

Lenten Sermon Four

The Spirit Anointed Christ for Mercy – Lenten Worship Series

The Spirit Anointed Christ . . . to Preach Deliverance to Captives

Based on Luke 4:18-19

If you have been paying attention on our Lenten journey, you have noticed that we have talked many times about the kingdom of God. We have said that Jesus was anointed to be Prophet, Priest, and King, and that He came to bring the kingdom of God. We have said that “as a member of His kingdom, a blood-bought child of the King, the whole ordering of my life should be service in that Kingdom. I want to do everything that I can to help others come into the Kingdom; and anything that might be a hindrance to that end, such as poverty, I need to try and help alleviate. Because the kingdom of Christ is a Kingdom of love, then I must put my whole self and all that I have at its service.” But where does the notion of the kingdom of God come from?

Imagine, if you can, that you are enslaved. Imagine that you are a captive. Imagine that all of the things you strive for are put to someone else’s service: All you built goes to someone else to live in and all the food you eat is given to you only to maintain your strength to build and work for someone else. Imagine as well, that all you have from your spouse and children, even your life, are considered the property of someone else, and all those things can be taken away at a whim. Your wife, or husband, and your children can be killed at the whim of your captor. Your life can be forfeited at the whim of your captor.

Now imagine that out of the blue comes a deliverer. Someone comes and announces a greater power than the one that holds you captive has come to free you and make you a people for his own possession. The deliverer wants you to live free, and be free, and be in total fellowship with him. Not only is this so, you are told, but this One has chosen you before the foundation of the world and wants you to be His emissary to the whole world, to tell others of freedom, love, light, and mercy. He saves you in order that He might be your God. He wants to be your God, and He wants you to be His possession and lavish upon you the riches of His kingdom.

Of course you know that we are talking about the Exodus and deliverance of the people of Israel from bondage and captivity. The Bible is clear when it states over and over again that God did these things so that Israel could be His people and He could be their God. The people of Israel received their identity as the people of God because of the exodus from Egypt. The great Passover and the day of deliverance marked who and what they were. With that in mind, remember that one day a crowd of people got mad at Jesus and said, “We are the children of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone.” Think of that! When confronted with the merciful Christ, the very people who marked their identity because they once were slaves forget who they were. They stand face to face with the one who freed them, and went ahead of them, and went behind in the wilderness, and who now stands before them in human flesh and wants to free them from the captivity of sin; and yet they forgot who they were. Can anything be sadder? Can anything be more illustrative of the power of sin than those words? Confronted by the one who freed their

forefathers from Egypt and who has now been anointed to free them from the oppression of their sins, they forgot the abject slavery and captivity that their grandmas and grandpas and great, great, great grandparents experienced in Egypt and Babylon. They forgot they were essentially captive in their own land, subject to Rome.

Yet Jesus will not be detoured. This is what the merciful Christ was anointed to do. He came to free the captives from the bondage of the devil — and the bondage of sickness, slavery, prejudice, and hatred—of anything that held them captive. But above all, He came to free them from the captivity of their sins by His perfect life and His sacrifice of that life on the cross. By His death He ransomed all the captives. He said of Himself, “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

Now captives need to be ransomed. Someone has to pay for their release somehow. You can be captive through no fault of your own, or you can be captive because of something that you have done. You may have been captured and taken hostage or put in jail because of your misdeeds, but anyway you slice it, captives need to be ransomed, pardoned, released, or set free. Use your own descriptor. Jesus’ proclamation of setting the captives free, if we think about it, had to do mainly with the bondage of sin and how that bondage showed itself. In *The American Church in Crisis*, David Olson writes there are five overarching messages that Jesus preached in the Gospels. The second of them is that He came to *destroy the power of Satan and deliver people from bondage*.

Olson says the defining story introducing the ministry of Jesus occurs in Luke’s Gospel, chapter 4, when he speaks at the synagogue in Nazareth. He opens the scroll and reads from Isaiah 61, describing the scope and purpose of his ministry with the words we have been studying. But then Olson makes this observation:

“The book of Isaiah played a principal role in the Jewish expectation of the coming Messiah and in Jesus’ own self-definition. Because Israel’s story was wrapped up in the history of its captivity in Egypt and Babylon, it was natural that freedom and release would be a theme of the promised Deliverer. The two most controversial actions of Jesus — both then and now — were healings and exorcisms. Both of those acts liberated oppressed people.

