

Kerrisdale Presbyterian Church

“free indeed”

Scripture: John 8:30-36

Hymns: At the dawning of salvation 248, O Canada 833, I rest in God alone 36,  
Eternal father strong to save 325, Choruses: We Celebrate (Till/Davenport), Mighty to  
Save (Fielding), The Lord's My Shepherd (Townend)

First preached on November 10, 2013 at Kerrisdale Presbyterian Church

Revised and preached on November 12, 2017 at St. Andrew's Presbyterian,  
Kamloops

Rev. Steve Filyk

On the weeks surrounding Remembrance Day

We reflect on the past.

We listen to stories of oppression and liberation

We are reminded that our present-day freedoms  
are the result of costly perseverance.

I'm not a history buff (I leave that to Amy)

But I always enjoy those 'historical moments'

Provided on the inside front page

Of the Vancouver Sun and Globe & Mail.

Here is one of those reprinted snapshots

Taken in Vancouver back on November 11, **1918**:

“Armistice Signed;

No two words that ever came over the wire

caused such a magical transformation

and spontaneously joyful outburst...

In less time than it takes to tell it,

the half-deserted streets were teeming

with hastily aroused

but wildly enthusiastic citizens,

who gave vent to their long pent-up feelings

with hearty cheers, innumerable congratulations...

Whistle after whistle and bell after bell

took up the pean of praise and thankfulness...

The celebration was on.”<sup>i</sup>

It's hard to imagine

What it would be like

To be there in the midst of such a party.

It must have been incredible!

And yet my envy is tempered

by so many other war images and stories:

All the pain and perseverance,

It took to end that war.

In his book, *When Your Number's Up*,

Historian Desmond Morton describes with great detail

The agony endured by the

Canadians who fought in the Great War.

In his chapter on trench warfare

Morton notes that “Soldiers [often]

remembered artillery bombardment

as the most terrifying experience of the war.

[How] They sat helpless

as the explosions came closer...”

Listen to this first-hand description of mealtime,

From Private Edward Foster:

“The concussion made me sick

and I sat there on my knees

with a piece of meat between my teeth

for possibly fifteen minutes

while eight more shells cracked the trench all around

and very nearly covered me with dust and dirt.

A little dog came to the top of the trench

to look at me while I was supposed to be having my dinner

and the concussion of a shell  
hurled the dog right through the air on top of me... [SLOW]

I threw the dog out and continued eating  
between bursts of shells  
(even if there was sand on my bread).<sup>ii</sup>

On Remembrance Day  
We reflect on the past.

We listen to stories of oppression and liberation.  
We are reminded that our present-day freedoms  
Are the result of costly perseverance;  
the culmination of countless decisions  
To continue on a difficult path.

In today's Gospel reading  
Jesus brings up the topic of freedom.  
He offers liberation to listeners  
that the Gospel describes as:  
"[People] who had believed in him".<sup>iii</sup>

The people are portrayed as having faith in Jesus.  
And yet Jesus' offer of freedom is taken as an affront.

These so-called followers don't see themselves as captives.  
They were children of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.  
And believed themselves to be, at least inwardly, free.<sup>iv</sup>

And so they ask Jesus  
To explain himself:  
"Jesus, what do you mean by saying,  
'You will be made free'?"

To probably everyone's surprise,  
Jesus doesn't start talking about Rome  
And its occupation of Israel.  
Jesus talks about sin.

He claims that everyone who commits sin  
Is a captive needing liberation!

Now it's not that Jesus didn't notice  
The present-day tyranny.  
He lived under the social injustices of the Roman Empire  
like the rest of them.

But he had the insight  
The perception, the knowledge  
To realise that a deeper tyranny and oppression  
lay hidden in every human heart.

Whether you are a child of Abraham,  
Or the son of the Roman Emperor,  
Everyone is affected, infected, by sin.

Now let's be clear,  
When Jesus is talking about sin  
He isn't talking about jay-walking  
Or indulging in late-night snacks.

Jesus is talking about those thoughts and behaviors  
That alienate us from God and estrange us from each other:  
pride and envy, greed and anger and lust.

