

***Freely Bound***  
Romans 8:12-25  
Sermon by Mark Schloneger  
May 30 2021

March 8, 2020.

That was the last Sunday that we had an in-person worship service.

Of course, that was the only option that we had *way back then*.

It seems so long ago, doesn't it?

My pre-pandemic memories are all in black and white.

March 8, 2020 was the second Sunday of Lent.

Like today, Hannah Heinzekehr led us in worship.

Andrea Bontrager Yoder led our singing.

The theme for our worship service that Sunday was a plea to God:

*Lord, show us, invite us, challenge us, into a new way of being.*

Friday of that week, an email was sent out canceling Sunday's service.

It was noted that we likely would not have in-person services for several weeks.

And here we are.

*Show us, invite us, challenge us into a new way of being.*

You know, sometimes, it can be scary when God gives you exactly what you asked for,  
challenged into a new way of being.

The focus of my sermon on March 8, 2020 was John 3:1-17.

As it so happens, this is also one of the lectionary texts for today.

These verses contain the story of when Nicodemus came to Jesus at night .

Nicodemus asked Jesus what he meant

when he said that we must be born again.

Jesus replied, *"Very truly, I tell you,*

*no one can enter the kingdom of God  
without being born of water and Spirit.*

*What is born of the flesh is flesh,*

*and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

*Do not be astonished that I said to you,*

*'You must be born from above.'*

*The wind blows where it chooses,*

*and you hear the sound of it,*

*but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.*

*So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."* (John 3:5-10)

*Lord, show us, invite us, challenge us into a new way of being.*

Part of the reason why I'm telling you our theme and scripture  
from the last time we worshipped together in person

is because I feel like we're picking up in this service right where we left off then.

Let me read from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 12 to 25

*So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:12-25)*

*Show us, invite us, challenge us into a new way of being.*

According to the church calendar, today is Trinity Sunday.

In the March 5 issue of *Anabaptist World*,

Richard Kauffman wrote a beautiful article about the doctrine of the Trinity -- I encourage you to read it.<sup>1</sup>

But, today, I want you to simply think about what it means

that at the heart of this doctrine is the notion that we can't fully know or understand God without talking about relationship.

Central to God's own being is love that is shared --

and this self-giving love spills out into the universe and invites us all into it:

in Creation and in the covenants,  
above all in Christ,  
and in the Spirit that bears witness to God's love for us, our neighbors,  
and all of creation.

But what does this mean for how we live?

What difference does it make to know that we are God's adopted children

who have been welcomed and included us into the loving relationship at the heart of God's own identity?

In the late forties of the first century A.D.

the Roman Emperor Claudius issued an edict

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<sup>1</sup> Richard A. Kauffman, "Holy Paradox, Essential Truth," *Anabaptist World* (March 9, 2021); <https://anabaptistworld.org/holy-paradox-essential-truth/>.

that expelled from Rome a large proportion of the Jewish population.  
This was after rioting that may have resulted from early Christian preaching  
among Rome's Jewish community.  
About five years later, Emperor Claudius died, and the new emperor, Nero,  
rescinded those decrees and allowed the expelled Jews back into Rome.  
You can imagine how those Jews were received  
as they returned to take up their property and positions in society.  
Given that, it was likely that there were Christians who – at the very least --  
saw no point in relating to Jews,  
thinking that the church had replaced the Jews as God's special possession –  
that the Jews were excluded from God's covenant.

But even more than figuring out how to relate to non-Christian Jews,  
this church in Rome had to figure out how to relate to each other.  
After all, the church was made up of both Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles.  
The question for them was: How can we live together as one new family in Christ  
when we cherish very different cultural traditions.  
Paul addressed that last point later on in his letter,  
saying that there are some practical things over which  
Christians can legitimately disagree,  
but that they should not impair worship together.

Maybe that's a message that we all need to hear, all of us,  
both as individuals and as a congregation,  
given our different comfort levels  
when it comes to safety at this stage of the pandemic.

To a church struggling to know how to live life together  
without the paradigms they had simply assumed  
for what it meant to be the people of God,  
Paul contrasts the life of the flesh to the life of the Spirit.

To live according to the flesh is to live for that which is transient --  
to pursue self-interests at the expense of others  
to seek and possess things to satisfy ourselves,  
to live as if we are completely free from the ties that bind us to God and others.  
That way leads to death, for it surely doesn't represent life as God intended,  
the life at the heart of God's identity, self-giving love.

