

TO LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE

Monday December 18, 2000

Read: Matthew 2:13-15 (16-23)

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, to oppress is “to subjugate or persecute by unjust or tyrannical use of authority; to weigh heavily upon, especially so as to depress the mind or spirits; to overwhelm or crush.” By that definition oppression comes in many forms, and in varying degrees.

It is easy to spot government sanctioned oppression of whole peoples—at least in the areas of the world familiar to us. It is harder to recognize it where we live, among people we know, or in our day-to-day lives. And yet, most of us are aware that oppression does go on even here in the United States. Discrimination still happens because of race or ethnicity. Individuals, and indeed whole nations, are oppressed through economics. The unemployed, underemployed, underpaid, uninsured, and those drowning in a sea of debt are held captive—unable to move ahead in life because they are poor. Too many children and youth are oppressed by the fear and hopelessness of being surrounded by violence. Men and women of all ages live with the oppressive effects of abuse. One might even suggest that the joy of the holiday season oppresses the sad and lonely, for certainly some spirits are overwhelmed and weighed heavily upon by this time of the year.

We can see oppression when we look for it. Perhaps the most difficult things to see, though, are what part we play in creating and supporting oppressive forces around the world and how we can do anything significant to end oppression. But as children of the God of the Exodus, we are called to repentance for our sin, and called to carry on Christ’s ministry “to let the oppressed go free.” JAL

Prayer: God of truth, you call us to be people of good conscience. When we look, we see the hurt of our brothers and sisters in the world. Give us wisdom and determination to lead the oppressed out of Egypt and into freedom. **Amen.**

For your meditation: How do you define oppression? What kinds of actions are oppressive? Can people be oppressed by life circumstances, or only by other, more powerful people? What does God expect of us when we see oppression?

Tuesday December 19, 2000

Read: Isaiah 52:1-10

They didn't have any shoes to wear.

That wasn't the only difficulty in their lives, but maybe it was symbolic of the way they were forced to exist. They lived in the middle of the woods, on private property not their own, in corrugated tin shacks. According to the government, they could not live there. It didn't matter that the property owners allowed them to live there; it wasn't a "black" area. If they were discovered, soldiers would come through and forcibly remove them, leaving them with no place to live at all. With no place to live, they couldn't work, even at their low paying, backbreaking jobs. It wasn't allowed.

Their houses had walls and a roof, but they only partially kept out the cold and the rain. There were no lights, no running water, and no floors—though it wasn't because these amenities weren't available. The homes outside the woods had them, and in fact some of them were quite elegant. And it wasn't deep in the heart of some third world country. It was not too far from a well-developed city in a very modern country.

Decent housing wasn't all that was lacking—so was decent pay for their hard labor, opportunity to education their children, possibility of advancement in their jobs, access to medical or dental services, and much more!

To them we could only have been wealthy, privileged white kids. But they were glad to see us anyway! We were signs of *hope* to them. They believed that we had the power and good will to do *something*. They were anxious to tell us their stories, for they wanted us to understand their lives. They were ready with smiles for all of our cameras to capture. But what they really wanted us to see was that they didn't have any shoes to wear. JAL

Prayer: God of the oppressed, even the Christ child was sent to a foreign land by oppressive forces. Help me to recognize oppressive forces in far away lands and in the lives of people I know. Help me to give up habits that cause oppression for others.
Amen.

For your meditation: Who are the oppressed? What are the forces that oppress them? What characteristics or circumstances make people susceptible to oppression?

Wednesday December 20, 2000

Read: John 8:31-36

I grew up on five acres of land, of which about half was a long, narrow field which merged into a swampy woods. I spent many a sunny summer day crawling through tunnels in the long grass of the field with siblings and friends. Sometimes we would take peanut butter sandwiches and kool-aid and have a picnic lunch as we balanced on a bent over tree branch or sat on the rusting frame of an abandoned wagon that had mostly rotted away. After dark we would play hide and seek in the field. And the woods provided endless hours of exploration. Sometimes we would dig around and find old bottles in the ground. Once we even caught a fish, which we kept in our fish tank for a long time.

The charm of the wintertime woods was a little different. The swamp had just enough water that we could ice skate when it froze. It wasn't very smooth, and we had to skate around trees. But it was enough to make us happy by the time we trudged back through the field, with pink cheeks and cold fingers, to the house.

For me, the field and the woods on my parents' property holds happy memories, perhaps most of all because it was a place and a time of freedom. There we were safe. The only eyes on us were watchful eyes, looking out for our safety. There were no grave dangers—no traffic, no bullets flying, no one to lead us astray, no drugs, no violence, and no prejudice. There in the field and the woods we didn't learn how to hate. We weren't enticed by money or possessions. We did gain an appreciation for the goodness of God's creation. And we learned to give and take, and how to get along.

