

John 8:31–36

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for Reformation Sunday, Year A (Revised Common Lectionary) · 25 October 2011

This week we work on the Reformation Day texts, and it has been just a joy to work through them. They are a collection of gospel-centered texts that practically proclaim themselves.

When I was a young pastor I got to meet Edmund Steimle, a great professor of preaching at the Philadelphia Seminary in the good old days. He preached on *The Protestant Hour*, a radio program that went out with national distribution, and he was one of the best preachers I've ever heard. If you can find his sermons, one of the best books is *From Death to Birth*. Dr. Steimle always argued that the three supporting texts, what used to be called the Old Testament lesson and the Epistle, with the psalm, all come together to help us preach the gospel text, so that the gospel text takes priority. Oftentimes the texts are treated as though each one were an alternative, but generally they are selected in this way. You can't always see it very clearly. In this case, though, all four of the texts stand completely on their own. You could pick any one of them and hardly miss.

So, unlike what we've done the last couple of weeks, I'm going to start by working through the preliminary texts, and then we'll spend the rest of the time on the gospel.

The New Covenant: Jeremiah 31

We'll start with Jeremiah 31, where God promises a new covenant: "It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors ... a covenant that they broke. ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts."

This is very interesting, because there are a couple of different versions of the covenant with Abraham, as you know. One of them is conditioned on Israel's obedience, and the other is pure, unqualified promise. God chooses the people of Israel, and he makes his covenant with them on the basis of pure promise. Now, when Jeremiah, or rather God speaking through him, refers to a covenant that was external, it appears to me to be a reference to the conditional covenant. If that is the case, the new covenant is unconditional. It is a covenant in which God

reshapes the heart, so that the object is not the hands and the feet, not simply external behavior, but a new heart. And the new heart is not an object in the traditional sense, but a gift. God is creating it. God will make a new covenant in which the internal conditions of the heart have altogether changed. How's that for a beginning?

Refuge and Strength: Psalm 46

Psalm 46 is a psalm I dearly love. Let me make just a couple of comments on it. We could spend the whole time right here, because this psalm is so delicious. It is the basis of Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress."

Just a couple of things in the first verses. "God is our refuge and strength." If you think about it, you can see two different analogies here, one stereotypically male and the other stereotypically female. I bet that if you think very long about a person who is a refuge, you'll start thinking of a woman: your grandma, your mother, or someone else very close to you. When you think of strength, stereotypically, though women of refuge are immensely strong, we usually think of a flexed arm, in male terms. Refuge and strength: that's a very interesting pairing. God is both the one to whom we turn in the time of trouble and the one who leads us out into the circumstances of life to take things on. I had a very interesting discussion about this once, when I was speaking out in Virginia, with a woman who was convinced that we have put so much emphasis on God as refuge that we have lost this characteristic of strength: that God leads us out of bad circumstances into the new, into what is conditioned by grace.

So these are two great images that rub against one another in a productive way. But they can't compete with the smallest word in the sentence: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Of course, you are all incurably Lutheran, even Matt, who has hung around with us so long he has no alternative, so you recognize that the prepositions carry a lot of weight. This little word "in" is powerful, because it is exactly the opposite of most of the words we hear preached. If the evangelicals wrote this, it would read, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help from trouble." In fact, most of the idols in the world would say that they will help us out of trouble, that they will solve all our problems. But to God alone belongs this great habit: he looks into the depths, as Luther says, with their need and misery and squalor, and comes into the trouble beside us. Rather than promising to take us out of it, he joins us in the trouble, and joining us in the trouble, he provides there both refuge and strength. Boy, you could go a long time on that. It's just fabulous.

And so the conclusion: “Therefore we will not fear.” If you say “we will not fear” on any other basis, you’re smoking something, because we live exposed to the powers of sin, death, and the devil, constantly in conflict with them. We ought to be afraid. There are things to be afraid of. If you’re not scared, oftentimes there’s something really wrong; better call me up and I’ll help you with it. But now, on the basis of the gospel, clear-headed and full of confidence and hope, we can say, “Therefore we will not fear.” Why? Because in the trouble he is both refuge and strength.

