

"Liberation Theology"

World Communion Sunday

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About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. ²He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. ³After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.) ⁴When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover.

⁵While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him. ⁶The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. ⁷Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his wrists. ⁸The angel said to him, "Fasten your belt and put on your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me."

⁹Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. ¹¹Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." ¹²As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. ¹³When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. ¹⁵They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is his angel." ¹⁶Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, "Tell this to James and to the believers." Then he left and went to another place. (Acts 12:1-17)

This story of Peter's liberation from Herod's prison is like a mash up of a Mission Impossible film and a slapstick television sitcom. The first half has all the elements of an action thriller, an improbable escape that defies all odds. The second half is more like comic relief, as Peter stands outside Mary's house in the dark knocking on the door, wondering why no one will let him in.

First, the impossible mission. Like many suspenseful thrillers, the backstory is that an evil tyrant has made a bold move. As the early Christian church grows in strength, so does the resistance to the church. King Herod, wanting to strike a decisive blow, sends soldiers to seize James and send the public a message by killing him publicly "with the sword." And when Peter, the church's most prominent leader, is taken into custody, the stage is now set: a bloodthirsty tyrant is on the move; the good guys are up against the wall; and now the hero of the story is in chains. It seems certain that Peter will be the next to die.

Cut to the prison cell, where learn that escape is virtually impossible. Peter's hands and ankles are bound with chains. Those chains bind him to two armed guards who stand directly beside him – one at his right, the other at his left. The three of them sit in a dungeon cell sealed with an iron gate. Two additional soldiers are stationed outside of the cell in a room that is also locked with an iron gate. A cadre of sixteen guards manned these stations in rotating six-hour shifts. Escape from this prison was clearly "mission impossible."



Except that, with God, all things are possible. An angel appears, the chains fall away, both sets of iron gates open wide on their own accord, and while the guards see and do nothing. The most improbable of rescues is achieved, and the hopes of the church are restored.

That's when the sitcom begins. As the angel disappears, Peter snaps out of his daze. He hadn't really known or understood what was happening during the escape. It was only when the angel disappeared that he realized he had not been dreaming. God really had set him free. He goes immediately to Mary's house, where he is sure his friends will be gathered. Knocking at the garden gate, a maid named Rhoda comes to the door. She recognizes Peter's voice, but instead of letting him in, she leaves him standing outside in the dark so she can run tell everyone the good news. Inside the house, Peter's friends get into a spirited debate over who or what is really at the door. All the while, Peter is just knocking and knocking, calling out for someone to open the latch. The comedic irony is obvious: Peter, having escaped the most heavily guarded dungeon in the kingdom, where the doors opened without the slightest push, cannot even get his own congregation to open the garden gate and let him in.

The differences in the first and second acts could not be clearer. In the first act, God is doing heroic work of liberation, making the impossible possible. In the second, the people of the church – including the protagonist Peter – fall into situation that is silly, even comical. While Peter is trying to shake himself awake, the rest of the church, after praying fervently for Peter's rescue this whole time, could not bring themselves to believe that their prayers had been answered. When we think about it, this dynamic isn't really that much of a surprise. It is actually a familiar pattern in scripture: God is always at work setting people free, but somehow God's people have a tough time believing the miracle. God's people always resist the truth that with God, all things are possible.

However, in the late 20th century, a fresh perspective on God's liberating work began to take shape. Much of the energy came out of Latin America, where slavery, colonialism, and other oppressive economic policies had burdened poorer populations for centuries. In our own country, African Americans began to view their own experiences of injustice and oppression through a similar lens. Christians across the globe began to see biblical stories like the rescue of Daniel from the lion's den and the miraculous escape of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace as evidence that God's nature, God's inclination, even God's primary purpose is to set people free from whatever binds them. Over time, this idea coalesced into a philosophy known as "liberation theology."

For liberation theologians, the two central stories in the life of faith are the Exodus from Egypt in the Old Testament and the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. For obvious reasons, the Civil Rights Movement in America viewed the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt as a parallel for their own liberation. Like the Hebrews of old, black Americans were seeking the blessings of a Promised Land, a place free from racist bondage and unjust systems. They too put their faith in the God who had said to Moses, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people... I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering."¹

They also found hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Breaking the chains of death and being liberated from the eternal prison of the tomb had always been seen as the ultimate Mission Impossible, but even the strong walls of death were no match for the power of God. If God could break Christ out of that kind of bondage, then God could certainly save those bound by the shackles of slavery or the injustices of systemic racism. In the resurrection, Jesus became the ultimate liberator. As Dr. Brian Blount has written, to one who is enslaved, imprisoned, or oppressed, "Jesus means freedom."²

¹ Exodus 3:7.

² Brian K. Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).

The hope of liberation theology, however, is not just for literal prisoners or oppressed minorities. The pattern of divine liberation in the Bible is repeated too often. It comes up too frequently, in too many places, for too many people for it not to apply to everyone. All of us know what it is like to be trapped in circumstances we cannot control. Everyone is held captive by something. For some it is poverty. For others it is addiction, or entanglement in a toxic relationship. Some people have been subjected to terrible trauma – something terrible that happened to them in the past and the lingering pain continues to cripple them and hold them back. In addition to the literal ones, there are all kinds of spiritual and emotional prisons that bind us. And, regardless of any other circumstances, our faith tells us that every one of us is trapped in a prison of sin. “No one is righteous,” scripture says. “Not one.” As Rousseau once wrote, “Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”

But thanks be to God that, in Christ, we are liberated – freed from the bondage of sin, freed from the prison of our alienation from God. As Christ himself said, *“The Spirit of the Lord... 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.”*³

And yet, still, we resist. We hear the stories of liberation, but we discount them. We doubt them. It is hard for us to trust them. Angels opening prison doors? Come on. And maybe we think this kind of doubt makes us smart and sophisticated, but it is nothing new. Every story of liberation in the Bible has its resisters. Kings and pharaohs resist with violence and persecution, just like Herod did. But God’s people resisted, too. The Hebrews in the wilderness doubted Moses, doubted that God really could save them. On Easter morning, when the women raced back from the empty tomb to share the news, even the disciples thought they were crazy, said it was “an idle tale.” When Rhoda ran into the house to say that Peter had been freed from prison, that he was outside knocking at the door, they dismissed her, too. Even so, every time, human resistance is overcome. God’s love and commitment is always greater than our doubt, greater than our failure, and stronger than any prison that might hold us. For God, there is no such thing as Mission Impossible. But somehow we keep getting stuck in a sitcom, wringing our hands while freedom knocks at the door.

On this World Communion Sunday, we are about to share one holy meal with brothers and sisters in faith all across the globe. Some of them are strong, but many of them are weak. Some are in positions of power, but many of them are losing hope. Some have plenty to eat, but many of them are not sure where tomorrow’s meal will come from. As we join spiritual hands with them across time and space, I humbly ask, which part of this story do we want to be in? Are we ready to trust God, and join in the epic adventure of liberation? Or will we stay stuck in the idle tale of the sitcom?

One thing is for sure: God is at work right now, around the world... crying with those who are in pain... sitting with families while bombs fall around them... comforting those who are bound by chains of cruelty and injustice... and working very real miracles that, someday, will set all of God’s children free. Amen.

³ Luke 4:18-19. Note that Christ quotes here a key prophetic proclamation from Isaiah 61:1-4.