Put to death the life of the flesh right now, Paul writes,  
because that's where it's headed anyway.  
Instead, become who you are and live according to the Spirit.  
Just as God freed the people of Israel from Egyptian slavery,  
and claimed them as children,  
so, too, has Christ freed you from slavery to the flesh  
and adopted you as children into the family.  
You do not need to return to the life of fear – a life bent on self-preservation;  
Instead trust where the Spirit leads,  
a life centered on others' flourishing  
Just as God led the Israelites through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day

and a pillar of fire by night to the Promised Land  
so too does the Spirit lead God's people into the fulfillment of those promises.

Yet, we as well as Paul's original audience know full well  
that those promises have not been fulfilled completely.  
As Christians, we embrace a life that parallels Israel's wandering in the wilderness.  
We're in the "in-between" -- we are led by the Spirit through our present sufferings,  
but we look forward in hope for the fulfillment of God's promises.  
God's Spirit is the guarantee that the promises are being fulfilled,  
yet it's also the sign that that reveals that we ain't there yet,  
neither us, nor the rest of Creation.

All of this, Paul says, is a part of hope.  
After all, who hopes for what they already have?  
Who dreams for what they keep in their pocket?  
Hope is about longing for what we do not have, what we do not see,  
our groaning, our suffering, our sighing,  
is creation's response, our response,  
to the fact that we aren't there yet.

It's our protest against what has been broken.

I know that many of us look forward to this Sunday,  
to finally getting back to meeting again in person.  
However, I also know that this worship service also serves  
as a reminder that we're not completely back --  
we're outside, wearing masks, singing isn't be the same,  
and not everyone is here, in person.  
We're caught in the in-between -- together, but not fully together;  
freed, but still bound; thankful, but still longing.  
Our reality, then, provides the metaphor for what Paul is saying.

We have the natural urge to get things back to where they once were.  
However, the Spirit calling us, propelling us forward --  
to lean into the glory that awaits even as we acknowledge the realities of our day.  
It's a part of our hope for justice, for wholeness, for shalom.

Show us, invite us, challenge us into a new way of being.  
How then shall we live?

A little over a year ago, in April 2020,  
author Arundhati Roy, wrote an article about those early stages of the pandemic  
and the ugly things that were coming to the surface about life in the United States  
and in her own native India.<sup>2</sup>

She couldn't have known what the next year would bring.  
"The tragedy is immediate, real, epic and unfolding before our eyes," she wrote.  
"But it isn't new.  
It is the wreckage of a train that has been careening down the track for years. . .  
We can be sure the COVID crisis will be dealt with,

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<sup>2</sup> Arundhati Roy, "Arundhati Roy: 'The Pandemic is a Portal,'" *Financial Times* (April 3, 2020);  
<https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

with all the prevailing prejudices of religion, caste and class completely in place. “  
She was being prophetic.

She closed her article with this:

“What is this thing that has happened to us?

It’s a virus, yes. In and of itself it holds no moral brief.

But it is definitely more than a virus.

Some believe it’s God’s way of bringing us to our senses.

Others that it’s a Chinese conspiracy to take over the world.

Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel  
and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could.

Our minds are still racing back and forth,  
longing for a return to “normality”,  
trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture.

But the rupture exists.

And in the midst of this terrible despair,  
it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine  
we have built for ourselves.

Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans  
to break with the past and imagine their world anew.

This one is no different.

It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it,  
dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred,  
our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas,  
our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us.

Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage,  
ready to imagine another world.

And ready to fight for it.”<sup>3</sup>

The past year should lead us into a time  
of deep reflection, the type of reflection  
that leads to confession, repentance, and commitment.

The type of reflection that names our grief, laments our losses,  
that groans with the suffering of others and ourselves and that continues.

As a congregation, in the name of Christ, maybe our role is simply to offer space;  
to offer the space that is needed to renew relationships after months of isolation,  
the space that is needed to examine what we really believe about God,  
and what it means to be the church after the props for our faith were taken away;  
the space that is needed to express anger, even rage, at the ugly things  
that this pandemic brought to the surface – racism, abuse, economic exploitation;  
the space that is needed for the work of reconciliation;  
the space that is needed for grieving over the many losses that we and others have experienced  
and the space that is needed to celebrate of God’s power that has sustained us  
and leads us into the future.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

With Arundhati Roy, I pray that the pandemic causes us as a congregation to break with the past and to look at our world anew.

At the same time, I would say that the portal through which we walk into a new world is not the pandemic.

It's Jesus, and, through the work of the Holy Spirit,  
we enter into the loving relationship of our three-in-one God;  
the love pours out like a cup overflowing to all people and all of Creation  
yearning for redemption.

Christ has made us free;  
free to be bound together with God, each other, and the all of God's Creation.

*Lord, show us, invite us, challenge us, into a new way of being. Amen.*