

Sermon for Sunday November 27, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"WHEN GOD PAROLED THE DEVIL'S PRISONERS"

Isaiah 42: 1-9

Text: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." Isaiah 42:6,7

Most of us are prisoners of one sort or another this morning. Some of us are prisoners to things. What we own and what we have really owns us. All we do and say and think revolves around what we have. Some of us are prisoners to our egos. We are always needing to have our egos built up. We need people to brag on us, to think we are someone special or great. Others of us are prisoners to our emotions. We are always looking for a thrill, looking for something that will give our emotions a charge, looking for some new excitement, a new sensation. Others of us are prisoners to some vice--it may be lust, it may be drink, it may be tobacco, it may be some other characteristic that holds us captive, but we are in prison to some inner weakness. What does your jail look like this morning? When you are really honest with yourself, what habits, what desires, what needs are your captors this morning?

Life itself can turn out to be a prison. Some people can be prisoners to what others expect of us. Some can be in jail to what society demands of us. Others can be prisoner to the circumstances of life. That happened to the Jews. They were in prison to Pharaoh in Egypt. Later they were prisoners to the Wilderness. And still later they were prisoners to the pagan gods in the promised land where they went to dwell.

But there was one time when they were not prisoners--or so it seemed to them. It was when David was king. When David was king they became a great nation. They were rich. They conquered other lands and became a large nation. The whole world looked up to them. But after David things went from bad to worse. The nation divided in a civil war, the northern kingdom was overrun and its people disappeared from the face of the earth. The southern kingdom eventually fell and they were carried off into captivity. And they were really in prison then. So a dream was born in their hearts. A dream of a time when they would be free again. A time when a king like David--a king even of the lineage of David--would come and set them free again.

Would you like a king like that--a king who would come and set you free? Well, what kind of a king would you want? What kind of a king would he need to be? Isn't it true that different ones of us would want a special kind of king? Well, that was true with the Hebrews, too. Different people wanted a special kind of king. For example, there were the Zealots. They wanted a military leader for a king. They looked for political restoration of Israel and freedom from Rome. They wanted a man who would form up the armies, lead them into victory in battle, and restore them to national greatness. Some say Judas, who betrayed Jesus, was a Zealot. They think that when he betrayed Jesus he was actually trying to force his hand and make him declare himself as the military leader of the people of God. But that failed and Judas went and hanged himself.

Another group was called the Pharisees. They believed that if they could keep the law perfectly for just one day, God would send the Messiah and make them a holy nation. So they looked for a religious leader who would keep the law perfectly. Does that help you understand why they turned against Jesus? He broke the sabbath, he associated with common people, he wasn't interested in all of their laws that kept them in a sort of religious jail. No, Jesus couldn't be the one.

A third group was the Essenes, a sort of mystic group. They separated themselves from the world and waited for some catastrophic event when God's Messiah would appear in the clouds with the heavenly angels and reestablish his kingdom. But Jesus was no recluse. He ate and drank with the common people, he went to weddings, he mingled with the crowds, he laughed and he also wept.

As it turned out, all three groups were prisoners to their various ideas about the one whom God would send. The last of the Zealots perished when the Romans stormed their final fortress at Massada and the rest of the land, including Jerusalem, lay in ruins. The Pharisees never did keep the law perfectly, not for even one day, and even ended up with blood on their hands for crucifying a man that didn't fit their expectation. As for the mystics, they vanished and no one knows what happened to them. Just recently the last remnants of their existence came to light when their manuscripts were found in ancient jars in the Qumarm caves. So they all vanished--the Zealots, the Pharisees, the Mystics.

You see, God's plan for setting prisoners free was different from what any of them expected. A lot of people today have dreams of how to set the world free. Russia says that if communism could control the world, people would be free. In Africa they say that if majority rule is permitted, men will be free. Women say that if we pass ERA, everyone will be free. Sociologists say that if we make the environment equal, men will be free. And so it goes. So many different people have their different dreams about what will set us free and cure the ills of the world.

What do you think will set us free? What would it take to set you free from all of your inner shackles, your prisons within the soul? If we could choose what would set us free, would we be as wrong as the Zealots or the Pharisees or the Mystics?

In this Advent season, as we look forward to the birth of Jesus, the Bible tells us that God knew what would truly set us free--and Jesus himself once said it--he said, "you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free." God sent that truth at Christmas and the truth is Jesus--he alone can truly set us free. Yes, most of us are the devil's prisoners in one fashion or another. And what is the price of God's parole? Would you like to be paroled this morning--free from all the things that make you prisoner? Then here is the conditions of God's parole.

