

Freed

Acts 2:22-36

April 19, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

This may or may not be something you have noticed, but for most Sundays of the year, the lectionary has an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, a Gospel reading, and then a reading from one of the New Testament letters. Occasionally they throw in options in those areas, but for most of the year, it follows that pattern. But in the weeks between Easter and Pentecost, it gets wacky. No Old Testament reading. And for someone who really enjoys preaching from the Old Testament, well, I've found this to be annoying in the past. Instead of an Old Testament reading, the organizers of the lectionary put in a reading from Acts.

Now this makes sense a little bit, because Acts doesn't fit in any of the other categories of the New Testament, as it's neither gospel nor letter. It's narrative, sometimes an imaginative narrative, about the beginnings of the church, what the followers of Jesus did after the resurrection and after Jesus ascended into heaven. Now what? Acts attempts to answer that question. Some of the events it tells about happened at the same time as events in Paul's letters, but the letters were written down much earlier. And sometimes the timeline in Acts just cannot be reconciled to the timeline in the letters. Much the same way that the gospels cannot be completely reconciled with each other. History, for first century writers, was not just about facts, but about the story those facts could tell.

So you may not have noticed that I've usually avoided preaching from Acts during this time. I don't know why, it sounds silly to say it out loud, but I think it's because I was annoyed that it was stealing the place of an Old Testament reading. And it's a pretty complicated book—lots of characters, lots of moving around to different and unfamiliar locations, and some long speeches, which we'll get to in a minute.

But then I was looking around for a book for our Bible study on Wednesday mornings, and I found this new book about Acts, which has videos that are available for free right now, and then I remembered the weird thing about the lectionary after Easter, and it all seemed to come together. So, this year, I'm sticking with Acts, from now through Pentecost. I figure we'll all learn something together.

Now. The long speeches. This is the first of several. This one is by Peter, on the day of Pentecost, after everyone gathered together has experienced the miracle of the languages and the coming of fire and wind. He gets up and preaches, with lots of references to the Old Testament, some of which are hard to catch.

There's this little section in between Old Testament quotes, though, that caught my attention. If you have a Bible in front of you, I'm looking particularly at verses 22-24, right at the beginning of where we started to read. It's all one sentence in Greek, which makes it complicated to translate. It's a pretty concise statement of Christian belief: *Through God, Jesus did deeds of power, wonders and signs. You crucified him. But God raised him up, freed him from death, because it was impossible for death to hold him.* As long-winded as Peter is in this sermon, this is really what it's all about. Jesus is the Messiah. He died. But God raised him up.

That last part, in verse 24, "But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power." That's the part that really caught my eye, because that's the promise that then becomes ours in the resurrection. In Jesus Christ, we too are freed from death because Jesus has broken the power of death over human life.

Which sounds lovely. Freedom from death. It just doesn't feel very true right now, as we watch death tolls from covid-19 climb every day, as we watch almost every aspect of our lives be constricted and constrained. It's easy to focus on what we are not freed from. We are still held captive to fear, to worry, to sickness, to disease, to bodies or brains that just plain don't work the way they're supposed to. We aren't free from addictions that control us. We aren't free from pain or tragedy or bad news. And all that was true before the pandemic. And now we aren't free in different ways. We aren't free to go anywhere we want or visit anybody we want to or buy everything we think we need or even free to go to school. We feel constrained and constricted and hemmed in. At least I do. And on some days, I feel like I'm captive to helplessness and hopelessness and can't get free.

The good news of Easter, though is that God freeing Jesus from death means that ultimately, we are freed too. That ultimately, in the end, whenever and whatever that looks like, death is not the end. Death doesn't have the last word. Sickness and worry and social distancing do not have the last word.

Martin Luther King Jr's words, based on a spiritual, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty we're free at last" were meant for all people, and were

meant in that ultimate sense. In God's time and in God's perspective, we are all free. And the words of the hymn "What Wondrous Love is This," "and when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on. And when from death I'm free, I'll sing and joyful be" speak to the same thing.

Our freedom does not rest in governor's executive orders. Our freedom does not rely on rules and regulations. Our freedom doesn't even rest in our own convictions that staying put at home is best for our communities, which it is. Our freedom, thank goodness and thank God, rests in God alone. God has raised us up, having freed us from death. And we won't know that freedom until we see God face to face, but it is still real and true.