

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“People Get Ready: Freedom”

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*Isaiah 61:1-11, John 1:6-8, 19-28*

In poverty and oppression, you are a number. 1.4 billion people worldwide are living in extreme poverty. More than 45 million people in the United States live in poverty. 27 million people are enslaved around the world today.

In prison, you are a number. Les Miserable fans will surely remember prisoner 24601, a man without a name, a man with the permanent mark of imprisonment. And while we don't permanently engrave numbers onto our prisoners in this time and place, we do still assign inmate numbers, and the emotional and social imprint of those numbers, that label of “prisoner,” can be every bit as long-lasting and devastating as it was for Jean Valjean.

Even in mourning, you are a number. There are over three million Syrian refugees who have fled to surrounding countries, leaving behind their homes and possessions and their dead loved ones. Nearly 200,000 survivors of the Holocaust still mourn what and who they lost during that great human atrocity.

They say in the non-profit world that numbers speak. But they don't, really. Numbers can be manipulated to tell whatever story you want people to hear. Numbers like the ones I mentioned can overwhelm us, and they can provide apathetic distance. Numbers are cold and silent, and they don't tell the real story.

Numbers also refuse to name those who are afflicted, which serves to augment the pain of those who suffer invisibly.

Numbers do not speak. They do not give a voice to the voiceless – to tell their story, to describe their oppression, to cry out for freedom, to prophetically call us to a new and more just way of living.

Numbers do not speak, but we use numbers anyway – in the media, in government reports, in non-profit fundraising. And so the poor, the oppressed, the prisoner, and the grief-stricken remain unidentified and voiceless – just another statistic.

In the gospel of John, we encounter a man with a name and a voice.

In the Matthew's gospel, he is the Baptist. In Mark, he is the Baptizer. In Luke, he is the son of Zechariah. But here, in the symbolism-obsessed gospel of John, he is the Voice. “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'”

John is quoting the prophet Isaiah who, like many of the prophets of Israel, had a special concern for those nameless and voiceless people. In the prophesy we read this morning, Isaiah shares with the people a vision of hope – an “anointed one,” a Messiah, who will “bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners,” who will “proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God,” and who will “comfort all who mourn”

The gospel of Luke tells us that at the outset of his earthly ministry, Jesus takes up this text as his mission statement, declaring to the religious leaders and teachers that this prophesy has been fulfilled in him.

Now, Jesus does many amazing and miraculous things in his earthly ministry. But as a Jewish rabbi once explained, Jews don't believe Jesus was the Messiah because those things the Messiah was supposed to change have not changed. People are still oppressed, brokenhearted, captive, imprisoned, and mourning. I have to admit, the rabbi had a point.

So what's wrong with us Christians? Are we crazy to believe Jesus was the Messiah? Possibly. Should we still be waiting for the Messiah to come? Perhaps. But I think we would be waiting a very long time.

Jesus wasn't joking around or inflating his ego when he said Isaiah's prophesy had been fulfilled. He understood what the prophesy was really about. Isaiah does not say that the Messiah, the anointed one, will eliminate suffering and oppression. Instead, he will inaugurate a new social order. In bringing good news to the oppressed, the Messiah will assure them that they are known and cherished by God, that they are not just a number – God knows their name. In binding up the broken hearted, the Messiah will offer comfort and healing and hope. In proclaiming liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, the Messiah will show the way to true freedom, despite whatever bondage may try to hold us. They are not a number – they have a name and a voice, and God hears their cries.

The “year of the Lord” referred to in this passage is the Jubilee year, the time when, every 50 years, all debts are forgiven, all slaves are released, and everyone celebrates and rests, even the land rests and lies fallow. In the Jubilee year, the people are freed from slavery to debt, to other people, even to their own wealth. The Jubilee year is a great equalizer, reminding everyone that we are not numbers. We are not what we own or who owns us. We have a name, and a voice, and a place in our collective story.

