

FREED TO CHANGE THE WORLD

by Rev. Mary J. Scifres

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INTRODUCTION AND LUKE 4

Tomorrow, we celebrate Independence Day in honor of this country's rebel leaders who declared our independence from Mother England and began a journey of building an amazing dream called the United States of America. Those leaders wanted freedom for Americans, not just freedom from England – freedom for Americans to build our own country, our own dreams, our own destiny. Here, we can worship whenever and wherever we want, vote for the candidate we deem best on the ballot, travel freely from place to place, spend our money in whatever way we want, and speak our mind about controversial topics. So much freedom. So many opportunities.

Some 240 years later, we are still building this country as we create new dreams and debate about what America's destiny should look like for the next 4, 14 or 414 years. Granted, it's a troubled time in our country and in our world, and it's easy to get discouraged and frustrated. But this is nothing new in the human condition. Into very similar circumstances, Jesus arrived on the scene some 2,000 years ago, went to synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, stood up to read, and announced his ministry with these words from the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Jesus had surely been raised not just on the Ten Commandments, but on the full set of Levitical laws that embodied a wise set of principles to guide the leadership of this earth: to defend orphans and widows with justice, to love strangers, and to provide for the needs of all – not only the people who love and know God, but also the strangers in our midst.

And so it is in a synagogue, where Jesus points to this focus on justice and compassion that calls to him as a guiding vision for his life and ministry. As he stands to read the scroll of Isaiah, he proclaims this focus to care for others and seek justice for all. So much freedom. So many opportunities. For the Spirit of the Lord is upon all of us.

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It was an interesting choice for Jesus to make, reading from the prophet Isaiah. There were plenty of rules and laws that the scribes and Pharisees were focusing upon in Jesus' day. It was a troubled time in the Holy Land. The Romans occupied Jerusalem and all its surrounding territories, and the Jewish leaders yearned for freedom from Roman occupation. But since they could not get that, they focused on imposing their own rules and laws upon one another, to try to remain distinct and faithful, set apart from the non-Jewish Romans – laws they could control in such troubled times, like keeping the Sabbath, separating unclean people like lepers and bleeding women away from the rest of the community, and not including people who were not religious in the right ways like Samaritans and tax collectors.

They were not that focused on the freedoms and opportunities God had set before them. In reading this passage, Jesus puts that focus front and center, for this passage refers to a very different law: the long-awaited and never-fulfilled Year of Jubilee, a proscribed law from the Book of Leviticus that seems to have never been followed. This Year of Jubilee was to be a time of liberty for both people and land, mandated in Leviticus 25 as a Sabbath of Sabbaths every 50 years. Slaves were to be freed, land was to be rested, and then ownership of property was to be returned to the community and redistributed. The captives set free, the poor given property and opportunity, the blind able to again see God's teachings and path of justice. Jesus certainly knew that this was not the focus of the Pharisees who ruled Judaism in his day. Even in ancient times, no king or judge had ever referred to this law, nor had they followed it in recorded history. Yet Jesus proclaims his focus when he picks up the scroll of Isaiah and reads of this beautiful plan, written by Isaiah about a Messiah who would come to finally set God's people free to fulfill God's promises. So much freedom. So many opportunities.

Jesus comes to proclaim the Year of Jubilee not as a new law or an old law that must be enacted immediately, but rather as a law that is fulfilled in Jesus' very presence, in his ministry, in the love, compassion, justice, and grace that through him will flow from God to all of humanity, not just to one chosen nation. Jesus declares independence with these words and with his actions: freedom from

the Pharisees' laws he had grown up on, rules that were imprisoning the unclean and the outsiders in poverty and oppression.

Isaiah's prophecy, claimed by Jesus as his own, is a prophecy of freedom and hope. Isaiah's words of love and justice for the poor, the oppressed, the blind, and the imprisoned are a vivid reminder of the hope of Jubilee and connect beautifully to the hopes expressed in the American Declaration of Independence. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are understood to be inalienable rights at the basis of the American dream of independence. We are free, but freed not from some oppressive country – poor England hasn't been able to control us or even its own citizens for centuries. We are free not **from** something, but **for** something. We are free to change the world, free to bring Christ's teachings to this world in the form of love and justice, peace and inclusion. We are free to make this world a better place. We can see that fulfilling Jesus' dream of God's realm on this earth, or fulfilling the American dream of freedom and justice for all, is still a work in progress. We have the power and the opportunities to work with God and with one another to bring that freedom and justice a little closer into being each and every day. So much freedom. So many opportunities.

God has freed us for a purpose: so that we are freed to change the world, in whatever capacity we can. Many of us here are preparing to celebrate American Independence Day tomorrow. But as Christians, we can also reflect on the gift and the challenge of American independence. We are the wealthiest nation on this earth, with some of the world's greatest educational institutions, and with public institutions like police departments, social service agencies, utility companies, parks departments, and road systems all in place to give us freedom and opportunity to pursue the very dreams our ancestors wrote of in that Declaration of Independence.