This is just fabulous. This is a God of grace who promises so much and bestows himself so freely. My goodness, who else but the God who raised Jesus from the dead would ever say such things as this: “I am your refuge and your strength, a very present help in your trouble.” So you’ve got meat and potatoes here, I’ll tell you.

Apart from the Law: Romans 3

Then we can go to Romans 3, and this keeps getting better and better. Here we have a wonderful discussion in which Paul takes on the law in order to establish us in God’s grace. It’s a nice Reformation gift.

“Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced,” including the law’s. This is finally what Christ is up to. He is stuffing the law’s mouth full of his flesh, so that it finally shuts up with its constant yapping and accusing. Its mouth is stopped. The law does its yapping and condemning and stirring and demanding “so that the whole world may be held accountable to God”: all of us under judgment, all of us exposed by the law to the judgment of God.

But now a conclusion that would drive you to despair turns into absolute joy. “For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.” The law strains, grinds, demands, crucifies. All the law can finally do is expose us as sinners. “But now, apart from law” — I just love that: with no help from the law. Thanks a lot. You can relax now, Moses. Your job is done. Take the day off. You can take it easy now, because “apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets.” Even the law had to help denounce itself. “The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”

I want to remind you, though I think all of you know this, that the term “righteousness” and the term “justification” come from the same family: *dikaiosyne*. The justice of God, the

righteousness of God, the justification of God all go back to the same group of words. But now we are being asked to describe this righteousness apart from the law. The normal way we describe it is by talking about the law: Christ fulfilled the law so that we could be forgiven under the law, and so that we could now live in obedience to the law. But Paul says in a very decisive way that all of this is apart from the law. So for our analogies for righteousness we have to look elsewhere. The legal analogy is done. It has served its purpose. Generally what happens is that the promise of justification gets short-circuited by our inability to think apart from the law. We start using legal analogies to explain it, and pretty soon we are stuck in legalism.

I want you to think about what happens when an orchestra tunes up. There is a fabulous cacophony. I just love it. All the players, caught up in their own world, are playing little pieces of this and that, and the whole sound is uproarious. Then all of a sudden the first violinist, or the oboist, sounds a note, the whole orchestra plays in unison, and out of the cacophony you hear these glorious sounds. They are righteous. They are in tune. They are what they are meant to be.

So justification, rather than simply being a legal term, is a relational term. It describes the relationship for which we were created: to be creatures, glad and content, rejoicing in the gifts of God's earth, in God himself in Christ, in our delightful neighbors, in the leaping greenness of spring, or now, in the fall, in this beautiful panorama of colors. We have a wonderful maple right outside the front room window of our apartment here in Saint Paul. Right now the front window is just full of red; everything you look at is in the red of those leaves. You can have no more beautiful sight on a fall day than that. This is the righteousness God is working in us. It is not simply the law. It is the righteousness that comes in the deepest relationships of life, as we forget ourselves and forget the law and get caught up in the joy of God's goodness and the delights of the earth and of our neighbors. If you keep going with this, you could go for a long time. It's just gorgeous.

The Truth Will Make You Free: John 8

But we're going to hustle on to the gospel text, because it is as rich as the other three combined. I suppose you've preached on it. I preach on it every year, and I always feel inadequate, because the text is so fabulous and such a gift that you can never run out of it. It runs out of you. That's what happens. And then you stand there looking as if you forgot to zip up your pants or button your blouse.

Once when I was a debater at Concordia College, I went to a debate tournament at Eau Claire State, near where my brother is now serving a congregation. The debate coach was a great woman named Gracie Walsh, a fabulous old maid; I just loved her. We were sitting in a meeting, it was getting warmer and warmer, and she kept unbuttoning and unbuttoning without realizing what she was doing, and all of a sudden she realized it. “Oh!” And she just jumped. Well, this text can do that to you, boy. It can make you feel uncovered in a big hurry.

“Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him.” In other words, he is speaking to the faithful here. He is not doing evangelism in the traditional sense. These are the people who had believed in him. “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

We have to stop with a couple of these words. First of all, “if you continue in my word.” Though it is spoken in the conditional, and would therefore generally be interpreted as a command, that you should be continuing on, in fact this is a statement in the indicative. These people are continuing in his word, under the assumption that they will continue in it. If you try to turn this into an appeal, it goes south right off the bat; it just goes to nothing. As John says in the prologue, believers are born “not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” Those to whom Jesus is speaking are those who have heard the word, and the “if” does not describe a potential or a chance, and so become an appeal. Rather, the “if” says: as long as you are continuing in my word, this is what you can expect. This is how it works. The agency is the word.

Of course, Jesus is using “word” in a very particular way here. Words communicate information, but Jesus is the Word, and so there is a lot more at stake than information. A relationship has been established as that word has bestowed itself. This is the word that turned the water into wine. This is the word that will call Lazarus out of his tomb. This is the word Jesus will express in his great prayer in John 17. This is God’s word, and so continuing in the word is not a matter of knowing it or apprehending it and coming to a conviction about it. Rather, continuing in his word is living under its grip, living under the promise. It is very much like living in the promise of a friend or a spouse, or a mother or a father. This is a word that grasps and redefines.

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples.” Here again is a little word: “true,” or “truly.” We are accustomed to thinking of truth in propositional terms: something true is something that conforms to what we know of it. In fact, we come closer to the meaning of this

term in taking a bicycle into the shop to get the wheels trued. When you true a bicycle wheel, you bring it into conformity, so that all the spokes are working together and the wheel doesn't wobble from side to side. The wheel is righteous; the wheel is true. "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples": you are aligned with this word, you are in relationship to it, so that everything is balanced by the word. You have been made true to the word and true to me, and you will be free. We'll pick up that word, "free," a little later.

"They answered him." Now these are his believers talking. "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone." This is what happens, of course. The gospel comes to free us chiefly from ourselves, as well as from a variety of other powers, and as soon as that freedom dawns right in front of us, we scurry back into our holes and say, "I'm safe as it is." I love that scene in the Chronicles of Narnia, in *The Last Battle*, where the dwarfs are sitting right at heaven's door and saying, in effect, "It couldn't be this good. It isn't possible. This isn't the world we know. There's something wrong here. We can't go in there." That's the old sinner in us.

So here is the promise of all promises: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." And we have a bunch of dumbheads saying, "Wait a minute, I thought I had that already. I don't need that. What do you mean? There's something wrong here. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" Of course, if you're going to say something stupid, you might as well say it to Jesus, because he can take it and improve on it. He doesn't need your help, thanks a lot. And that is exactly what he does. This becomes an occasion for him to bring home the promise with even more power. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and so when it hears the great promise of the Spirit, it stands there with its finger in its nose and doesn't know where to turn. What's this? Good night, he's given it all away. Nothing could be more dangerous.

"Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you.'" You know what's coming now. This is the high, hard one; here it comes. "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." Here is the biblical word for the argument for the bondage of the will. It has been exposed by the power of the gospel. The law hammers and yaps and mutters and screams and condemns, and we all find excuses and deliver ourselves. But when the gospel comes, we can finally tell the truth. And so Jesus says, "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." This is how it works. You get stuck in yourself, and you are never going to get out, no matter what great

resolutions and intentions you might have. As Luther once said, this is what makes our theology certain: it takes us outside ourselves and brings us to rest in Christ Jesus.

Here the believers especially have heard God's promise, and they are retreating full speed into themselves: "Hey, hey, hey, we have never been slaves to anyone." And of course, in saying this, they have established their slavery beyond any kind of question. The word of life is right there sounding in their ears, and they are running backward as fast as they can go to escape from it. That's how it works. So they have been exposed. "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."

"The slave does not have a permanent place in the household." He is just there to help out. He is household help; she is household help. They come over on Wednesdays, clean, and go home. Or they come on Friday night and cook, everybody eats, they do the dishes and leave. That's how you pay them, and you're done with them. That's how household help works. The slave does not stay and call you by your first name and ask, "Did you find it fulfilling?" The slave goes home. "The son has a place there forever." The son, the daughter, the child has a place there forever. Why? Because the promise has been made. "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

What Is Freedom?

