

Once the Captives are Released  
Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin  
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Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-9; Luke 4:16-24

It is no coincidence that the first words that Jesus speaks aloud in Luke's gospel come from the prophet Isaiah. The importance of this chosen text can scarcely be exaggerated.

Anointed by the Spirit and come to fulfill the Scripture, Jesus begins his ministry in the Galilee by laying out the cornerstone of all that he will do. Delivering verses from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus declares that as God's anointed one, he will proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release for all who are oppressed. And he does not mean it metaphorically. He means it concretely and historically. In the here and now of that moment, and the here and now of this moment, wherever and however people are held captive and oppressed, Jesus promises to bring release and restoration.

There are many ways to be held captive. And Jesus comes to free us from all these ways. We pray for our release from the captivity of physical or mental illness. We pray release from the captivity of addiction. We pray release from the captivity of anger or grief. And we pray release from the captivity of prison. Jesus offers us both release from our captivity and restoration to wholeness. Release and restoration. Like the prophet Isaiah, he will not just bind up the brokenhearted; he will ALSO give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes. He will not just proclaim liberty to the captives; he will ALSO offer the oil of gladness instead of mourning. He will not just open the prison to those who are bound; he will ALSO call them the oaks of righteousness. For what is release if there is no restoration? What is the freedom from captivity if the self and the community are not restored to wholeness? What is the opening of the prisons, if there is no home to return to? When Jesus, the new prophet, echoes the old prophet Isaiah in that

synagogue in Nazareth, he is proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor that will promise both of these things- release and restoration. The community will be released from the hardship and oppression it has suffered, and it will be restored with a double portion and everlasting joy.

As we can see around us, our community is not yet whole, and our restoration is not complete. To focus our attention on one form of captivity, too many in our community and nation are still being held captive in that most concrete and physical way, and these prisoners remain bound long after their physical release. Let me share some statistics with you:

At the start of the new year, the American penal system held more than 2.3 million adults. To put that in perspective- America makes up about 5% of the world's population and holds 25% of the world's prison population. The United States is far and away the global leader in the rate at which it incarcerates its citizenry. More than one in every 100 adults is now confined in an American jail or prison. While one in 30 men between the ages of 20 and 34 is behind bars, for black males in that age group the figure is one in nine. Nationally, more than half of released offenders are back in prison within three years, either for a new crime or for violating the terms of their parole.<sup>1</sup>

New York State holds approximately 63,000 persons in its 70 state prisons. In NY State, it costs approximately \$32,400 to maintain a prisoner in a NY State prison for a year. The total operating budget for the state prisons is about \$2.6 billion.

The recidivism rate in NY State is higher than the national average, at about 67%. And of the prison population in NY State, over one-third, about 37.5%, are incarcerated for drugs or other non-violent offenses.<sup>2</sup>

Of the more than 5,000 women currently imprisoned in NY State- 57% report a history of physical or sexual abuse, 74% report a history of substance abuse, half are imprisoned more than

100 hundred miles away from their children, and 38% will not see their children even once during their incarceration.<sup>3</sup>

The physical release from prison is not an end to the living hell that these men and women suffer. The obstacles of reentry are enormous- finding a place to live, finding a job, satisfying the conditions of release, maintaining sobriety, fighting the lure of the old life, rebuilding trust with children, relearning the streets and subways of a community that no longer looks familiar, and overcoming the prejudice with which society views the ex-offender. It is a near impossible task, as the statistics grimly prove. If the desire is to have less offenders in prison, and I don't think this is true for those who profit from the system as it now stands, there must be an alternative and prophetic consciousness within the community that receives these persons upon release.

Last week I had the privilege to attend a conference entitled, *Becoming the Promised Land: Faith, Community, and the Prison Reentry Population*. Sponsored by Union Theological Seminary, New York Theological Seminary, Auburn Seminary and the Presbytery of New York City, this conference brought together a host of experts to talk about what this alternative and prophetic consciousness must look like. When I say a host of experts, I mean theologians, formerly incarcerated persons, community leaders, and advocates for reform. Already, new programs are emerging to tackle the high rate of recidivism by providing persons, upon release, with the services that they need to reintegrate into the community and succeed. Most notably is the Exodus Transitional Community, founded by Julio Medina, a charismatic and dogged leader who came to this work after his own personal transformation in prison. Employing only persons with a history in the penal system, the Exodus community epitomizes this alternative, prophetic

consciousness for restoring those who have been released from captivity to wholeness in the community.<sup>4</sup>

What emerged from this conference was a shared belief that forgiveness and justice are essentially connected to the prophetic task of release and restoration. For if we are not truly ready to forgive another of their sins, just as God has forgiven us ours, there can be no true freedom for the other. And if there is no real freedom, there is no real justice.

This amounts to a conviction of our own sinfulness as it relates to working with the prisoner. Most of us, and I include myself, would prefer to work from a 'safe' distance. We do not really believe that the one who comes out of prison is not the same as the one who committed the crime. We do not truly believe that transformation can occur. If we do not understand what circumstances drive someone to commit a crime- whether it be poverty, addiction, malice, stupidity or desperation- we choose not to think about it much. Because, truthfully, who of us has not made an ill-informed decision motivated at the time by poverty, addiction, malice, stupidity or desperation? The cliché is true, 'There but for the grace of God go I,' except that God's grace would never allow such a thing to fall on another person.