Freedom is more than basic rights, having your basic needs met, not being imprisoned. It is more than happiness and comfort. Freedom is a name, a voice, a place in the story. This is the freedom prophesied by Isaiah. This is the freedom fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

John was a man who knew that freedom. He not only had a name, he had an origin and a purpose. He was sent by God as a witness to testify to the light. He turned down all the false names the religious leaders tried to pin on him – Messiah, Elijah, the prophet, meaning the reincarnated Moses. He accepted nothing more and nothing less than the truth about himself.

John was the voice. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. If there is any truth in the words of Janis Joplin, that freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose, then John was indeed very free. He was living in the wilderness, eating honey and locusts. He had no home, no money, no family by his side. While the Messiah, his cousin, walked the earth, he was imprisoned and killed.

But he knew his place in the story. He was to witness to Jesus, to point to the One who is coming into the world and to acknowledge the superiority of that One. The word “witness” in Greek is the word “martyria” – martyr. That is what John truly was. He witnessed to his faith in Jesus by dying. In this, for John, was freedom. His place in the story was to point to Jesus, to draw attention to him not just through his voice, but through his actions.

We talk a lot about freedom today. We argue about whether our freedoms are being infringed upon, whether we are too free, even. But we talk about freedom in numbers. Numbers in poverty. Numbers in prison. High school graduation rates. Crime statistics.

Very rarely do we give oppression, poverty, prisoners, and survivors a name, a voice, and a place in the story.

And the reason for this is highly ironic.

You see, we have control over numbers. We make changes, we recalculate, we re-district and re-distribute to make numbers go up and down and whichever way we want. We use numbers to try and manipulate the social order. In other words, we use numbers to try to be the Messiah rather than witness to the Messiah. Instead of following the new social order prophesied by Isaiah and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, we attempt to create our own social order, based in human weakness and fear.

This leads us to claim names that don't truly belong to us. Whether this comes in the form of attachment to political parties or consumer products or over-identification with our success, wealth, and achievements, we accept false names all the time. A recent trend in baby naming has children being named after products – Chevy and Lexus, Armani and Nautica.

But for most of us, the name game is more subtle – “perfect,” “successful,” “brilliant,” “happy.” Names we can never live up to all the time. My sister and I accepted the false names of “the smart one” and “the pretty one.” I’ll let you guess which one I was. Children get labeled early on as “troublemakers” or “the quiet one,” and they hold on to these names all the way through school and into their adult lives. And as long as we allow for a social order based on categories and numbers, we will be imprisoned by these false names.

Without an honest and authentic identity, we cannot find our true voice. We speak from a place of expectations – those we place on ourselves and those imposed on us by others – rather than speaking from our origin, our God-given name. If we are imprisoned by names like “perfect” and “successful,” our suffering, self-doubt, and vulnerability are silenced. If we are imprisoned by names like “troublemaker” or “quiet one,” our true potential and unique abilities are silenced.

And when parts of us are silenced, we can only tell part of our story, and we lose our rightful place in our collective story. The “perfect” and “successful” ones are expected to fulfill the roles of epic heroes, gods and kings, captains of industry, commercialized saints. Is it any wonder that many of those we place on this kind of pedestal end up toppling under the weight of addition, unfaithfulness, and vice? Wrong name, no voice, wrong place in the story. The “troublemakers” and “quiet ones” are forced to tell a story of limited ambition or chronic failure. Should we be shocked that they don't often strive for anything greater than this depressed narrative? Wrong name, no voice, wrong place in the story.

Isaiah has prophesied and Jesus has fulfilled a new social order. One where everyone has a name, a voice, and a place in the story. One where everyone is free. Isaiah says that when this prophesy is fulfilled, everyone who sees God's people will “acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.”

So my question for us to day is this: do you feel blessed? Are you free? Can you be honest enough with yourself to reject all of those false names and claim your true, God-given identity? Can you speak with a voice that tells your true story? Can you stop trying to be the Messiah and instead witness to the One who is to come, who is greater than any of us?

You are not a number. God has named you, sent you into this world for a reason, and made you a part of the cosmic story of God's love for the world. We are a people who have been blessed, who have been set free by the new social order inaugurated in Jesus Christ. And the more we point to Christ, the Messiah, and follow him, even if at a distance, the more we will experience our own freedom and advance freedom in all the world.

All glory be to God. Amen.