

Liberation!

Exodus 6:2-6, John 5:19-27

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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So there are two guys sitting in a bar, talking about their faith. It turns out that one of them is a devoted Christian, while the other is a committed atheist. The Christian just can't figure out why the other fellow can't be open to the claims of faith. Finally, the atheist says, "Look, it's not like I've never tried God or anything. Do you remember that big storm and flood we had last year? My trailer was hit by a wall of water, I was swept down the river, and I was sure I was going to die. So I just closed my eyes and said, 'Look, if there is a God, then get me out of this mess now and I'll believe in you forever.'"

The Christian looked at the atheist incredulously. "Well," he said, "what happened? Obviously, God got you out. Why don't you believe?"

The atheist said, "Oh, no, God had nothing to do with it. It's just when I opened my eyes, I saw that there were two guys in a boat who happened to be coming by just at that time."

Have you ever been saved, and you didn't even know it?

What does it mean to be saved?

Many of you have been here for the past year as we have been working our way through Genesis, listening for the Word of God as it comes through the stories in that book. When we left Genesis, we left Israel and all of his family living in Egypt, where they were attempting to ride out a famine. God had saved his people by sending them someplace else.

I know that some of you have had about all the Old Testament you can take, and I don't want you to come in here and see that I'm preaching Exodus, and thus signing you up for another year-long stroll through an Old Testament book. But I also didn't want to end our study of God's creation and calling there. After all, Genesis is about a promise – a promise that God would call to himself a particular people, That he would give that people a place to live, and that he would bring them into a new closeness of relationship with himself. The story of God's people does not end in Egypt.

This morning's reading picks up about 400 years after the action in Genesis ends. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are very numerous now, which is a good thing; they are also slaves. The Egyptian king has made the Hebrews slaves, and has built a nation on their backs. And then Moses arrives.

Moses shows up for a number of reasons. First, to show us that God is up to something. Second, to tell us what happens next in the story of God's people. Third, he is there to demonstrate that God is a God who keeps his promises. And fourthly, by looking at Moses, we can see something about what God is up to in Jesus of Nazareth.

This Advent season, we're going to take a few weeks and explore the ways that Moses and Jesus are alike. Specifically, we'll look at a few ways in which Moses showed up to announce some truth into the lives of the Israelites and how Jesus amplified that truth years later – demonstrating in his person the kinds of message that God was hinting at in Moses' actions and words.

This morning, in Moses, God announces that the time for liberation of the Hebrew slaves has come. Take a look at the promises of verse six: I will bring you out...I will deliver you...I will redeem you. And then there is a re-statement of the promise that was given to Abraham: I will take you for my people and I will be your God.

Now remember this: all that those Hebrews had ever known was slavery. More than 400 years of living in a country and acting a certain way. I was thinking about that this week, and realized that I am the 13th generation of Carvers in North America. The first Carver came to this continent in 1620 – almost 400 years ago. That seems like an impossibly long time. All we have ever known is here. I don't belong to England any more – I'm an American. In the same way, the Hebrews had had more than 400 years to get used to being Egyptians. All they knew, or their parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents – was Egypt.

And then Moses shows up and says, "Remember! God calls us to live into the promise! God is bringing that promise to life before our eyes! All we have to do is follow him into it!" And my hunch is that many Hebrews said, "Yeah, sure, Moses. Dream on. Whatever..." And they kept doing what they'd always done. Not because they were bad people. Because they were people. Like us.

Now, skip ahead to the reading from John chapter 5. Jesus is here, speaking with a group of religious people who had seen him heal a man who had been ill for nearly forty years. In spite of the fact that most of us would think that healing a sick man is a good thing, this brought a great deal of controversy. The leaders were asking themselves and each other, "Who does this man think he is? He strolls in here, upsets the status quo. Thinks he can heal anyone whenever he wants to?"

It would appear as though Jesus, like Moses, was not above ruffling a few feathers from time to time.

And Jesus says, "Look, friends, I am the new thing that God is doing. God is restless. God is hungry. God is anxious to reach into people's lives. I am bringing life to dead people. I am bringing the good news of the Promise to bear in people's lives. I am here to free you from the slavery you have to sin and to death that you have always known.

And then, and now, a lot of people say, "Yeah, sure, Jesus. Whatever. Dream on." And keep doing what we've always done. Not because we're bad people. But because we're people.

Did you hear the one about the two young fish that were swimming along in the stream? There they were, just moseying around, and a much older fish swam by them in the opposite direction. He smiled at them and said, "Morning

boys. How's the water today?" The two young fish kept swimming until about five minutes later one of them stopped and said to the other one, "What the heck is water?"

They were so deep into it that they didn't have a clue what it was – even though it surrounded them.

Beloved, we swim all day in a culture of death. We swim all day in a culture of slavery. From the time we get up until the time we fall unconscious, we live and move in a world that says that if there is any hope, it is up to us. If there is any life, it is what we do. If there is anything at all, it's us.

God, through Moses, offered the Hebrews the choice of life and freedom.

God, through Jesus, offers us life and hope.

Advent – the weeks leading up to the celebration of the gift of the promised savior – is the time when the church waits. A time when we reflect. We wear the blue and purple of confession and repentance and we say, "This is water. THIS is water." We participate in marriages and attend classes and spend money and build families...all in a culture that tells us that there is no God.

And Jesus says, "Look, I'm here to bring life. I'm here to transform your existence. In the here and now, I'm here to help you to notice your own life and to give you a means to seek God's blessing in the midst of your marrying and studying and spending and child-rearing. To tell you that there is a part of the promise that applies to your lives right now – in the water you're in!

"And I'm here to bring life that is eternal – to remind you that what *is* is not what will always be. You are swimming in a world that has been polluted by sin and brokenness, but I am here to remind you that this life is not all that there is.

And so the word for today is simple and direct, my friends. This first Sunday of Advent, as we prepare to observe the Lord's Supper – the tangible, tactile, visible symbol of Jesus' presence with us – remember that Jesus offers a word of freedom and liberation. Take the taste of bread and the impossibly tiny cup. Savor that taste. Roll it around in your mouth. Remember the promise. And hold onto the promise: Jesus comes to bring new life. You can have new life in him. New life for today, and new life for eternity. This is what is – but this is not all there is. There is a future. There is a hope. There is a deliverer. Remember. Believe. Amen.