

“FREE AT LAST”

“**Choose** for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . .
but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15).
“**Then** you will know the Truth and the Truth will set you Free” (John 8:32).¹

Well, here we are at our last Black History sermon for this year, and when I chose today’s theme several years ago, I think I probably put today’s spiritual in the sequence as I did just because “Free at Last” seems like a good title for the last sermon in a series.

The words to the spiritual—at least some of them—go like this:

Free at last, free at last,
Thank God Almighty, I’m free at last.

You can hinder me here,
But you can’t hinder me there.
The Lord in Heaven’s
Goin’ to answer my prayer.

Free at last, free at last,
Thank God Almighty, I’m free at last.

The general sense of this spiritual appears to focus on “Death, that Great Friend of the Slave,” as it was put in the movie *Harriet*,² which Jill and I watched again this week; and so I first thought of taking this sermon in the direction of Resurrection and the New Creation. At the same time, this spiritual also speaks about freedom from slavery in this life; so I thought about that, and the passage I had first intended to use as our text this morning was this one from Isaiah, which our Lord quoted as His personal “Mission Statement”:³

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor (Isaiah 61:1-2).

I kept thinking, and I remembered that the overarching emblem of freedom from slavery in the Older Testament is Israel’s exodus from Egypt: *Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the LORD’s divisions left Egypt* (Exodus 12:40-41).

I followed that train of thought, and I remembered that once Israel was in the Promised Land, God told them, “*When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God*” (Leviticus 19:33-34).

As I thought about that text, I thought about Lady Liberty and our current debates about immigration. There she stands as we sit here this morning, crying out, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free; the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me—I lift my lamp beside the Golden Door.”⁴

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on February 23, 2020.

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harriet_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harriet_(film))

³ Jesus quoted this in His home synagogue as He began His public ministry (Luke 4:18-19).

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_Colossus

I thought about the fact that unless we're Native Americans (and even they, if we look back far enough), every one of us is an immigrant. I reflected on the fact that it is only the bravest, most motivated people who immigrate, and I thought about the fact that immigrants just want what every one of us wants: jobs, freedom, safety, education, and a better life for their children.

I remembered recent research that argued that if everyone who wanted to migrate was allowed to do so, global GDP would double. I reflected on the fact that immigrants to rich countries typically earn 3-6 times as much as they could back home, and they send a great deal of what they make back to their families in their native lands. Such remittances globally are three times greater than foreign aid, and they go to the people who need them, rather than to corrupt politicians.⁵

I noted with interest that the typical immigrant to a rich country will eventually pay back much more in taxes than they will receive in benefits, and that immigrants start more businesses and file for more patents than native-born folk do. Migration to rich countries leads to many fewer children among those who immigrate, which helps reduce global overpopulation.

As I thought about immigrants, I remembered that our Lord Jesus commanded us to help those who are the last, the least, the lost, and the left out.⁶ Yes, I thought about these things.

Well, I kept thinking. And my thoughts turned to Dr. King's famous speech—listed as one of the 100 Best Speeches of the twentieth century—which he closed with words from today's spiritual. On a day such as this, we should certainly remind ourselves about that speech:

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro [still languishes] in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come [to Washington] today to dramatize a shameful condition. . . .

We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

. . .

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

⁵ <https://shop.economist.com/products/special-report-on-migration-november-16th-2019>

⁶ Matthew 25:31-46; David Anderson, in David Anderson and Brent Zuercher, *Letters Across the Divide: Two Friends Explore Racism, Friendship, and Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), p. 71.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a *dream* today!⁷

Dr. King reminded me that we are all a part of one race, **the human race**. I was reminded that **racism is not a skin problem but a Sin problem**. And whether we're thinking about immigration or about racism, I remembered Dr. Tony Evans' pronouncement that while "We may have come over on different boats, we're all on the same boat now!"⁸

I was doing a lot of thinking about this sermon, but I still wasn't settled about it. I discussed my situation with my sweet wife, and she said, "Well, I'd just talk about getting free from what binds you." So I thought about that, and as I did, I noticed that I'd overlooked the word, "bind," in Jesus' Mission Statement:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to **bind** up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor (Isaiah 61:1-2).*

I realized that the word, "bind," can refer to the idea of "restriction," or it can refer to the idea of "commitment," or even to the ideas of "healing" and "restoration." In the first sense of "restriction," I remembered that it is written that "*Abraham bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar*" (Genesis 22:9). Indeed, our Jewish friends call this scene the *Akedah*, or "the Binding." There are many examples of such binding in the Bible:

- Nebuchadnezzar bound the king of Judah and took him to Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:6);
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound and thrown into the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:21);
- Satan had bound the woman with a persistent hemorrhage for many years before Jesus healed her (Luke 13:16);
- And Jesus was bound and taken from Gethsemane to Pilate (Matthew 27:2).

