

Imprisoned

Feria for Wednesday following the 3rd Sunday of Advent

December 16, 2020

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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John [the Baptist, who had been put in prison by Herod,] summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” When the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” Luke 7:19-23

The gospel appointed for this evening is not about prison *per se*. The gospel is about the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus and their respective places in God’s plan of salvation. Each of the four gospels treats this relationship between John and Jesus distinctively, but all four gospels clearly argue that the message and witness of John the Baptist are subordinate to the message and witness of Jesus the Christ.

The gospel appointed for this evening is not about prison *per se*. It is the concluding argument in the gospel of Luke about the subordination of John to Jesus. Nonetheless, a primary frame of reference for this important gospel moment is John’s imprisonment. John must have known that his life was at risk, especially given the infamous caprice and brutality of Herod. John is wanting to confirm that he got it right, that his emphatic public message has been the right message, and so John sent two of his disciples to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

The gospel appointed for this evening is not about prison *per se*. But for some reason the imprisonment of John has led me to thinking generally about the phenomenon of prisons, and prisoners, and those who imprison. All of it, I admit, feels largely foreign to me. I haven’t ever been imprisoned, nor has anyone close to me. I admit that, if I scratch just below the surface, I live with the assumption of the privileged that even if I were guilty of a crime, or however accused, I could probably lawyer my way out of prison time.

Maybe my attention was already primed to consider the notion of imprisonment because of the gospel text from Matthew that we heard for the Sunday of Christ the King, only three Sundays ago. At the Last Judgment he king says to the sheep at his right hand, “*I was in prison and you visited me.*” (Matthew 25:36) And to the goats at his left hand, the king says, “*I was ... sick and in prison and you did not visit me.*” (25:43)

Or maybe I’m thinking of the line in the Advent blessing at the end of the mass: “*May Almighty God ... sanctify you with the light of his blessing and set you free from all sin.*”

Or maybe I am already anticipating the start of the public ministry about which we will hear after Epiphany. As Luke tells it, the public ministry begins when Jesus opens a scroll

in the synagogue and reads from the prophet Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me ... He has sent me [among other purposes] to proclaim release to the captives ... and to let the oppressed go free...' (Luke 4:18)

The reality of prisons is so remote for me, and I gather for many of you who are joining in this mass. And yet I know, as you must know, and I sometimes sorrow, as you must, to register, that we Americans imprison more of our citizens than any other nation on earth. And I contemplate with equal sorrow the knowledge that my existential proximity to prison, and the threat of doing time, would be far greater if I were a person of color. The statistics on disproportionate sentencing and imprisonment by race are staggering.

We also know, apart from the legal system, that we humans can also be imprisoned without being behind bars. We may become incarcerated by a mere lack of emotional resilience, or by more pernicious demons or limiting norms: the roles and status we are led to believe that we may or may not assume, our addictions, domestic violence, and more.

I'm not aiming to turn an ancient Bible text into a political statement or a manifesto. But I do feel led by contemplating the imprisonment of John to recognize how remote prison life seems to me and, I gather, to most of us. And I ask us to pause for a moment in this season to contemplate and pray for those in prison, for judges who must go to bed at night after issuing long, hard sentences, for those, like John, countless in number, who have been imprisoned and executed unjustly, for prisoners separated from loved ones, for prisoners of war and prisoners of conscience, and for the compassion and safety of all who take part in the criminal justice system.

Maybe one or two of us, by contemplating John and his imprisonment, will be nudged to some action: visiting a prisoner, writing a letter, hearing a hard story. I've sometimes wondered what it might be like to take part in a prison ministry, but have never done so.

Or what if, instead, or in addition, we took time in this season of Advent to open our eyes to and study the ways that we have been imprisoned, or that we imprison others. How did we get here? How long have we been here? What would freedom look and feel like?

John the Baptist may give us some guidance from his own prison, where he is both faithful and engaged. Notice that he takes action. He sends two emissaries to Jesus. He is not complaining or trying to leverage help. Rather, he is showing his intention to give his full attention to and place his entire trust in God: "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" John receives a positive response from Jesus that he must have received as good news: "...*the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them...*"

We don't know why this good news of Jesus did not result in John's freedom. Sometime after today's scene, John was beheaded as a party favor. The guilty and the innocent continue to die in or because of imprisonment, one facet of the greater 'problem of evil.'

Even so, both the prophets and Jesus insistently proclaim freedom as a purpose and gift of God. Some prisoners *are* freed. Some are freed from behind bars. Others are freed from emotional or circumstantial prisons. You and I may be among those who have never been behind bars, but maybe we are captive in other ways. And in Advent we may wonder how the Savior is ready and willing and waiting to set us free—or others, through us. Amen.