

Sermon Draft for June 22, 2025

Text: Galatians 3: 23–29

Sermon: “Set Free”

Malady: Because of our sinful nature, the Law imprisons us as hostages.

Means: Faith in Christ Jesus is God’s gracious gift, given to each of us in Baptism. The Gospel sets the hostages free.

Introduction: A lamb and its mother passed a pigpen each morning on the way to the pasture. Watching the pigs wallow in the mud seemed like fun. On an especially hot day the lamb asked its mother, “May I jump the fence and wallow in the cool mud?”

She replied, “No.” And the lamb asked the next question, “Why not?” The mother just replied, “Sheep do not wallow.”

This did not satisfy the lamb. He felt his mother had no reason to refuse. As soon as she was out of sight, the lamb ran to the pigpen and jumped the fence. He felt the cool mud on his feet, his legs, and his stomach. After a while he decided he had better go back to his mother, but he could not, he was stuck!

His thick wool was weighed down with heavy, sticky mud. His pleasure had become his prison. He was a hostage of the mud. He cried out and the kind farmer, his owner, rescued him. When he was cleansed and returned to the fold, his mother said, “Remember: sheep do not wallow!”

Sin is like that. It looks so inviting and appears easy to escape from whenever we wish. But it is not so! Pleasure becomes our prison. By nature, we are all hostages stuck in the mud!

Who was I before faith came? The Bible says, “I, like everyone else, was a prisoner of sin.” Being a prisoner of sin is akin to the captivity of Terry Anderson, who was held hostage for 7 years by Shiite Muslims. Physical exercises, mental exercises, and especially spiritual exercises did help him pass the time and retain his sanity. Yet such exercises by a hostage do not set him free. Anderson’s captors may have been impressed by his regimen, but they continued to hold him prisoner.

Likewise, rescue from being a spiritual hostage cannot be obtained through our own works under the Law. Our own efforts may make us feel better, but they will never bring us righteousness or salvation.

The Law's role is simple. The Law's role is that of the ancient custodian who was put in charge of the master's son. The custodian's duty was to superintend the son's conduct, to see that the son traveled safely to and from school, did his chores, etc. Our spiritual custodian, the Law, shows us our need for assistance. It reprimands us and points out our weaknesses, our inability to follow what it demands of us. It shows us our sins, our failures. It prepares us for the Gospel, which alone has the power to set us free.

While speaking at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, Terry Anderson, the former hostage, said something that we could also apply to God's Law and Gospel.

The first part could describe the Law: “I wouldn’t want to relive my experience, but I won’t forget what it taught me.” His next comment could describe the Gospel: “But God comforted me, he did guide me, he did help me find my way past the anger and bitterness so that I can live my life in joy and love. I couldn’t have survived without that Bible and without my faith” (AP, in the 13 March 1994, Grand Island NE Independent).

By means of the Gospel, we are set free from our hostage captivity. We Christians have become sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ Jesus (v 26). This happens in Baptism (v 27). Being a child of God is a privilege and honor. We serve our Lord gladly, not by coercion, but in the freedom of the Gospel. This release from captivity is ours through faith as a gift. ***“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*** (Ephesians 2: 8–9).

Our spiritual clothing is the garment of the righteousness woven by Christ in his life, death, and resurrection (v 27). Since God views all us baptized Christians as his children equally, without favoritism we consider each other as of equal status before God (v 28).

We are united as one by one Baptism into the one faith in the one Christ. Since we belong to Christ, we are the spiritual descendants of Abraham and heirs of God's ancient promises to bless all nations. We are blessed by God to be a blessing to others.

What lies in your tomorrow? What is there beyond death? A sick man turned to his doctor and asked, "Doctor, I am afraid to die. Tell me what lies on the other side." Very quietly the doctor replied, "I know little of what is on the other side of death. But I do know one thing: I know Christ, my Master, is there, and that is enough. And when the door opens for me, I shall pass through with no fear, but with gladness."

You may have been or may still be now “held hostage” in an illness, yearning for the day when healing sets you free. You may have been a captive to a bad habit or addiction and wished for the freedom of recovery. You may have felt like a prisoner trapped in an unpleasant job, an abusive relationship, or some other situation, hoping to be released.

Through Christ life, death and glorious resurrection we have been released from the Law and its condemnation of our sin. We are no longer hostages, but sons and daughters of God. And we look forward to the final deliverance, when all the bonds of this life will be opened and we will enter the freedom of eternal life. Christ took our place upon the cross and grave so that we might have a place with Him for all eternity.

In a cemetery in a small town in Iowa, a grave from the Civil War reads (in addition to the name, date, and rank of the soldier): “He died serving in the place of [another name].”

During the draft in the Civil War, it was permissible for one man to volunteer to serve in the place of another one who was drafted. It was often done for money, especially by single, unattached men who sought the adventure of war, or by a friend who didn't want to see a man leave his family.

“As I stood by that grave,” Rev. Alvin Barry said, “I wondered how that other man felt when he visited the grave of this friend who volunteered to die for him. Then I thought, How do I feel when I stand at the cross or the grave of Jesus, who volunteered to die in my place? He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and rose again.”

Amen