Now, one of the really interesting things about this passage is the word I promised to come back to, and now it's my turn. What is freedom? What does it mean to be free? We can see some qualities of it here.

Freedom comes of continuing in his word. The freedom Jesus describes is granted and renewed and bestowed and sustained in the hearing of the word. "You will know the truth." And what is the truth? That God is God, the only one who is finally trustworthy, and that with anything and everything else you take your chances. Insofar as you receive things from God's hand, you continue in your freedom. To the extent that you grasp after them and seek to possess them, whether it is yourself or anything else, you fall into bondage. As my friend Sheldon Tostengard likes to say, we're like horn players with an overdeveloped embouchure: we get stuck right there. We get attached to virtually anything and everything, and when we get attached to it, it's slavery.

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples." Our freedom consists in this: continuing in his word, and continuing as his disciples. There is an old saying that human

resources people use: it's not what you know but who you know. In this case it would be better to say: it's not what you know or who you know, but who knows you. Christ Jesus knows you in the deepest sense, and because he knows you in the deepest sense, you have become a hearer of his word. He is speaking to you right now, and you have become truly one of his disciples. You haven't had any alternative, one way or another. As his word has continued in you, he has turned you to himself. And that truth, which is himself, which lives and is expressed in relationship to him, that truth which defines you in relationship to him, is your freedom. That is your manumission paper. That is what declares you free.

It is important to notice here that the truth is not a proposition but a person. To know the truth is not simply to know the catechism or the doctrinal definitions. To know the truth is to know Christ Jesus. You can expect his goodness from him. You can count on him to deliver you from every evil. In the evil he is refuge and strength; in the evil he is delivering you even now. And so you have been aligned with him. He has brought you into tune with himself, so that you can sing a song of freedom.

I always remember Nina Simone, who turned into a terrible cynic, but who used to love to sing this song: "I wish I knew how it would feel to be free." We have a hard time bringing it to language, because our definitions of freedom, like our definitions of love, turn into marvelous abstractions, I'm afraid. But here it is. Christ is speaking to you. You are continuing in his word. You have been made true to him. He is freeing you. It is not an installation within you that performs. It is not something you can possess. But in the hearing of this word, in the knowledge of this truth, and in being gripped and held and sustained by him, you are free in the deepest and most profound sense.

So the whole goal of preaching these texts is to say exactly that. You are continuing in his word. You know the truth, and the truth has made you free, will make you free, and will sustain you in his freedom. The Son makes you free, and you are free indeed.

Well, that's kind of fun. I suppose we could have four services and you could preach on each of these texts. When I was in Tanzania, they used to complain bitterly if I didn't preach for at least an hour. I suppose when I go to Ethiopia it will be the same. You get to take a break when you're going that long: have a glass of water, sit down a second, maybe even use the restroom.

Questions and Answers

A comment that what passes for freedom in our day is the most grotesque form of slavery.

That is exactly true. We are going to free ourselves by becoming our own best friends, and so we disappear into ourselves, and that's about the end of it. Nothing could be worse. No, finally our freedom consists in this: that Christ Jesus slays us and raises us to newness of life, and holds us right outside ourselves, in him. You're right on the money.

One time when I was over in Africa, they asked me to preach, and I decided that, since they wanted an hour, I was going to preach on Psalm 23:5a: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." I preached on it for an hour and sat down, and one of my students who had arranged it came and said to me, "Are you taking a break? We could use some more." Sometimes it's nice.

A comment on how the hearers in the text miss the promise.

How many times has it happened? Like cows staring at a new gate: clueless. Here is the word of life in their ears, and they say, "Well, aren't I free already? What should I do with that?" Chewing the cud. "We have never been slaves to anyone." Oblivious. The overdeveloped embouchure has been functioning so effectively that they can't even see it. That's the trouble. As Luther used to say, most of our sins occur in blindness. We are not aware of what we are doing until afterward. And then we are so utterly attached that it is like a kid who has stuck his tongue on a cold post in winter: the only way to get it off is for somebody to just pull. So you endure the detachment. And of course the ultimate illusion is that we think we are neutral, in command of a field of force where we can say yes, no, or maybe.

