

Sermon – John 8:31-36; Jeremiah 31:31-34
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“Freed for Something New”

Friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. As a Lutheran preacher, today tempts me into the past, or at least into my memories of it. Like many of you, I have walked the streets of Wittenberg, Germany, cradle of the Lutheran Reformation. I have fond memories of standing outside the *Schlosskirche* where Martin Luther *maybe* nailed the theses that lit the match of reform. I can picture Lucas Cranach’s altarpiece in St. Mary’s Church, where the townsfolk gathered to be nourished by Word and sacrament. I can even smell WittenBurger, which sells the best burgers and fries in town. But one of my favorite pictures from our last visit is of our two boys, then nine and eleven, standing in the street, looking at a phone, conferring with one another. We were walking back into town from our hotel, the oddly named Pension Alabama, and they were trying to navigate for us using the map on the phone. The picture reminds me that our Reformation heritage is not so much about where we have been; it’s about being honest about where we are so that we can discern where we’re going.
2. Those in the crowd who had been following Jesus have begun to feel a little lost. In the preceding nineteen verses, Jesus has both declared himself the Light of the World *and* foretold his own death. What sort of guy have they been following around? He invites them to continue in his word, and in him to find both truth and freedom. And this is where it begins to go off the rails. Freedom? Are you suggesting we aren’t free, or that we’ve ever not been

free? It would be funny if it weren't so sad. To be a descendent of Abraham is, of course, to be part of a people whose identity is marked both by their slavery and by God's deliverance. And while they may not be slaves now, freedom is hardly the word you'd apply to a people living under the bootheel of Roman imperialism. They are being dishonest with Jesus but, even more, they are lying to themselves, unable to accept the truth of their past or their present.

3. It would be unfair, of course, to imagine that the crowds that day were having a unique experience. Accepting reality is not our strong suit as human beings. As has become increasingly clear in these days, there are plenty of folks who want to argue about past, too. About how wonderful it was, and how if we could just get back there, all would be well. Of course, many who do this forget that even when the past *was* good, it wasn't good for everyone. Sure, if you can overlook the racism, the misogyny, the oppression of pretty much anyone outside of a very narrowly-defined norm, yeah, it was pretty great. Then again, for some that's what's most attractive, and there are swelling choruses seeking to restore a warped version of Christianity in which patriarchy and power are the bywords of the day. And while we see these lies clearly for what they are, we all live with warped vision. We deny our mortality, our sinfulness, our culpability in this world's systems. We imagine we can correct course in an instant, for we are masters of our own destinies, are we not? We are free, are we not?
4. Well, no. We are not. It always catches up with us eventually. And in case we don't notice on our own, Jesus points it out. Sinners are enslaved to sin. Paul drive home the point, noting that on our own, we can never be justified in God's sight. The Episcopal preacher Fleming Rutledge gets at this in, of all places, her exploration of Tolkien's Middle-earth, beginning with the hero of *The Hobbit* encountering the character Gollum for the first time. The wretched Gollum is "miserable, alone, lost," living out "endless unmarked

days without light or hope of betterment.” The reader’s “sense of horror is provoked not by Gollum’s sliminess but by the hopelessness of his bondage.” This, Rutledge writes, “mirrors the picture of the human predicament described by St. Paul in the epistle to the Romans. The universal human condition is one of bondage to Sin and Death.” We are all in thrall to a power greater than ourselves, but also a power to which we give ourselves over all too easily.

5. Whither then do we go? Jesus tells us that if we continue in his word, we will know truth and freedom. That word “continue,” however, isn’t quite right. Or at least isn’t the whole story. It comes from the Greek “meno,” better translated as “abide.” Jesus invites us to make his home with him and then, perfectly aware that we are unlikely to do so on our own, goes ahead and does it for us: “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” Freedom is being at home with God, at home with ourselves, and at home with one another in this world. In the words of the psalmist, “Be still!” Stop striving, pretending, avoiding. Just stop, sink back, and rest in the arms of the One who is your home. In Christ are forgiveness and life. In him, we find one another, and we discover who we actually are. In him, we find out where we are and where we are going – and it turns out both places are Jesus.
6. To an exiled people, Jeremiah brings words of promise. Goodness knows they could use the hope; when your country has been defeated, your temple destroyed, your family forced into a foreign land, it’s no use pretending you haven’t hit rock bottom. And what does the Lord say? That I will bring you back to the old covenant, put things back how they used to be? No. God promises something entirely new. In love, God will not even remember their sins anymore. This covenant is enacted by Jesus in his death and resurrection. Our sins die with him and we are made new. New hearts. New relationships with God. New invitations to live and serve our neighbors and this world. We were in bondage, and now we’re not. We were dead, and now

we're not. The Son has set us free, and his Word always does what it says. Where have you been? No matter; you are forgiven, you are found, you are beloved. Where are you now? Here, together in Christ, alive for the sake of the world. Where are you going? Through this world, for one another's sake, toward Christ. You need no printed map, no written law. Christ is written upon your heart, and he is forever your refuge and strength, even in these anxious times. A mighty fortress with room enough for all. Come, and abide. The Son says you belong. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.