

Proper 13 B 2018

August 5, 2018 :: Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15; Ephesians 4: 1-16

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“With Freedom, Responsibility.
With Freedom, New Life.”

One of my all-time favorite movies was *The Shawshank Redemption*. And one of my favorite characters in that movie, was a man named “Red.”

Red has been in prison all of his adult life — for 40 years! — but he’s managed to adapt, and he’s carved out a decent niche for himself as the “go to” guy at Shawshank prison. And so, if there is anything you want, and you have enough money, then Red is the guy you want.

However, one year, and quite unexpectedly, Red’s request for parole is approved. And the freedom that he could only dream of, is finally his. But Red quickly discovers that freedom was not what he expected.

To his dismay, Red comes to the realization that he is an “institution man.” Because for forty years, someone else has determined every aspect of his life. And now that he’s free, he

discovers that he's forgotten how to do for himself. He's forgotten what it means to be responsible. And so, Red discovers that, for him, freedom is an alien land, a strange land. And that scares him so much, that he thinks about ways of violating his parole, just so that he can be returned to Shawshank; to the familiar environs of a prison. And so, for a long time, we are left to wonder: "What will he do?"

I mention all this because, in a couple of our readings, we are given descriptions of how two different groups of people responded to God's gift of freedom in their lives.

In our reading from Exodus, we learned about the Hebrew people. They've recently been released from slavery in Egypt, where, for 400 years, they have been praying and waiting for God to release them from their "prison." And suddenly, Moses is raised up, and Moses and God contend with Pharaoh, and Pharaoh finally gives in, and releases the Hebrew people.

However, and to their dismay, the Hebrew people discover that, like Red in the Shawshank Redemption, they too have become "institutional" people. They've been enslaved for so long,

they've forgotten how to do for themselves. And so unfamiliar is freedom to them, and so difficult do they find freedom, that they actually contemplate returning to Egypt, where "we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread."

Fortunately for them, God intervenes and provides them with quail and manna. And as a result of that, they never return to Egypt; and they're never again slaves to the Egyptians. But over time, they do manage to establish, for themselves, a new form of slavery; only, this time, it's an enslavement to a religiously-based legal system.

That is, from the original Ten Commandments, which God gave to them, the Hebrew people created a legal system made up of hundreds and hundreds of laws which governed virtually every aspect of their lives. And so, while they're no longer slaves in Egypt, they're still essentially enslaved.

So, that's one response to freedom.

Another response comes to us from St. Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus. There, the Ephesians have fully embraced

their newly acquired freedom. They love the fact that Jesus replaced the old legal system, with its hundreds and hundreds of laws, and condensed it down to a system with only two laws: Love God, and love your neighbor. And they think that's great. And they think that's easy.

However, and in their great joy over their new-found freedom, they have forgotten that freedom bring with it a price: and that price is the need to be responsible *for* others, and the need to be responsible *to* others. And so Paul has to rein them in, and he writes to them, telling them that they should ...

“... lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

In other words, Paul is reminding them that, “Yes, you're free of the burdens of an onerous legal system. But you're not free of your responsibilities to, and for, others.”

And that was the second reaction to freedom.

And to summarize those two very quickly: The Hebrew people feared their freedom, and the responsibility it brings, and so they search for another form of slavery. The Ephesians, on the other hand, embrace their freedom so much, that they forget the responsibilities that freedom brings.

Now, the question that comes to my mind, is this: Do either of these stories provide us with any good direction? Or, do we have another choice? I think there is another option.

You see, the first thing we have to realize is that our heritage — as the people of God — our heritage is to struggle. Certainly, the temptation is real to wish for a God who is like Santa Claus, and who gives us everything we ever needed or wanted. But the truth is, *God wants our input*. God wants us to contribute to the ordering of our lives. And God wants us to participate with him in the creation of a new life; and not just for ourselves, but also for those around us.

To do this, we only need the two commandments that I mentioned earlier: To love God, and to love our neighbors. Because God has given us everything else we need.

Within our heads, God has placed the ability to learn and reason, and the ability to anticipate and plan.

Within our hearts, God has provided us with the assurance of his love, and the desire for a community that can give us the assistance, and companionship, and encouragement that we need.

And, last but certainly not least,

God has provided us with his Spirit, who is our constant companion, advocate, and guide.

And that Spirit will help guard us against being swept away by our fears, and becoming like the Hebrew people, seeking a new form

of enslavement. But also, that Spirit will help guard us against being swept away by our self-centeredness, and becoming like those Ephesians, who were so focused on themselves that they had no thought for others.

In the end,

I'm glad that God has not chosen to dictate every aspect of our lives.

I'm glad that God wants our input, and that God expects us to act like responsible and mature people.

I'm glad that God gives us the opportunities to learn our true value, by putting us in situations that demand our best efforts.

And I'm glad that God has enough faith in us, and entrusts us with the care of each other, and with the care of this world.

Certainly, this freedom for which Christ has set us free, can entail struggles. But it's through our facing those struggles that we will become examples of strength, and stability, and hope, for those around us. And it's only through those struggles, that we can, with Christ, become bread for the life of the world.

So, whatever happened to Red? Well, over time ...

Red learned that a leopard *can* change his spots.

He learned that fears can be overcome.

He learned that, just as a person can adapt to the life of a prisoner, he can also adapt to the life of freedom.

And, perhaps most importantly,

He learned that, with each new day, any life can start anew. Amen.