

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE GREAT EMANCIPATOR

Luke 4:16-21

I want to talk a little history with you this morning.

As you undoubtedly know, it was 200 years ago this past week, on February 12, 1809, that Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, was born. You probably know that naturalist Charles Darwin was born the same day.

It is the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth – not Darwin's – that I want to take note of today. Born in the backwoods of Kentucky, Lincoln came from a poor, humble background. As my brother Gary notes in his book, *Faith and the Presidency*, "He lacked family pedigree, formal education, and social prominence. Nevertheless, as president, he successfully guided the nation through its most harrowing experience, saved the Union, freed the slaves, and analyzed political issues, historical events, and God's providence in profound addresses that will forever live in the nation's history. Struck down by an assassin's (bullet), he has been revered as a martyr who died so that his people might live in freedom and harmony" (p. 92). In the American pantheon, says my historian brother, no one occupies a higher place.

In spite of dispiriting defeats, disappointments and discouragement in the conduct of the war, Lincoln persevered in his passion to preserve the Union. And, following the Union victory in the bloody battle of Antietam in September 1862, Lincoln issued a proclamation to take effect on January 1, 1863, freeing all slaves held in states or parts of states in rebellion against the Union. The Emancipation Proclamation, as it is known, declared that "all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforth shall be free," and pledged the authority and efforts of the United States government and military to "recognize and maintain the freedom of" these slaves.

In the words of historian James McPherson, the Emancipation Proclamation "irrevocably changed the character of the (Civil War)." Eliminating the possibility of an armistice that would leave slavery untouched, the Emancipation Proclamation turned a war to preserve a political union into a campaign to abolish slavery and to remove this stain on the American soul. The day after President Lincoln announced his intentions, newspaper editor Horace Greeley proclaimed the Proclamation to be "the beginning of the end of the rebellion; the beginning of the new life of the nation."

Lincoln became known as "the Great Emancipator," a title which fits him well even today, nearly 150 years after he issued the proclamation.

To emancipate, the dictionary says, is to set free from servitude or slavery; to liberate; or to restore from bondage to freedom.

At the time of the Civil War, there were nearly 4 million African slaves in America. While not the sole cause of the war, the emancipation of the slaves and the abolition of slavery as an institution were central to the conflict between North and South. In a memorable scene in the movie *Gettysburg*, Union Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, commander of the 20th Maine regiment, tells a group of mutineers placed under his command shortly before the Battle of Gettysburg: “If you look back through history, you’ll see men fighting for pay, for women, for some other kind of loot. They fight for land, power, because a king leads them, or just because they like killing. But we are here for something new. This has not happened much in the history of the world. We are an army out to set other men free.”

Setting others free is the heart of emancipation. Setting the slaves free was Abraham Lincoln’s determined goal. But it is worth noting that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, by itself, did not set a single slave in Confederate territory free. Only with the end of the war in 1865 would come the abolition of slavery in America.

Because of his role as “the Great Emancipator,” because of his leadership during the darkest period in our nation’s history, because of the example of his life and the inspiring rhetoric of his speeches – especially the Gettysburg Address (1863) and his second Inaugural Address (1865) – we celebrate the bicentennial of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. And we thank God for his life and legacy.

But if Lincoln is “the Great Emancipator,” I want you to know that there is a *Greater* Emancipator. Moses may have been “the main man” in the Exodus of the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt, but God was the people’s liberator. God was their deliverer. God was the One who brought them out of Egypt and set them free.

When God gave Israel the Ten Commandments, so they would not forget who He is or what He had done for them, He said: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). On several occasions Moses reminded the people that it was the LORD who had brought them out of Egypt and liberated them from their slavery (see Deuteronomy 6:12; 7:8; 8:14; 13:5,10). He said: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deuteronomy 5:15; see also 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22).

God is in the emancipation business. He is in the business of setting captives free. He is the *Greater* Emancipator. He is the *Greatest* Emancipator. When He sets people free, they are free. Really and truly free. If that sounds like the language of Jesus, good! It *is* the language of Jesus. The Son of God came to set people free. Jesus said in John 8:36: “So if the Son (that’s Jesus) sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Jesus came to emancipate His people, to set His people free. He is the *Greater* Emancipator. The *Greatest* Emancipator.

