

## A Liberating Word

Luke 4:14-18

*Third Sunday after Epiphany/ 27 January 2018*

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born into slavery on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay, in Talbot County, Maryland, around 1818, but no one knows for sure. In early March 1826, Frederick received word that he was being sent across the Chesapeake to Baltimore to live with the Auld family in Fells Point. Sharing the deck with a flock of sheep, Frederick boarded the *Sally Lloyd*, around March 18. He moved to the bow of the sloop and, as he wrote years later, “spent the remainder of the day in looking ahead.”<sup>1</sup> After a brief stop in Annapolis (he was not allowed to go ashore), Frederick arrived in Baltimore on a Sunday morning. He approached the city in a state of awe as he looked out and saw two- and three-masted sailing ships, steamers, church spires, four- and five-storey buildings and warehouses, and landed at Smith’s Wharf in Fell’s Point. He lived with Hugh and Sophia Auld in their home on Aliceanna Street, just up from the harbor.

Frederick arrived in one of the most thriving and growing port cities in North America. It was the largest trading center for tobacco, wheat, flour, coffee—and, sadly, slaves. The city had 80,000 people: 60,000 whites, four thousand black slaves, and more than fourteen thousand free blacks—the largest concentration of free persons of color in the United States. Frederick entered a new and wondrous universe—of technological innovations and culture, an intellectually diverse and sophisticated society, a cosmopolitan city linking him to a larger world.

Frederick couldn’t read, but he was bright and intellectually curious. He was obsessed with words, and not just any words. Sophia used to read aloud from the Bible as Frederick slept under a table near her feet. He became obsessed with the Bible. He wanted to read, and Sophia started to teach him privately. When Hugh discovered this, he rebuked her and told her to stop, because literacy was unlawful in Maryland for slaves. Hugh said, “Learning would do [Frederick] no good, but probably, a great deal of harm—making him disconsolate and unhappy.” And if Frederick was taught to read the Bible, Hugh said, “there will be no keeping him.” It would “forever unfit him for the duties of a slave.”<sup>2</sup>

Frederick went to church with Hugh and Sophia, Wilk Street Methodist Church; there he heard the sermons and the stories. He heard from the pulpit that, “All men...bond and free” were sinners in need of redemption. Frederick was befriended by a black lay preacher, Charles Johnson, who taught him to pray and awakened his heart and led him to confess “faith in Jesus Christ, as the Redeemer, Friend and Savior.”<sup>3</sup> After that, Frederick saw the world, he said, “in a new light.” He said he “loved all mankind—slaveholders not excepted; though I abhorred slavery more than ever. My great desire now was to have the world converted.”<sup>4</sup> Frederick developed an insatiable hunger to hear more from the Bible. And he wanted to read the Bible for himself—and so he secretly taught himself to read.

In 1833, Frederick was sent back to the Eastern Shore (because of a feud between Hugh and his brother, Thomas), and forced to live in a cruel, sadistic setting. Around this time, Thomas had something of a “conversion” at a camp meeting revival in St. Michael’s, but he continued to brutally beat his slaves, including Frederick, and didn’t see the hypocrisy in that. Frederick *saw* it and *felt* it; he came to see the hypocrisy in the entire Christian

slaveholding universe.<sup>5</sup> With his knowledge of the Bible, he knew what scripture really says about redemption and liberation for all God's children.

Frederick eventually escaped from slavery, headed north, changed his surname to Douglass, and became one of the greatest writers, orators, humanists, and Christian prophets of the nineteenth century. As historian David W. Blight argues in his recently released (and outstanding) biography, Douglass became, "one of abolition's fiercest critics of proslavery religious and secular hypocrisy."<sup>6</sup> Douglass felt in his soul and body, the "blood-chilling blasphemy," he said, at the heart of proslavery piety, these "professedly holy men" who owned his body and tried to own his mind.<sup>7</sup>

And it was the Bible, but not just the written words of scripture, it was the witness of scripture, the voice that comes through the text, God's world-creating, world-judging, world-renewing, radical, liberating, life-giving Word carried by the words of the text, which told him who he was, and who his neighbor was, and gave him a vision of what God desired for all people.

That's the power of God's Word. That's what God's Word *does*. I'm not talking about words, but the *Word*, and by Word, I don't mean the Bible. I'm talking about *the* Word—the creating, redeeming, sustaining, life-giving Word that *is* God, the God who speaks, the God who said, "Let there be . . .," and it was. I'm talking about the God who spoke in the beginning, who spoke and caused the beginning, and spoke the universe into being. The same God still speaking and causing new beginnings. The Divine Voice is dynamic and purposeful and continues to act and move and shape us. The Divine Voice spoke to Isaiah, and Isaiah listened to the Word, and the Word turned him into a prophet. God told Isaiah, "My word shall go out from my mouth: it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Is. 55:11). And then, in God's good time, the Word became flesh, and lived among us, "full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14).

In Luke's Gospel, the Word made flesh begins his ministry in Nazareth. Where? In a synagogue. And what is Jesus doing there? Reading scripture, and not just any text. He's reading from the Isaiah scroll, and just not any reading, but these words: "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" (Lk. 4:18).

According to Luke, when Jesus was finished reading, he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. Sitting down, Jesus does something bold and daring—and arrogant, but for the fact that Jesus was who he was—and says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk. 4:21). Jesus claimed for himself and his mission the prophetic stance of someone like Isaiah. In fact, Jesus is saying that this mission will now be embodied in and through him. The Spirit of the living God is upon him and empowering him to act on God's behalf. And then that same Spirit sends him into the world, calling disciples to follow where he leads. To be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, to bear the name "Christian," means we, too, are being led by the same Spirit who anointed Jesus, led by the same Spirit-anointed Jesus, led by the same Holy Spirit who continues to speak through the pages of scripture and calls us to offer a liberating word.

