

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"The Gospel in the Carols: We need a Saviour"

Scripture: Mark 5:1-20, John 8:34-36

Theme Carol: God rest you merry, gentlemen (1-4)

Opening Hymn: People in darkness 124

Closing Hymn: Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel 122 (1,4,7)

Children's Hymn: Emmanuel, Emmanuel 114

Choruses: Mighty to Save, Here I am to worship

Rev. Steve Filyk

December 1, 2019

1st Sunday of Advent

Communion Sunday

It's Saturday night.

He tells his wife that he's got some business to take care of
and heads to his office downstairs.

He responds to a few emails, works on a few files,
But soon he's surfing the web
Looking at all sorts of things he shouldn't be seeing.

He's promised himself he wouldn't do this anymore
But it's become a kind of habit,
A way that he relaxes and deals with the pressure of life.

Meanwhile his wife is upstairs.
She has given up on waiting for him.
And is on to her third glass of wine.

She knows she needs to cut back:
She doesn't need the extra calories
And she's tired of the harsh mornings.

But this week was stressful.

Her job's been hard,

And her teenage children have become monsters.

Someone she found herself the liquor store after work.

It's another quiet evening for grandma.

Normally she would have been

chatting on the phone with one of her daughters,

But something changed after Christmas last year.

She overheard them talking:

they were making fun of her.

And when she confronted them,

they said she was overreacting.

That happened 11 months ago,

And she has yet to receive an apology.

Now she refuses to phone them up.

If and when they need her they can give her a call.

We consider ourselves free.

And yet we are subject to all sorts of bondage:

Bitterness or unforgiveness,

Alcohol or pornography.

We consider ourselves free,
But some of the choices we have made
Have turned into bad habits we cannot kick,
Even when they are causing us harm.

What did Marley's ghost say to Ebenezer Scrooge:
"I wear the chain I forged in life...
I made it link by link, and yard by yard..."ⁱ

PAUSE

The story of the nation of Israel is a story of captivity and freedom.
We've spent some time exploring it this fall.

When the people of Israel become slaves in Egypt
God hears their cry and frees them.

God leads the people (sometimes kicking and screaming)
into a land of great promise
blessing them with a law to guide them,
judges and kings to lead them,
priests to offer atoning sacrifices
and prophets to proclaim God's word.

And yet while God continues to cherish them
The people continually rebel against God's will,
The people continually wander from God's ways.

In exercising their 'freedom'
They find themselves back in slavery.

The northern tribes of Israel are obliterated by foreign powers.
Judah is sent into exile.

God graciously preserves a remnant
and brings them back to the land of promise.
But even then, they struggle to be faithful.

As they reflect on their history
The people realise that they need a Savior, a Messiah,
To rescue them from their continual captivity to sin.ⁱⁱ

Today's lesson gives us a glimpse of that Messiah.

After a day of teaching
Jesus and his disciples head across the Sea of Galilee,
Where they encounter an awful storm.

When make it to land they find themselves outside of Israel,
on Gentile soil.

And there they encounter
something even more terrifying:
A crazed naked man approaches from the cemetery.ⁱⁱⁱ

When Jesus sees him,
Jesus recognises his need and immediately takes initiative:
Jesus commands the impure spirits, to leave him.

What ensues appears to be some sort of negotiation
Between the man, the multitude of demons enslaving him,
and Jesus.

In the end the demons are cast into a nearby herd of pigs
that rush off a cliff and drown in the waters below.

...sent back to the abyss.

And the man who had been so enslaved
that he was exiled from society,
a man who had been so oppressed
that he hung out in the graveyard hurting himself,
is now sitting at Jesus feet, sober-minded and free.

As one commentator notes, we see:

“legion evil transformed into discipleship,
a wickedly dissociative personality fashioned into an apostle,
a howler of self-mutilation made into a proclaimer
of the reign of God on earth...”^{iv}

And Jesus is revealed to have authority over the worst sort of evil.
Jesus is revealed to be that Saviour who sets people free.

PAUSE

My guess is that few of us have ever met
Anyone as oppressed
As this demon-possessed man we meet in the Gospels.

Yet some of bondage we see in him,
we can see in others.
And some of this bondage we can identify in ourselves.

There are areas in our lives where we have given up control,
Ceded territory to the evil one.
Many of us can't imagine freedom in these areas,
And many of us think that we don't deserve it.

We've forged our chains,
We've built our own prisons.
We've made our bed so now we have to lie in it.

But the Good News we hear today
is that Jesus hasn't come among us
to insist that we face the consequences of our behavior.

Jesus has come to rescue and to save.

When Jesus encounters the demon-oppressed man
He doesn't ask the man
How he ended up in this situation.

No, he immediately reaches out to help him.

This Savior so longs to help us,
That he will surrender his own liberty
So we can be set free,
so that we can live free.

“At the climax of Mark’s story
Jesus himself will end up naked,
isolated, outside the town among the tombs,
shouting incomprehensible things
as he is torn apart on the cross...”^v

Jesus will give up everything
To battle the forces of evil
And set us free.

Do you want to be free?
Do you need a Savior?

Are you willing to let Jesus break those chains that bind you?
Shatter those links that you yourself have forged?

“God rest you merry, gentlemen,
let nothing you dismay!
for Jesus Christ our saviour
was born on Christmas Day,

to save us all from Satan's power
when we had gone astray:
O tidings of comfort and joy...”^{vi}

ⁱ From Charles Dickens “A Christmas Carol”

ⁱⁱ A summary of The Presbyterian Church in Canada “A Catechism for Today” pp 27-32

ⁱⁱⁱ His nakedness is implied by the fact that he is noted as being clothed in verse 15

^{iv} Richard I. Diebert *Mark* 51

^v N.T. Wright *Mark: for Everyone* 56,57

^{vi} Jubilate Hymns version of 'God rest ye merry, gentlemen'. Eighteenth century traditional.