First, you must give your heart to Jesus. You can call it conversion, you can call it being born again, you can call it whatever you like. But it means giving your heart to Jesus, turning over your will to him. Dr. Robert G. Lee, a famous Baptist minister of Memphis, Tennessee in another generation, tells how he gave his heart to Jesus. He was a country boy who lived on a farm. Once when he had been attending a revival meeting, he became convinced that he was lost. The next day, out in the field plowing, he stopped at the end of the row. There in a fence corner he knelt down and prayed, "Lord, if one must accept Jesus to be saved, then I accept him." The next Sunday when the invitation was given, he walked down the church aisle to publically profess Jesus as his Saviour. "I do not remember the minister's text," He wrote, "but I remember the song they sang: 'Out of my bondage, sorrow and night; Jesus I come! Jesus I come! Into thy freedom, gladness, and light; Jesus I come to Thee.'" And then Dr. Lee said this, "The peace which came to me in the fence corner is in my heart until this day." Yes, out of my bondage, into thy freedom, Jesus I come to thee. That's the first step in accepting God's parole, "Jesus I come to thee." Have you given your heart to Jesus?

So, the first requirement in God's parole is conversion--to give your heart to Jesus. The second requirement is consecration--to put all you have and are at his disposal. How much are you willing to put at God's disposal this morning? Back during World War I, General Foch was made Commander of all the allied forces.

When General Pershing placed the American Army under his command he said, "Infantry, artillery, aviation--all we have are yours. Dispose of them as you will." And that's the kind of consecration God demands of us. Jesus put it this way, "No man having put his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God." And he said, "No man can serve two masters..."

D. T. Niles, that great Christian leader of India, tells of seeing an Indian woman standing on the banks of the sacred river Ganges. At her side stood a handsome, healthy boy and in her arms was a sickly infant. A few hours later he passed that way again and saw her still standing there but now with only the sickly infant still in her arms. He knew what had happened. She had thrown her son into the river as a sacrifice to her gods. "But," he said to her, "why did you not give your sickly child who will surely die anyway?" Rising to her full height she replied, "We give our gods our best." Poor soul! How misguided, how useless and pitiful. Yet, do we give Jesus our best? Do we say to him, "all I have is yours, dispose of it as you will?" But that's the kind of consecration God demands of us. And if you think we can get by with any less, we will always remain the devil's prisoner.

Yes, to parole the devil's prisoners God demands conversion--that we give our hearts to Jesus; and he demands consecration--that we put ourselves at his disposal. But thirdly he demands courage--courage to speak out for him. Do you remember the man Jesus healed who was possessed with demons? He wanted to follow Jesus, but Jesus said, "Go home--go home and show what great things God has done for you." That's hard, isn't it? It does take courage to share with those closest to us--to share with others--what God has done for us. Yet, Jesus makes it clear that if we are ashamed of him here on earth, he will be ashamed of us in heaven. (Mark 8:38)

Some of you football buffs may remember Bill Glass, all-Pro defensive end for 12 years with the Cleveland Browns. Bill left football at the peak of his career to become an evangelist. Even while he was still an active player, he had the courage to speak out for Jesus and many a tough football player gave his heart to Jesus because of Bill. After his retirement, Bill once went to the Correctional Institution in Marion, Ohio., to share his Saviour with the prisoners. The first night was a nightmare of embarrassment. The prisoners hooted, laughed, ridiculed. Some walked out--but they returned. Some refused to stand when the hymns were sung. Yet, when a cold north wind began to blow across the meeting place, they stayed. Bill Glass took his courage in his hands and told them about Jesus. Later, one of the convicts expressed it this way, "We didn't want anybody preachin' at us. We've been preached at by everybody. But we wanted to hear Bill Glass talk about football. But after that first night, we just wanted to hear more about God." When Bill Glass finished at that Ohio prison, one of the men said, "Now, I'm free. With Jesus Christ, I'm more free than the guards who go home at night."

Yes, there are all sorts of prisoners in the world today--you may be one of them. In your own heart you know whether or not you are a prisoner to something--to money, to social standing, to material things, to some evil habit, to some weakness. You see, the devil has many prisoners today. But for the man who gives his heart to Jesus, who puts his all under God's command, who has the courage to speak out for what he believes, God sets him free. That's the promise of Jesus--to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Would you like a parole this morning?