Such sins are "destructive habits...  
patterns of life which, if we let them take control of us,  
...unravel all that is good in our lives,  
...[and] destroy everything around us."<sup>v</sup>

Jesus suggests to these so-called followers  
That despite their good heritage,  
and their sense of inner freedom,  
That they have a problem with sin.

More importantly Jesus declares that **he** knows,  
That the Son knows, the pathway to freedom.

Liberation from sin?  
Now that would be something to celebrate.  
News worth posting on Facebook  
Or yelling down the streets.

And yet, from my experience  
     It seems that few people, pastors included,  
         Have experienced the freedom,  
         The liberation Jesus talks about.

Could it be that Jesus doesn't deliver on his promises?  
     Could it be that we simply don't see our need?

Or could it be that our failure to experience  
     Such rescue and liberation  
         Has something to do with our failure  
         To stick with Jesus, to remain, abide with him?

That we are content with forgiveness,  
     When Jesus has even bigger plans to make us whole?

Now those of us who know the Gospel story  
     Recognise that the freedom Jesus offers is the result  
         Of a costly perseverance.

An obedience to God  
     that culminates in abandonment by friends,  
         Abuse by the authorities,  
         And a terrible death on a Roman cross.

To offer this freedom, Jesus makes the ultimate sacrifice.

But to welcome this freedom,  
     To truly embrace it,  
         demands our commitment and perseverance as well.

Listen to the text.  
     Jesus says to any would-be followers:

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples;  
     and you will know the truth,  
         and the truth will make you free.”<sup>vi</sup>

Most of us hear Jesus' offer

And we think it is appropriated  
     by some brief ritual act:

Maybe a baptism,  
     Or a profession of faith.  
         Maybe walking the sawdust trail,  
         And saying the sinner's prayer.

We participate in these rituals  
     We welcome God's forgiveness  
         And then we wait and wonder  
         Why we don't seem to be living in the freedom  
         Jesus talked about.

We wonder why we still struggle with our problems.  
     Why we keep missing the mark  
         When it comes to our relationships  
         With God, with our families and our friends.

According to John, being liberated by Jesus  
     Means more than claiming his name  
         But following him.

According to John, “perseverance is the mark  
     of true faith, of real disciples.  
         A genuine believer remains in Jesus' ‘word’.”<sup>vii</sup>

Glorious consequences are promised,  
     But such faith requires total and enduring commitment.<sup>viii</sup>

*PAUSE*

You are holed up in your bunker.  
     It is deep.

    And it is solid.  
 Enemy shells have been raining down on you,  
     Pounding on your position for hours.  
         But the bunker remains firm.  
         The defences haven't been breached.

You feel safe and sound.

All of a sudden another soldier appears:

Oh, no, it's an officer.

He dusts off his shoulders, and pulls off his helmet.

He calls everyone to gather round

And explains that while the bombardment is continuing

That the enemy is in retreat.

He wants everyone to get out of the bunker

To chase down the retreating enemy.

To get 'er done.

A hush blows through the bunker.

No-one says anything.

You see fear in the eyes of those around.

And you feel it in your own gut.

The office notices the fear.

With a smile he grabs you by the shoulder.

"Don't worry." He says.

"I know the way. It will be okay. Just follow me!"

"Just follow me."

Maybe we need to rethink our journey with Jesus.

Could it be that Jesus is calling us to a deeper commitment?

And could it be that this path leads to a freedom

we never imagined was possible?

May God give us grace and courage to follow.

Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> As reported in This Day in Vancouver: November 11<sup>th</sup>" *The Dependent Magazine* November 11, 2011 <http://thedependent.ca/news-and-opinion/this-day-in-vancouver/day-vancouver-november-11th/#sthash.tVqljCDf.dpu>

<sup>ii</sup> Desmond Morton *When Your Number's Up* 131, 132

<sup>iii</sup> John 8:31 NRSV

<sup>iv</sup> Rabbi Akiba is credited with saying that all Israelites are kings' sons. See D.A. Carson *The Gospel According to John* 349

<sup>v</sup> Graham Tomlin *The Seven Deadly Sins* 11

<sup>vi</sup> John 8:31 NRSV

<sup>vii</sup> D.A. Carson *The Gospel According to John* 348

<sup>viii</sup> see Ibid