When we turn to the idea of "binding" in the sense of "commitment," or "healing," or "restoration," there are many more examples:

- God told Israel to "*Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds . . . bind them on your foreheads*" (Deuteronomy 10:6);
- God "*heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds*" (Psalm 147:3);
- *Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart* (Proverbs 3:3);
- And Paul wrote, "*over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity*" (Colossians 3:14).

After I'd been thinking all this time, I came at last to the Truth that **the only freedom any of us ever really has is the freedom to choose our Master**. We choose whom or what we will serve with our lives.

Many have noted that we are not ready to really LIVE until we are ready to DIE if such sacrifice be required of us. Choosing—binding ourselves to—what appears to be safety instead of a Purpose worthy of all we have and are is choosing fool's gold. Here's what some wise folk have said about such choosing:

⁷ <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>

⁸ Anderson, pp. 26, 39.

“You will invest your life in something . . . or you will throw it away on nothing.”⁹

“If you don’t make up your mind, your unmade mind will unmake you.”¹⁰

“The Christian Way is not the middle way between extremes, but the Narrow Way between two precipices.”¹¹

A person who is enslaved in the usual sense has very little freedom, but such persons do sometimes have the freedom to choose death over enslavement, as the many did who jumped overboard during the horrors of the Middle Passage. Harriet Tubman and many others who fought to end slavery in this nation were willing to choose death if they failed to win their freedom, and such was true of a good many folk in the battle for Civil Rights.

As Dr. King memorably put it, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” Catherine Booth, who with her husband founded the Salvation Army, wrote that “There comes a crisis, a moment when every human soul that enters the Kingdom of God has to make its choice of that Kingdom in preference to everything else that it holds and owns.”¹²

It was in this way that Joshua put a choice to Israel: “*If serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then **choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . . but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD***” (Joshua 24:15).

Jesus told those who followed Him—and us after them, “*Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me”* (Matthew 10:37-38). “*If you hold to my teaching [that is, if you **choose** to follow Me, if you **bind** yourselves to me, no matter what it costs], you are really my disciples. **Then you will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you free. . . . If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed***” (John 8:31-36).

If we have been set free in this Way, and only in this Way, then we can live toward those realities with which Dr. King concluded his famous speech:

“We will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

And this will be the day -- this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, From every mountainside, let freedom ring! . . .

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

Free at last! Free at last!

*Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*¹³

⁹ Haddon Robinson, *Leadership*, vol. 7, no. 3.

¹⁰ E. Stanley Jones, *Leadership*, vol. 17, no. 2.

¹¹ Donald Bloesch, *Leadership*, vol. 5, no. 4.

¹² Catherine Booth, “William and Catherine Booth,” *Christian History*, no. 26.

¹³ <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihadream.htm>

One more story and I'm done. Not long ago, three military recruiters showed up to address some high school seniors. Graduation was only a few months away, and the military men were there for the obvious purpose of generating new recruits. The meeting was to last forty-five minutes, with recruiters from the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps each having fifteen minutes.

Well, the Army and Navy recruiters got carried away. When it came time for the Marine to speak, he had just two minutes. So he walked up to the microphone and stood utterly silent for a full sixty seconds—for half of his time. Then he said this:

"I doubt whether there are even two or three of you in this room who could cut it in the Marine Corps. I want to see those two or three immediately in the dining hall when we are dismissed." He turned smartly and sat down. What do you think happened next?¹⁴

I've quoted these words from Jonathan Edwards before:

"Resolved: that every person should live for the Glory of God.

Resolved Second: that whether others do or not, I WILL."¹⁵

*"If you hold to my teaching [Jesus said, that is, if you **choose** to follow Me, if you **bind** yourselves to me, no matter what it costs], you are really my disciples.*

***Then** you will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you free. . . .*

*If the Son sets you free, [**then**] you will be free indeed"* (John 8:31-36).

*Free at last! Free at last!
Thank God Almighty, we'll be free at last!*

¹⁴ W. Frank Harrington, "It's Decision Time," *Preaching Today*, tape no. 162.

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Leadership*, vol. 6, no. 1.

Freedom

Leader: *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners (Isaiah 61:1-4).*

People: ***When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt (Leviticus 19:33-34a).***

Leader: *If any of your people . . . sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh year you must let them go free. And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the LORD has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you (Deuteronomy 15:12-15a).*

People: ***Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story—those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south. . . . They cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle (Psalm 107:2-7).***

Leader: *And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the LORD has rescued will return (Isaiah 35:8-9).*

People: ***They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away (Isaiah 35:10).***

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.

People: **Thanks be to God!**