The second message of Jesus is to set people free from the power of Satan and deliver them from bondage. In both healing and exorcism, the goal was to restore people back to God’s original creation of them. Jesus’ words of healing always restored people to health. Lepers become clean. The blind receive sight. Dead people are brought back to life. Exorcism functioned similarly, reversing the evil inflicted upon the tormented.¹

Philip Jenkins, professor of history at the Pennsylvania State University, describes the power of God at work through the second message of Jesus:

Precious little is left of the New Testament after we purge all mention of angels, demons and spirits. Shorn of healing and miraculous cures, the four gospels would be a slim pamphlet indeed. For the earliest followers of Jesus — and presumably for Jesus himself — healing and exorcism were essential

1 David Olson, *The American Church In Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 195.

*components of proclamation. In his acts of healing, Jesus was not just curing individuals, but trampling diabolical forces underfoot, and the signs and wonders represented visible and material tokens of Christ's victory over the real forces of evil.*²

In his commentary on Luke, N.T. Wright adds: "Jesus' task is therefore not simply to teach people a new way of life; not simply to offer a new depth of spirituality; not simply to enable them to go to heaven after death. Jesus' task is to defeat Satan, to break his power, to win the decisive victory, which will open the way to God's new creation in which evil, and even death itself will be banished."³

Jesus understood that there was a problem even deeper than sin, namely, a cosmic rebellion against the almighty God. There are forces of evil who oppose God at every opportunity by corrupting His good creation. Jesus' second message offered freedom and liberation from that oppressive bondage.⁴

It might have been sickness, demonic possession, greed, selfishness, any number of things; but the early church took the words of Jesus very seriously indeed.

Early church bishops took it upon themselves to visit jailhouses and prisons to see that those incarcerated were treated properly. The ransoming of captives, however, became one of the great issues of early churches. They lived in a time when enemies of the empire were swooping in and plundering all over the place, and one of the things that they did was take captives. An early church father by the name of Ambrose wrote, "It is the highest act of liberality to ransom persons, to withdraw them from the hands of their enemies, to rescue men from death, women from shame, to restore parents to their children, and citizens to their native land." One church in France had to use glassware for the celebration of the Lord's Supper because all of its gold and silver was given to the ransoming of prisoners.⁵

We have remnants of the great need the church felt to minister by freeing the captive and visiting those in prison from an ancient litany. "Remember, O Lord, the faithful, who languish in prison, and grant them to see their native land again." When the church became the official religion of the Roman Empire it even ransomed and sent enemy prisoners taken by the Roman Army back to their homes.⁶

The merciful Christ was anointed as Prophet, and He preached liberty to captives. He was anointed as Priest; and when He sacrificed Himself on the cross, His death was the ransom that freed us from the captivity of sin, the devil, and death itself. As our King, Christ rules all things by the power of His might. In His kingdom of grace — the church — freedom is proclaimed and lived. The church continues the prophetic office of Christ and continues to follow the merciful Christ by also preaching deliverance to captives. How many pastors in our congregations visit prisoners, work as chaplains for police departments, or go to the local jails to provide Bible studies and counseling sessions? Our Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod's World Relief and Human Care supports the work of prison ministries through special education and an emphasis upon the work of chaplains. We cannot free those who have been rightly prosecuted, but

2 Philip Jenkins, "Believing in the Global South," *First Things* (December 2006):16.

3 Tom Wright, *Luke For Everyone* (Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox, 2001), 124.

4 Olson op cit, 196.

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we can proclaim deliverance from the bondage of sin to them. We can work for the freedom of the unjustly imprisoned. We can work for the freeing of those bound still in the devil's snares.

At the beginning of this sermon, I asked you to imagine that you are enslaved. Imagine that you are a captive. Imagine that all of the things you strive for are put into someone else's service. Now imagine that out of the blue comes a deliverer. Someone comes and announces that a greater power than the one that holds you captive has come to free you and make you a people for His own possession. He wants you to live free, be free, and be in total fellowship with Him. Not only is this so, you are told, but this One has chosen you before the foundation of the world and wants you to be his emissary to the whole world, to tell others of freedom, love, light, and mercy. He saves you in order that He might be your God. He wants to be your God and He wants you to be His possession and to lavish upon you the riches of His kingdom.

You were a captive, and you claimed your freedom from captivity when you were baptized and renounced the devil and all of his works and ways. You celebrate your freedom when your pastor tells you your sins are forgiven. You celebrate that freedom with your fellow, former prisoners when you receive the supper of freedom. Not only will the destroying angel pass over you, but because you have been freed and ransomed from the prison house, you can eat and drink the medicine of immortality, the body and blood of your Redeemer. All of this because your merciful King, anointed for mercy, came to give His life as a ransom for you — for you and the whole world. Now you can share that freedom and the message of freedom and release because you are indeed free.

Amen.