In today’s text from Luke 4, Jesus defined His mission in the world by applying the words of the prophet Isaiah to Himself. After His baptism by John in the Jordan and the 40 day period of testing in the desert, Jesus began His ministry of preaching and teaching in the towns and villages of Galilee. When we encounter Him in this passage, He has come home to Nazareth, where He had grown up.

On the Sabbath, Luke says (verse 16), Jesus went to the synagogue – the place where the Jews gathered for public worship and instruction in the Word of God. The Bible says that going to the synagogue on the Sabbath was Jesus’ custom. Which is to say, it was His habit. It was the regular pattern of His life. The preacher in me just can’t resist saying that if Jesus thought it important enough to make sure He was in church regularly, you and I ought to make sure it is a priority in our lives. And we ought not to be content with just showing up at church, as if that is all that matters to God. Being here does matter. But a perfect attendance record for 50 or 60 or 80 years or more won’t get anyone a ticket to heaven. What matters is the attitude and posture and response of our hearts to God and the gospel of His saving grace in Jesus His Son. Coming to church regularly is one way of showing our need for God, our trust in Him, our allegiance to Him, and our gratitude for His all-sufficient grace, which both saves us and sustains us.

If you come to church regularly, if like Jesus you have made it the pattern of your life, I want to affirm you in that. If your attendance is sporadic or inconsistent, I want to encourage you to make it your habit to be in church every week to meet with God and His people. But don’t ever think that you can earn your way into God’s favor by your record of church attendance. It doesn’t work that way with God.

Like our worship services here at Faith, there was a regular pattern to the synagogue service in Jesus’ day. It usually began with prayer, followed by the Hebrew *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6 (“Hear, O Israel, the LORD your God, the LORD is one; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart...”). This was followed by prescribed readings from the Law and the Prophets, and then a brief sermon by a visiting rabbi or a man in the congregation. On this occasion, Jesus was invited to read the Scriptures and comment on them.

He read from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, and then made a stunning statement. It may not be stunning to us today, but no doubt it took those in the synagogue at Nazareth by surprise, especially since they knew Jesus as the son of Joseph the carpenter. Jesus read the words of Isaiah – Messianic words – and then, after giving the scroll back to the attendant, He sat down (the normal posture for preaching or teaching) and said: “Today – right here, right now – this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (verse 21).

“You’re looking at the fulfillment of this prophecy.”

It was a prophetic statement of Jesus’ own call to ministry and His mission in the world. The purpose of Jesus’ coming into the world is expressed in different language in several different places in the Bible.

Luke 19:10: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Mark 10:45: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

John 3:16-17: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”

John 10:10: “I have come that (you) may have life, and have it to the full.”

1 Timothy 1:15: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

All of these express the purpose of Christ’s coming into the world. So too does this prophetic passage from Isaiah 61, which Jesus claimed for Himself. Jesus came in the power of the Holy Spirit, as God’s Anointed One (which is what the title Messiah or Christ means) – to do what?

- To bring good news (the evangel or gospel) to the poor – to those who were spiritually poor and knew they could never do enough or be good enough to save themselves.
- To proclaim freedom to the captives.
- To open the eyes of the blind.
- To bring release to the oppressed.
- To announce the time of God’s favor.

Jesus came on a mission of emancipation. He came to set the captives free. He was – and is – the Great Emancipator. More accurately, the *Greater* Emancipator. The *Greatest* Emancipator. Greater than Abraham Lincoln or any other emancipator the world has ever known.

In what ways is Jesus the Great Emancipator?

1. FREEDOM FROM SLAVERY TO SIN AND GUILT

First, He sets us free from our slavery, from our captivity to sin and guilt. Jesus said that everyone who sins is a slave to sin (John 8:34). That covers all of us, doesn’t it? All of us sin. What Jesus means when He says we are slaves to sin is that we are powerless to overcome our sinful desires and our sinful patterns of behavior apart from the power of Jesus to redeem us and set us free. But Jesus has the power to do just that. And so He went on to say: “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

Paul uses the language of slavery to sin in Romans 6. In verse 16 he says: “When you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness.”