Not all the world's children have opportunities to learn such lessons. In some places orphans are locked away with hardly a chance to see daylight. In other places, life is always in peril. Christ came to set us free. But perhaps the world will know the freedom Christ brings only when all the world's children live in the safety and freedom of the field and the woods. JAL

Prayer: God of the free, you sent Christ to inaugurate peace on earth. As an instrument of your peace, show me how to make all of the world's fields and woods and cities and villages safe for people at any stage of life. **Amen.**

For your meditation: What does being free mean to you? Free *from* what? Free *for* what? What freedoms did the world gain with Christ's birth? What freedoms does God give? What connections are there between freedom in the world and the freedom Christ gives?

Thursday December 21, 2000

Read: Psalm 9:7-14

The dreary Connecticut winter was gloomier than usual that year. I was struggling with vocational decisions and requirements, and looking for direction. And, after a fall semester of being so tired that I napped during any time slot of even twenty minutes between chapel, class, work, and church activities, over Christmas break I was diagnosed with Lyme disease. Somehow, when I finished the antibiotics for that, I came down with strep throat. I was finally getting over that, but still frustrated and tired, when a chapel service changed everything!

It was Ash Wednesday. A clown and her “supervisor” led the service. She was supposed to be doing some cleaning, but she was tired too! She fell asleep. He crossly woke her and handed her the duster. She dusted and straightened, and picked up the trash. As we read the confession, she put the trash on the altar! When the supervisor shook his head “no” she gave him the broom. She mopped the floor. She mopped his feet! She had us mop our feet too! Together we read words of assurance that our sin was forgiven.

When her work was finally done she sat down to rest, and nodded off to sleep again. This time when the supervisor woke her, it was with gentleness. He held up his finger to point that she could go. But she had one more thing to do. She lifted her finger to his, and together they made the sign of the cross. Then the cleaner-clown brought her half of the cross to the congregation, and we passed the cross through the chapel, each one needing another to make the cross complete.

That worship service didn’t change any of the circumstances in my life. Perhaps it did change my attitude. When I left I felt cleansed, refreshed, and set free. JAL

Prayer: God of change and glory, it is sometimes the actions of others, and sometimes the workings of our own minds that cause our hearts to be heavy, but you, O God, sent Christ to bring us freedom. Make me free, that I may be an instrument of your freedom for others. **Amen.**

For your meditation: Have you been oppressed in your life? How? In what ways have you been set free from that oppression? Where was God working in the midst of that experience? How has this enabled you to help others find freedom in their lives?

Friday December 22, 2000

Read: 1 Peter 2:15-17

One of the best Christmas gifts I ever got sits on display in my office amidst other symbols of my profession. Sometimes the kids who come in to say “hi” play with it. It is made to look like a globe, but it’s also a nice soft ball. And it’s a unique part of my elephant collection—for if you unzip the globe and turn it inside out, you’ll find the elephant hiding inside! It’s a pretty neat gift for what it is. But it’s still more special for what it represents. This elephant/globe came with a certificate giving the exact location of about a hundred square feet of rain forest that were saved with the funds used to purchase the gift!

It’s a wonderful gift. And it’s a gift that invites reflection on how I use the things available to me, living in a land of plenty, with resources from around the world ready for my consumption—at the grocery store, the gas pump, a discount store, or at the turn of a faucet or flip of a light switch. On my best days, those reflections remind me that my actions and my lifestyle are the cause of oppression for some of my fellow human beings. After all, if I didn’t eat the many, many pounds of sugar the average U.S. citizen eats yearly, a little bit more land would be available in a South American country to grow foods that would meet the needs of its people. If I didn’t have more clothes hanging in my closet than I could wear in a week, (or even a month!) maybe a few men, women, or children in foreign countries could stop making cheap clothes in sweatshops and find something that would bring more joy and more hope to their lives.

I am thankful for the gift that opens my eyes to see that I am part of a world that still oppresses many of its inhabitants. I look to the child of Bethlehem to give me the strength to change my ways. JAL

Prayer: God who gives good gifts—who gave the best gift of all at Christmas, make me not just a recipient, but help me to learn from the Christ child how to give—my treasure, my love, myself. **Amen.**

For your meditation: In what things do you have authority over others (at home? at work? in groups?) How do you use that authority? In what activities do you participate which creates oppression for someone? Are there things you can change in your life to end oppression in someone else’s life?

Saturday December 23, 2000

Read: Isaiah 58:6-12

He was just a small town kid trying to make it in a big, lonely world. Not much had gone right in his life. He never could establish a relationship with one parent—he just heard often about how bad he was. He even got a stick and a piece of coal for Christmas one year.

He did have one parent who loved him, but it was always a struggle to make it financially, plus his brother and sister needed attention just like he did. His grandparents tried, but they were struggling with their own serious health issues. Then his grandpa died.