There is a direct line from the prophetic voice of Isaiah to Jesus of Nazareth to countless other prophets throughout the centuries, to Frederick Douglass, to preachers, writers, poets, reformers, to scientists—heck, anyone anointed by the Spirit of God to bring good news—not bad news or negative news, and certainly not fake news—but good news to a world that desperately needs to hear it, especially the poor. This is what God’s Word continues to offer in the world. What we say, what we preach, how we live, how we treat our neighbors and strangers, our gestures should be proclamations of release, they should release people from what binds them—not bind them further, not throw them into greater captivity. We are to be about offering insight and light so that people can see and see clearly. We are to be about helping people who are blind come to see God’s desire to liberate all people. We are to be about helping those who are oppressed.

We can only be about this work when we realize that it’s not really our work, but the work of God at work through Jesus and, therefore, at work in us. We can’t begin to offer good news until we have heard (and continue to hear) God’s good news to us. And we can’t begin to offer good news to the poor without having some understanding of what it feels like to be poor, perhaps remember what it felt like to be poor, to have not. We need to be empathic toward those who have less (often through no fault of their own). What would be good news for the poor? What if we asked them and listened to them, instead of assuming the answer. Perhaps we need to acknowledge our own impoverishment, the things we lack, or the things that impoverish us which, ironically, might just be our wealth and privilege. Similar questions can be raised around releasing the captives, recovering sight, letting the oppressed go free.

Where in your life, as a follower of Jesus, where has Jesus released you from captivity or recovered your sight or freed you from oppression? Where have you heard God’s liberating Word? For it’s only because we have heard and experienced the liberating Word that we are able to offer a message of good news and liberation. That’s what God wants for us: *liberation*.

You can easily see why the Bible is no friend of dictators or enslavers or oppressors or tyrants. You might have read about (or seen) the recent exhibition of the so-called Slave Bible at the [Museum of the Bible](#) in Washington, DC. It was a redacted Bible, published in 1807 in London by the Society for the Conversion of Negro Slaves.<sup>8</sup> It omits 90 percent of the Hebrew Bible and 50 percent of the New Testament. Its pages include “Servants be obedient to them that are your masters,” from Ephesians (6:5), but omits the portion of Paul’s letter to the Galatians that reads, “There is neither bond nor free . . . for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). I went online to read the text, myself, and was surprised to learn that Luke 4:18-19 was included, although slightly modified. Instead of “let[ting] the oppressed go free,” it reads, “set at liberty them that are bruised.”

The words of the Bible can be so easily manipulated by cruel people bent on keeping poor people poor, keeping captives captive, gaslighting the truth and keeping people in the dark and blind, and making sure there’s always someone around to oppress or marginalize or frighten.

This is why we need the help of the Holy Spirit to help us hear God’s Word in and through the words, this is why we need the Spirit to help us see what God is trying to do in the world. It’s only because the Spirit is at work in us that we can bring good news in Jesus’ name. It’s fitting that this text is today’s gospel reading, given that we will have our Annual

Congregational Meeting following worship this morning. This text is a good reminder about what we are called to as a church, and what our lives are to be about individually. This is what Jesus came to do, it's what he did, it's what he *does*, and it's what his church still does, because we are his.

And the text is also a good reminder of something else we need to remember as a church: *nothing happens apart from the movement of God's Spirit*. The Spirit anoints us and empowers us to do this work, and to do this ministry with joy and gratitude. It's often easy to think that the effectiveness of our ministry, the growth and vitality of the church, the financial health of this congregation are all exclusively dependent upon us, upon the gifts and skills and treasures of the membership and the staff, dependent on our passion and commitment, dependent on our wisdom or knowledge. All this is good and helpful and useful. But apart from the work of the Spirit in us, through us, among us, we don't have any news worth sharing—we have nothing, absolutely nothing. Without the Spirit, we're completely ineffective and, then, thrown back upon ourselves, left to trust our own resources to serve or save the church, to serve or save the world from the mess that it's in. It's not about us. It's never about us. And if the church becomes about us, then something is seriously wrong. As the Scots Confession (1560) reminds us, with words that are sobering, and eloquent and true, “human beings are dead, stupefied, and trapped in disobedience until and ‘unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus,’ enlivens, enlightens, and breaks their captivity.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the oldest hymns of the church is *Veni, Creator Spiritus*, from the ninth century. *Come, Creator Spirit*. And, so, may this prayer be the prayer of this congregation.

Come, Holy Spirit.

Create and recreate us.

Speak to us and give us something to speak to your people.

Shape us, move us, shake us, God,

and send us out beyond these beloved walls with your good news.

Make us hearers of your Word and doers of your Word—your liberating word.

*May it be so.*

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, originally published in 1855. Cited in David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Recounted by Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, cited in Blight, 39.

<sup>3</sup> Douglass, cited in Blight, 52.

<sup>4</sup> Douglass, cited in Blight, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Blight, 58.

<sup>6</sup> Blight, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Blight, 59ff.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/09/674995075/slave-bible-from-the-1800s-omitted-key-passages-that-could-ignite-rebellion>

<sup>9</sup> Grateful to Philip G. Ziegler's reference to and paraphrase of the *Scots Confession*, pertaining to the Holy Spirit, in *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2018), 76. See also article 12, Presbyterian Church, *Book of Confessions*.