In the end, there are really only two alternatives: Either you are a slave to sin, living under the power and dominion of sin, or you are living for God, through the power of His grace, which has set you free from the dominion of sin.

Which is it in your life? Is sin of one kind or another holding you captive? Are you living under the power of sin and guilt? Or do you know the kind of freedom Paul wrote about in Romans 8, when he said: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering for us” (8:1-3).

By His sacrificial death on the cross for us, Jesus has set us free from our slavery to sin and guilt. This freedom from captivity is for you and me and everyone who turns to Him in true repentance and trusting faith.

Have you found freedom from slavery to sin and guilt in your life? It is only a prayer away. If you will turn your heart to the Lord in humility and repentance and faith, if you will ask Him for forgiveness and cleansing and a new power to live for Him, He will set your heart free. He did it for me. He will do it for you. You don’t need to live under the dominion of sin a single moment longer. Jesus is the Great Emancipator. He came to set you free.

2. FREEDOM FROM SLAVERY TO THE DEMANDS OF THE LAW

Not only did Jesus come to set us free from our slavery to sin and guilt, He came, second, to set us free from our slavery or captivity to the law with all its demands and requirements. He came to liberate us from the endless obligations of the religious treadmill. He came to set us free from the relentless requirement to do more, to do better, and to be better in order to measure up to God’s standard and win His approval.

Always having to do more is a terrible way to live. The essence of Christianity is not what we do to win God’s favor. It is what God has done (D-O-N-E) for us in the saving work of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross. There is nothing any of us can do to earn His grace. All we can do is to receive it by faith for what it is – a gift from God.

You can be obsessed and oppressed by the idea that you have to prove yourself worthy of God by your achievements or efforts. You can knock yourself out laboring tirelessly to prove your devotion to God. But Jesus came to release the oppressed. Jesus came to set us free from the “have-to’s” of the law as a way of getting God to love us or like us.

If Jesus is Lord and Savior of your life, if your hope for salvation is in Christ and Christ alone, you are not under law but under grace. He is the Great Emancipator.

3. FREEDOM FROM SLAVERY TO FEAR

Third, I want you to see that Jesus came to set us free from our slavery to fear. The world today is a frightening place. Reasons for fear abound – whether it is a fear of the collapse of the economy, the fear of terrorism or some other catastrophic event, the fear of losing your job, the fear of failing in your marriage or some other area of your life, the fear of illness or death.

For someone here today, it may be the fear of being rejected by God because of something you've done. You may feel like you have blown it so badly in your life that there is no way God could love you. Let me just remind you of what Jesus said in John 6: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will not hunger, and whoever believes in me will not thirst... Whoever comes to me (in faith) I will never cast out" (6:35, 37).

Do you hear that? "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out." It is not about your performance. Is God sometimes disappointed with us, or even angry? Yes. But His love for us never changes. And if you belong to Him by faith, He will never cast you out. He will never let you go. So do not allow fear to hold you captive.

Then again, for someone here today, it may be a fear or anxiety for the well-being of someone you love. You may have a family member or friend who has made bad choices and is not walking with the Lord. Maybe there is someone in your life who has grieved your heart and the heart of God by choosing to go their own way in life, instead of God's way.

God wants us to live in faith, not fear. The blessing God promises – the blessing God gives – is His peace. Jesus came to give us peace. He said to His disciples: "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).

Take His word to heart. Allow Him to liberate your heart from any fear that is holding you captive today. Trust Him, in His time, to open the eyes of that friend or family member who has been blinded by the desires or pleasures of this world. He is able. More than able.

Abraham Lincoln was the Great Emancipator. Thank God for his life and legacy, and the cause for which he gave the last full measure of devotion.

But fix your eyes and your heart on Jesus, who is the Greater Emancipator. The Greatest Emancipator. He came to set us free from our slavery to sin and guilt, from the never-ending demands and requirements of the law as the way to win God's favor, and from the power of fear to rob us of the blessing of God's peace.

Now and always, may He be the Great Emancipator in your life. Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.