

“Word Unbound”

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October 13, 2019

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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

Recently my daughter has been practicing Christmas carols on the violin. I am one of those pastors who likes to hold off on Christmas carols as long as possible, and even use Advent carols instead of Christmas ones until the congregation can't stand it anymore and must break into a *Gloria in excelsis deo* or a Hark the Herald Angels Sing. So as you can imagine, it is not easy on my ears to hear my daughter squeak out O Little Town of Bethlehem and O Come All Ye Faithful in October, but she needs that much practice in order to be ready by Christmas. Added to the unseasonable nature of her music, she just about gets the notes, but the rhythm was tricky: she was counting half- and eighth-notes as quarter notes. And so, I broke my own personal rule and sat at the piano and sang those Christmas carols along with her. After a couple of times through O Little Town of Bethlehem, she put down her violin and, with an exasperated sigh, said, “Mama, can you please quit singing? I hear the words, and my imagination brings me to Bethlehem, and I keep wondering what life was like there when Jesus was born, and then I miss the notes!”

My hope is that she will get to a place where she knows the notes and the rhythm enough so that her mind can go to Bethlehem while she plays, and bring forth all the feelings the words and music of that song conjure up for her as she feels the power of Jesus' coming. I hope that she will find her home in Bethlehem, as Christ is born in her. Not only would that make her more musically interesting, it would also give her music as a way to express her faith.

That is what God's word can do for us. It can grab hold of you and transport you to a holy place, a holy time, a holy moment of God's breaking through to our human world. The Paul, in his letter to Timothy, wrote, “The Word of God is not chained.” So even though the author was being persecuted for his faith, and even chained like a criminal, God's word was not chained. Instead the story leapt from the pages of scripture and took root in him, binding him to Christ's story of death and resurrection. The word unbound gave him reason for hope and endurance even in his own suffering, having faith that God would raise him too.

Has the word of God taken root in you in ways that you can access it even when you are far from church?

The power of the Word is that you don't have to be in Bethlehem in order for its story to take hold of you. You don't need to have the glory of the Temple in Jerusalem to feel the presence of God nearby. When the Word of God is not chained, that means that God's voice can find you wherever you are, whether in struggle or rejoicing. It means that you can be at home with God, wherever you go. The Israelites who were living in exile, forced into Babylon by an occupying power, hung their heads as they wept for all that was lost: their city, their Temple, their right to rule themselves, their people, their God.

But God's advice to them, given through the Prophet Jeremiah who was left imprisoned in Jerusalem, was for the Israelites to make themselves at home there: build houses, plant gardens, and start families-- in Babylon. Not only that, God told them, but also "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to The Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your own welfare." I know many of you who were born in other countries but are living here now have done exactly that. Even though at times you may have a deep longing for home, and even though the challenges of being an immigrant in America right now might rip you to pieces, you have staked a claim in this country, and I absolutely believe America is better for it.

And I suspect that for those of you who find strength from weekly worship, it is because God's word draws you in and calls you home-- not back to the city of your birth, but to a spiritual home, where you are loved, where you feel a sense of connection, where you are called to goodness, and you know your worth in your Creator's eyes. This nurture fills and sustains you, so that you are then able to offer these things to the world beyond these walls.

When Jesus encountered the group of 10 lepers, he could see they had no home. The story, like many Gospel healing stories, takes place in no town in particular but somewhere between here and there: when he was "going through the region between Galilee and Samaria." The lepers approached him, but they also knew to keep their distance; lepers were considered contaminated people, so they would know not to go near the temple, not to go near healthy people, not even to go near their families or their homes. Yet Jesus called them to turn away and show themselves to the priests. *Though they were not healed yet*, they turned to do as Jesus said-- a bold move, considering that in their current state, they would never be allowed to be near a priest.

And yet they did. On their way, they were healed, their bodies restored to a state that could allow for health, and connection, belonging, and a home. And they kept going, heading to the priests who could sign certificates stating that they were in fact “cleaned.” It was like their green card- until they had those certificates, they could not participate fully in community life. So, I actually don’t blame them for not turning back to thank Jesus.

But one, a Samaritan, did turn back, and not only thanked Jesus with words, but with his whole, restored body, which fell before Jesus in an overwhelming display of gratitude. He was not only thankful; he behaved as someone in love. He had found that his home was not centered on what the officials-- the priests-- said about him. After all, he was a leper once, but he was still a Samaritan, a religious outsider. He knew he could better stake his belonging, his sense of home, on the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

At the age of 37, Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, a Harvard Neuroscientist, suffered a stroke. It took her 8 years to recover fully, and the scientist in her paid full attention to what was happening in her brain and body. She shares her experience in a beautiful and inspiring TedTalk. In the immediate time after the stroke, the left side of the brain was shut down for her. In that time, she experienced fully the right hemisphere’s gifts: Peace. Bliss. Compassion. Oneness with humanity and with the universe. A sense of unbound energy-- she called it Nirvana but I wonder if perhaps it was God. Eventually, the left side of her brain started to come back online in fits and starts. Because Dr. Taylor knew so much about how brains work, she knew the steps to slowly stretch and train the left side of the brain so that it could be a partner with the right side of her brain. This work of lighting up the left side allowed her to sit up, and to speak, and to walk, to read and to think. But she noticed that along with these necessary skills, she saw the return of her brain’s chatter that allowed for judgement, for negativity. She found an attic stored full of baggage from the past: all her dramas, traumas, and insecurities. While she knew she needed the left side of her brain to function in life, she never forgot what it was like when she was free from these voices that tended to keep her chained. Since then, she has made it a practice to spend time to intentionally quiet the chatter of the left brain, and nurture the presence of the right brain, for the sake of herself and for humanity, and to invite others to do so too.

I believe the Word of God can do that if we learn how to dwell in it. Now, don’t get me wrong: there is lots of chatter in the bible. Angels are not singing Alleluias from every word that comes off these pages. As much as any of us can show the human tendency towards violence, selfishness and greed, we see these behaviors in the bible too. But the bible also has these pieces that can conjure up within us those experiences of

peace, bliss, compassion, oneness with God and with neighbor. And these are the words we need to carry with us, and share with others. These words will lead to our freedom and freedom for the world. These words can make a home for us wherever we are, homes where we can find healing for ourselves and for our communities and break down the walls that keep neighbors as strangers.

If you have no idea what these words may be, please do yourself and God a favor: don't just crack open the bible and expect whatever page it lands on to hand you God's deepest truths. Like I said, there is lots of chatter in the bible and it takes skill and discipline to read it well and to sort out the grit from the glory. But anyone can start with these passages:

"Love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:31)

"What does the Lord require of you, but to seek justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

Sometimes the truths in the bible do not come from neat phrases but from actions, such as Jesus crossing borders, time after time: between rich and poor, sick and well, Samaritan and Jew, clean and unclean. Or the story of God breaking into the world of human pain and suffering to be one with us, coming as a tiny, crying infant born on the streets of Bethlehem.

As your experience with and knowledge of scripture grows, you will gain more and more passages that take life even beyond the page, and these will not only show you who God is, but they will also become the lens through which you read other passages in the bible, and the lens through which you view your own life as well. You may even find words that will free you and will raise you, even when you find yourself in chains. Even when you find yourself in Babylon, you may discover there is a Bethlehem too, where God is waiting to be born into our suffering and show us the ways towards life.