate this idea of a freedom that is not FROM something but rather FOR something, I read many stories of amazing people who are using the freedom we experience because of Christ’s birth in service to others. You may know of many of them and we certainly can learn from the lives of inspiring people like Martin Luther King, Jr, Florence Nightingale, or Mother Theresa... and the list goes on.

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However, I thought I might introduce you to someone you don't know. Jennie Jackson will be 79 years old on her next birthday, though you would never know it by looking at her, and she will probably not be in the history books or the papers. Jennie raised 4 children as a single mom, and now has 7 grandchildren, and so many great-grandchildren she says she has lost count (but she can show you pictures of all of them and tell you how smart they are!). Jennie is a strong woman of faith and she has passed that faith on to her family. Jennie feels a call to care for others, and has been doing so her entire life, but has also been doing so professionally for the last 58 years. Jennie is my 91-year-old mother's daytime caregiver.

Jennie has the most special relationship with my mom who is now bed-bound and mostly non-verbal. Jennie can make her smile and mouth the words "I love you" when others might think mom is being non-responsive. Our childhood family room has basically become a hospital room and people come in and out, so Jennie puts up a privacy screen and bathes mom each morning in the most loving and respectful manner. I could go on and on about the way Jennie looks after my mom, but it is not only her care for my mother that is remarkable. When I was home over Thanksgiving, Jennie came in that holiday morning, because of course she worked that day, but she was a bit weary. Her daughter is a nurse and had to stay late at the hospital unexpectedly the night before, so Jennie went to her daughter's house after working all day and cooked her daughter's entire Thanksgiving dinner for her family. Jennie had already stayed up late two nights in a row making batches and batches of her famous chitins for the Thanksgiving meal her son was serving at the homeless shelter he operates in our small town. I would not know these things about Jennie if I did not inquire often because Jennie is never bragging about the work she does or the way she quietly loves all God's children so well.

One of the most remarkable things about Jennie to me is that she has the biggest smile and is always laughing. She has had a challenging life and her job has caused her to fall in love with many people who are nearing the end of their lives. Yet, Jennie is full of joy. I think Jennie's embrace of her Christian freedom has led her into a life of service to others that has opened the door to the expansive life of abundance that God sent his son to this earth to give us. No, Jennie will never be famous but none of us need to be in order to embrace the gift of the incarnation. This life of freedom for others is a gift initiated by God, fulfilled by the Son, and continues through the power of the Spirit. It is just waiting for us to embrace it and to be filled with the joy of God's abundance. The in-between days are coming to an end and the work of Christmas must begin: it is time for us to get busy doing it. All thanks be to God.