A comment that slaves imagine they are free.

This is exactly it, Kyle. In the meantime we get attached to virtually everything. We fear, love, and trust everything that moves: our cars, our TV sets, our significant schemes. And we think of ourselves as perfectly free, even while we are being marched along by a ring through the nose, right through our appetites. It's like giving lectures on the freedom of the will right in front of the refrigerator. Our slaveries are so comfortable, including the one to our own will.

There is a wonderful old book by Erich Fromm, who was a guru in his day, *Escape from Freedom*, in which he argues that people's natural reaction to freedom is fear. Freedom is the

last thing we want, because you never know what's going to happen if you're free. You might have some fun. Who could tell? Something good might happen. Good night! I'd rather be carried between laxatives and pep pills on my way from the refrigerator to the TV set than hear Christ Jesus say a word like this: "You're a free man." That's just too much.

A question about how to preach freedom concretely.

What you want to do when you preach this text is give it as concretely as possible. What are you free from? You're free from yourself. You're free from making yourself a project. You're free from having to obtain your significance, from gathering yourself up every day trying to prove something. You're like a self-conscious kid who has finally had the self-consciousness broken. That breach is your death, but it is also your liberty.

I can speak of this pretty personally. Carolyn was gone for three weeks in Europe, two and a half of them visiting our youngest son, and I thought, "Well, I'll have some time of freedom." Of course I spent the whole time she was gone longing for her, and when I saw her again, it was then that I was free. When she was gone she couldn't catch me out smoking a cigar, but that kind of freedom doesn't last very long. The real freedom comes deep, deep, deep in the grounding relationships of life.

That's exactly right, John. All the examples Jesus gives are tough ones: going home to your family, going to work. That's where freedom expresses itself, in these defining relationships, which are also relationships in which we are contended for as well as contending. Everybody lives with some contention in the family: fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. That deep-down freedom is what you experience when you finally go home with someone who really loves you, or when you finally sit with your father or your mother beyond contention. That's where you see this concretely.

I suppose I'd better use this example now, because the World Series looks like it's coming to its inevitable end, and that means I have to face winter once more without baseball. I have hockey, but it takes me a while to adjust. I like to speak of losing yourself in the game. When the game is really good, when you are caught up in it, when the game is all you can think of, and then it ends and you rub your eyes and say, "Now, what was I doing before this started?" When it's good like that, you are free, because you are not manipulating or controlling or disposing or willing yourself. You are in the grip, and that is what it is to be free.

A comment offering the word "captivated."

That's a great word, Brian. It's interesting that in his last years, when Gerhard Forde was fighting the decline of his faculties, he would still come to clarity every once in a while, when he would be his old self and it would just pop. He started using that word at that time: the captivation of the will, being captivated. In fact, in the last little book Steve Paulson and I edited from his papers, *The Captivation of the Will*, he speaks of exactly that. It's a great word.

When Forde and I were writing *Free to Be*, we used to sit and talk about analogies, and we played for a long time with the difference between a lover and a playboy. A playboy sets out to acquire the techniques that will conquer. A lover is captivated. All a lover can see is the beloved, and so the lover is kind of awkward. Where the playboy is smooth, the lover is shy. Where the playboy is forward, the lover is uncertain, wanting more than anything to hear a word from the beloved. The playboy is dead certain, convinced his techniques will accomplish his goals, reduce the beloved to malleability, and finally let him feast on her. That's just obscene. This is what it is to be captivated: to be gripped in the heart by Christ Jesus in such a way that you can say, "I wouldn't want anybody or anything else. He's all there is." Or like Thomas, which I love: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." There's no other show in town. That's how it works.

You are a lot of fun, and I really appreciate the chance to do this, and I'm glad to have you pitching in. And if people are using this site on their own, power to you too. I pray for you, that God will deliver his word for you and through you come Sunday, and grant you full throat in the proclamation of the gospel. God's peace.

SOURCE

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Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwYj5K_GRzk

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