So much freedom. So many opportunities. So many possibilities when one is free. As Christians, we are called to so much more than just citizenship in a free country. We are called to transform our freedom into action, to let freedom become our opportunity to change the world for God's sake. So much freedom. So many opportunities.

When tragedy strikes, we realize that the freedom we sometimes take for granted is neither free nor guaranteed: a child hiking near Iran is captured like a prisoner of war; a child goes out dancing and is struck down by a hateful shooter; a loved one commits a crime and is imprisoned by our penal system; an alcoholic stops by the bar and

is once again enslaved by addiction; a favorite niece falls in love with an immigrant, only to see him deported after he graduates from college; a friend traveling to Turkey is now in the hospital. On a personal level, many of us know the chains that bind us in our own life struggles: addictions, financial worries, family problems, sinful behaviors, mental illness, or sorrows and grief that seem to paralyze us. On a macro level, we know that freedom is not available to everyone in our world or even in our own country: The poor and hungry are still amongst us and many are still enslaved and oppressed, even within the borders of our own nation and our own faith communities. Justice yearns to rule in this country and upon this earth, and Jesus has called us to freedom to live as God's followers. We are citizens of God's kingdom! The Spirit of God is upon us, freeing us from the chains that bind us and empowering us to bring good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, hope to the oppressed, and justice to this world. So much freedom. So many opportunities.

We are called to God's purpose. We are a people of independence and freedom, a nation of justice and equality. Our patience allows us to work toward the very values we proclaim, even as we recognize that there is much work yet to be done.

The writers and signers of the Declaration of Independence did not dream of a war, though they knew full well that they might have to fight for this nation's freedom if the dream of justice for this new community of citizens was to move toward fulfillment. Those first dreamers did not all live to see the First Constitutional Congress. None lived to see the slaves of this nation freed. Yet, the dream of freedom and equality continued to live in the heart and soul of this nation. Jesus did not live to see his Jewish community enact a true Year of Jubilee, nor did he live to see his own disciples finally begin to live the very lessons he had taught. Yet, Christ's dream of love and grace continues to live in the heart and soul of the Church and in this religion called Christianity.

This is God's word, God's voice of hope in the midst of the painful struggle to create God's realm upon this earth. We are not given a spirit of fear or timidity, but Christ gives us a spirit of love and courage, of hope and strength, so that despair and fear need not bind us. In Christ, we are freed to hope!

When we listen and allow God's voice of hope to free us from the despairs that bind us, we are freed to change both ourselves and the world around us. Two thousand years later, Christians do not

easily accept systems of enslavement and oppression that still exist in institutions and governments throughout our world. God has loosed those chains that bind us. We are no longer enslaved to accept “business as usual.” We have been freed to make significant influence and change in the world. Throwing tea into Boston Harbor, young rebels began a revolution of freedom from taxes that oppressed and a government that did not heed the voice of its citizens. Singing “We Shall Overcome” with Civil Rights activists, Christians throughout this country began the slow breaking of the chains of racism and racist systems that destroy our nation. Advocating with United Nations leaders and international activists against human trafficking, Christians around this globe are helping to slowly break the chains of slavery – both legal and illegal – that connect us with human beings and foreign nations in horrifying and frightening ways.

As we break those chains, we are connected to those eighteenth-century Americans. As we resist the imprisonment of systems that hurt our sisters and brothers on this earth, we are freed to forge bonds of love and grace in place of bonds of oppression and greed that enslave people. Working with social service agencies and faith communities of every shape and size, Christians in our own community and in communities like ours around the world are breaking the chains of economic despair that haunt so many in these difficult times. As we fill the shelves of food banks and clothing centers, as we send medical kits and building supplies to war-torn countries, as we care for foster children or latchkey neighbors whose parents are working late, and as we offer a helping hand to friends without work, we are breaking the chains of self-sufficiency that trap us into despair when money runs short and disappointment runs long. As we break down those walls of self-protection, we are freed to give and receive love in a new way – in the communal way that those first Christians did some 2,000 years ago; in the liberating way that our Jewish ancestors dreamed of when they wrote of Jubilee, a season of sharing everything and forgiving all, so that everyone could start again freshly and freely.

So much freedom that God offers to us. So much freedom that God yearns for us. So many opportunities. So many possibilities. Opportunities to change the world, possibilities to transform lives, freedom to serve God each and every day of our lives upon this earth. As we celebrate a nation’s freedom this weekend, may we as followers of God live into these opportunities to change the world, may we partner with the possibilities of transformation, and may we embrace the freedom to be Christ’s hands and feet of love and justice.