

Luke 4.14-22

**“RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES”**

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Do you recognize that hushed pause as I weekly fill this pulpit, read the scriptures and begin to interpret them? I find that pause daunting as I seek to find the power of God to proclaim, equal to the severe challenges you face in the world. It's a pregnant pause as you wonder whether God has any hopeful Word for you. Sometimes the world looks like a dark place where evil only swallows the good.

So imagine that same full-of-anticipation pause as Jesus rose, read from Isaiah, and preached his first sermon, in his home synagogue, of all places. Did you hear the words Jesus declared just then? It was about God's Spirit descending on him to proclaim release to the captives and to bring freedom to the oppressed.

As he announces God's reign taking on a world of evil, it's not in terms that we see good and evil, which are mostly whether I'm doing right or wrong, am I guilty or innocent, am I part of the problem or part of the solution. It is bigger than that. He doesn't say he wants to improve our lives or make good people better. Jesus' manifesto delves deeply into how we enslave and imprison ourselves as humans

Release to the captives. Freedom to the oppressed. It is vaster and more global. Jesus reminds me of how Paul writes to the Ephesians, pleading, and imploring, and defining in strong terms, “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Then Paul, in shades of today's final hymn, tells of a war between good and evil taking place right under our noses, and we had better brace and fortify ourselves.

The apostle Peter works this same vein describing evil's personification as “like a roaring lion, your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.” Can we hear such readings and how they address people like us today? Or do we smile at quaint and anachronistic vestiges of a superstitious era before modern enlightened people began the march of progress to build a better world? Do we snicker at religion's primitiveness conjuring red men with horns and a tail? Can we grasp that resisting evil is often bigger than our capacity to choose and can array itself in big institutions or vast movements in ways invisible to the eye?

I stand before you to say we can't jettison such talk because it makes us squirm. Such biblical language, cloaked in myth, conveys that evil is far more extensive and powerful, and far more systemically effective than can be understood or captured by scientific analysis or by the jargons of sociology and psychology. By forfeiting Christian language and thought, our loss is bigger than words. We lose our ability to perceive and address the dark side of human existence in the world.

Why does racial hostility snigger at and even subvert a movement dating back 50 years that had seemed to relegate it to a shameful past? Why do mobs gather and explode often to their own detriment and seemingly without cause or point? Why do nations refuse to hear what Dwight Eisenhower said about the military-industrial complex and call menacing other lands patriotic? Why do educated and good people dedicate themselves to self-destruction through drugs or gambling?

The rational discourse offered by enlightened social sciences lacks words and concepts for how these things happen. The gulag; the Cambodian killing fields: the megalomaniacal pretensions of Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot. Only recently have we become aware of human trafficking right under our noses. Such patterns unfold around us. And these same forces manifest themselves in addictive systems of drink, drugs, and gambling--that bring ruin to our lives and destroy our families.

But we won't know this, shield ourselves adequately, and muster a commensurate response if we will not come out of the little bubble that cannot face darkness.

The summer after graduating from Divinity School, the same summer I was ordained for ministry, Yale Psychiatry and the Connecticut Department of Mental Health hired me in a research grant to interview those closest to heroin addicts. Not surprisingly, my subjects were also mostly addicts. To interview well, you must be trained. So Ileana, a professional researcher, let me sit in on her session with a woman who was in her thirties but looked about 50. Aside from the tracks on her arms, she was covered in oozing sores and perspiring profusely. Obviously in withdrawal, she heaved into the trash bin five times. About five months pregnant, her earning power for heroin was fueled by working the streets.

After the interview, Ileana was beside herself. "I've never interviewed anyone so horrifically in the throes of addiction," she said. "And you were subjected to that on your first interview." But there is no easy way to burst the bubbles we live in.

Another story. In 2009, I had a sabbatical renewal leave, as I will in 2018 after Easter. After my four months away writing, I came back early into my office to go through mail and messages so as to hit the ground running upon my reentry into my Cape Cod ministry. To get through everything, I vowed not to receive visitors or take any phone calls. And that was easier because I was alone on a Saturday.

It was a pile of work to sift through. My phone rang nine times that day. For some baffling reason, I can't even begin to say why, I felt a need to answer the seventh call. So I impulsively picked it up. A mother I had never met before was calling, desperate in her pain. Her 19 year old only daughter, who had been in recovery from heroin addiction, had relapsed. Her pusher had given her a free dose, for old time's sake. But because of months of recovery, her resistance to one dose of heroin had dropped dramatically. So it killed her this time. Can you imagine the feeling of doing this memorial for hundreds of grieving, inconsolable teenagers?

And the problem has only gotten worse since then. Both of my two stories are about illicit drugs. Since then pharmaceutical companies and doctors have proliferated the distribution of opioid painkillers in excess of our need. And fully legal drugs accelerate the rate of addiction beyond anything we imagined back then. Can anyone say powers and principalities? We don't just need Jesus as a friend. We need him as a Savior with power to take on such deep and intractable evils.

The power at work behind such patterns of addiction is personal and systemic. Pushers, enablers and addicts combine in a system of enslavement that transcends the intentions and acts of those caught up in these systems. It is a moral problem, a psychological problem, a spiritual problem and we are all at deep risk.

Jesus is not about improving our lives or helping good people to become better. He's about deliverance to captives like us and routing evil forces of enslavement.

So as the Bible describes the Evil One, it is not a caricature of a man in a red suit with horns and pointy tail. That is thin and silly. It is about how sinister, clever, conniving, and subtle evil is, and how personally it insinuates itself. That is a rich, thick and helpful story. We need to hear of it because no one else is saying that.

As the Bible mentions life and death, it is not only about having a pulse or not. Deuteronomy warns, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life that you...may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days..." (Dt. 30.19-20) Beyond our breathing, here life and death refers to the way that we live and die. What are we offering up our lives for? Whom do we hope to serve with the days allotted us? We can serve ourselves with what seems a good idea at the time or dedicate ourselves to God who is the source of life in every extended vital sense.

Church is where we break down these decisions and where they lead. For as we keep faith with God it sets up healthy forms of life God lays out. That matters for all of us and for all our children. I don't claim we have a magic wand to make everything ok. I'm saying evil is a spiritual power and in Christ evil meets its match.

I had lunch last week with Alan Mathis of Liberation Programs, who knows more about addiction than I ever will. I told Alan of the work Gary and Christine are doing at FCC, and how some had to be convinced of its importance. Wiser than I, Alan said, if they resisted, it was because they didn't grasp that you've staked a claim for your children and youth against addiction and for mental health. Alan is right. Parents alone cannot be expected to prepare their young all by themselves.

Systemic evil, powers and principalities, need a systemic community of grace, and the power of God in Christ to deliver captives and free the oppressed. That's

who we are. That's why we are here. God gives us power to subdue the threat.  
Amen.