Really, he'd been in trouble most of his life. So it was no big surprise when he ended up in a juvenile detention facility. But it was the people he'd wronged who convinced the judge to give him an alternative to (the equivalent of) juvenile prison. They simply spoke from their hearts about how individuals, society, and even the church had failed him in his young life.

It worked. In the alternative setting he did well. He learned respect for self and others. He turned his life around, and when he was released he became a responsible and contributing member of the community. Too bad somebody couldn't change his life before he was in trouble with the law—somebody like you, or me.

We don't all have to be Gandhi, or Nelson Mandela, or Mother Theresa to set the oppressed free. Jesus often tended to the needs of individuals. Think how much it might mean to give the kid next door an opportunity to succeed which he hasn't had yet in his life. Or what a difference it could make to offer real hope for the future to the girl who doesn't know how to dream anymore. Changing just one life can affect so many other lives. Who knows what kind of chain reaction might be set in motion if you change two or three? JAL

Prayer: O God, who sent a helpless baby to change the world, help me make the world a better place by changing the lives I can. Make me a channel of love that I, with Christ, may bring peace on earth. **Amen.**

For your meditation: How can you set others free? Whom can you free? What would motivate you to take the action necessary to free someone?

TO PROCLAIM THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR

Sunday, December 24, 2000
Christmas Eve

Read: Luke 4:19

Festivals and fairs are delicious pleasures that many in Wisconsin look forward to experiencing yearly. Some of the best personal enjoyments I have received at these events have been listening to the performances of the street musicians. The folks who are not considered polished enough, or have not developed a big enough following, to be featured as stage performers at Milwaukee's Festival Park, one of the stages periodically set up around Madison's capitol square and other similar warm weather venues across the state. The love of the music they play is frequently more evident, and the quality better, than offered by name performers whose hit recordings are dependent on enhancements of studio production.

Ecuador Manta was playing one of these sidewalk gigs at the 2000 State Fair. As the gathered audience was enjoying the Andes influenced music of this South American group, Wanda emerged from the throng and began dancing. Her red, white and blue spangled cap, snow-white hair, and smart pants suit set her apart from the decidedly younger, and much more informally dressed, spectators. Her popularity as an audience favorite shot up even further when after several extended dances it was announced that she was 82 years old.

Soon the lead singer, an accomplished dancer himself, announced that he was coming out front during the next musical selection to join Wanda. Their time as a couple was brief and intermittent throughout the song. Despite repeated pleas to "stay with me Wanda" and "back this way," Wanda heard her own beat in the music and continued to dance to it all over the black top dance area between the band and growing audience.

Is that not the way it often is with God and us? We may hear God's Word calling us to dance, but we insist on dancing to our own tune. The songs may be clearly telling us what God expects of us, but we become so focused on our own existing agendas that we can't move from our plans to God's plan. Opportunities are missed to respond to God's invitation to let our life dance show our commitments to peace, justice and witness.

As the frenzy of celebrating Christmas American Style is approaching its climax, listen for the tune of the Incarnation. SZ

Reflect and pray: How have you honored the Christ Child this Advent? How are you being called to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor through your life dance at the start of the new millennium?

Monday, December 25, 2000
Christmas

Read: Luke 4: 16 -22

During the summer of 1989, prior to the early 90s fall of the socialist government, Jane and I spent a couple weeks in Bulgaria touring Orthodox Monasteries. Recognized for the important role they played in preserving Slavic culture during the half millennium of Ottoman domination, the ruling communists had encouraged their preservation as symbols of national heritage. A portion of the country remained nominally Orthodox Christian, with a small minority of Protestants and Roman Catholics. A remnant of Methodists survived.

I had carried with me into the country a copy of a best seller of the late 80s. **Spy Catcher** is a non-fiction account of cold war intrigue and betrayal in British Intelligence. It was fascinating reading during the time we were east of what was still known as the Iron Curtain. As we were departing Sofia to return to the U.S., the customs official thoroughly inspecting our luggage discovered the paperback I had left in my bag. After staring at the book for what seemed like an eternity, this man who needed to give his permission for us to pass through and board our airplane, looked up at me and asked "What's your business in the U.S., mister?" An identity crisis instantly came over me. I had just finished a decade on the Wisconsin Conference staff, but thought Camp Director may bring to mind displaced persons or forced internment, so did not offer that occupational description. Being between positions that summer, I thought "unemployed" would lead to pointed questions about how our two weeks in Bulgaria had been financed. Fortunately, my response of "Protestant clergyman" satisfied him, and we were allowed to pass.

I've reflected several times since about that incident. How would I answer if it were Jesus asking, "what's your business in the U.S., mister church member? Are you being true to my teachings? Are you bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to captives, helping the blind to see and setting the oppressed free?"

As we remember the Birth of the infant Jesus, may there be no question that indeed our business is about exemplifying the call to action from the Christ we follow. SZ

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the birth of your Son. May I be a worthy follower of the Way through my witness and actions. **Amen**