The current prison industrial complex, and our society's support of that complex, militates against hope. For those who are released from the system, there is a kind of hopelessness because there is little or no prospect for change. It is not enough to broker the release of those who have sufficiently 'served their time' and shown 'proper remorse.' As Christians who follow the Way of the One who promised release and restoration to the captive, and knowing as we do that prisons are not built or maintained on the basis of compassion, we have a particular obligation to recognize the moral urgency of the situation and respond. For Jesus' compassion for the prisoner, in his own time, was not just a personal emotional reaction

but also a public criticism in which he dared to act upon his concern against the numbness of a society that allowed such things to flourish.

In many ways, First Presbyterian Church is already responding prophetically to the cause of the prisoner. For many, many years, this church has supported the ministry of the Church of Gethsemane, a Presbyterian congregation in Brooklyn comprised of formerly incarcerated persons, their families and their allies. In addition to financial contributions, you gather nonperishable foods that Gethsemane distributes to its families, who often struggle to make ends meet. At times, you have gathered toiletry items and snack foods that Gethsemane sends to its incarcerated members. The children's choir here at First Church goes annually to Gethsemane to share their music during worship.

As Gethsemane's pastor Liz Alexander will say, First Church's support is invaluable. But it's not enough. If our efforts have been primarily financial, we are still a long way from becoming the prophetic community that Christ has called us to be with his proclamation of release and restoration. Money matters, don't get me wrong, and we should continue providing support. But our support has been largely faceless. We are not forging new relationships with the members and leadership of that church. And there's no reason why we shouldn't be! Brooklyn is not that far away, trust me! Two of your pastors live there! The F train from West 4<sup>th</sup> Street will have you at Gethsemane in less than 30 minutes, if the train is running normally. Yet we are worlds away from this community of people. A community of people- not ex-prisoners or ex-felons or ex-drug dealers, but men, women and children who are the beneficiaries of the same promises that Christ has made to us, and maybe more so.

It is not enough to pray for the prisoners' release; we must be ready to welcome them into our midst. It is not an easy task, but being prophetic never is.

There is a story, in the book of Acts, about the apostle Peter's imprisonment and release. In this particular story, Peter is imprisoned for no other reason than his membership and leadership in the new movement of Christians that was then spreading through the Roman Empire. When news of Peter's imprisonment reached his community, the church prayed fervently to God for him. The very night before Peter was to be brought out before the people (probably a euphemism for something gruesome) an angel appeared before Peter and released him from his chains. With the angel's help, Peter passed by one guard, and then another, and then passed through the iron gate of the city, which seemed to open on its own accord. Having attained his freedom without incident, Peter ran to the house of Mary, where many were gathered and praying. He knocked on the outer gate, and a servant girl named Rhoda came out of the house to see who it was knocking at the gate. And Peter said, "It's me, Peter." Rhoda recognized Peter's voice and was so excited that she ran back into the house to tell everyone the good news. She never opened the gate. Peter stood at the outer gate, still knocking.

Those inside the house didn't believe Rhoda, telling her that it must be Peter's angel. And while they argued with Rhoda about whether the one knocking at the outer gate was Peter or Peter's angel, Peter stood at the outer gate, still knocking. Finally, they opened the outer gate and found the real Peter standing before them, miraculously released from captivity. Those that had been praying so hard for Peter's release missed the opportunity to welcome him back into the community!

Needless to say, we are not alone in our struggle to manifest the prophetic vision that Isaiah and Jesus offer for the world. We can pray so hard for justice that we forget to do it. We can bow our heads so low that we miss the one standing in front of us who needs our help.

Yet this is First Presbyterian Church, after all, a congregation that is ever striving to be prophetic and never satisfied to sit comfortably around with our past accomplishments to keep us company.

About a year and a half ago, a few members of the Board of Deacons enrolled in the Circles of Care Restorative Justice Ministry through the Interfaith Coalition of Advocates for Reentry and Employment.<sup>5</sup> The idea of the Circles of Care program is to encourage an individual who is currently incarcerated through letter-writing, and then to support him upon his release. At first, the Deacons found the letter-writing difficult. There were questions about how much personal information to share, or how to maneuver the vast theological differences that seemed to emerge. The staff at ICARE has supported this group at every stage, and over time, each member has formed a unique and meaningful relationship with this individual. He has a parole hearing in July and the possibility of release in the early fall. If he gains his freedom, and we hope he does, we will have the occasion as a whole church to welcome him into our midst. We will have the opportunity to be the prophetic community that Jesus envisioned for us- a community that embodies Christ's radical grace and inclusivity, a community that seeks the release and restoration of all persons from any form of oppression and captivity.

Just last week, the Session voted for our congregation to shift its commitment in the New Sanctuary Movement from the first to the second level of commitment.<sup>6</sup> At this midlevel of commitment, we will be paired with a family that is currently seeking asylum in the United States. At least one member of the family is facing possible deportation, and at least one member of the family is a U.S. citizen. In many of these families, parents face deportation and separation from their American children. Every appointment or hearing runs the risk of ending in

imprisonment. The process is one of fear and intimidation, and the threat of captivity is real. In welcoming this family into our midst and assisting them in any way, short of providing physical sanctuary, we will have the opportunity to be the prophetic community that Jesus envisioned for us as he proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor when the captives will be released and the prisons opened to those who are bound.

In the Lukan story, Jesus sat among the congregation in that synagogue in Nazareth and taught them about the release and restoration that God has in store for God's people. And people in that congregation patted themselves on the back for having produced such a fine, well-spoken young leader from within their community. But before the story is over, Jesus has set himself apart from his hometown, for he and the community diverged on the meaning of this Scriptural fulfillment. The people of his hometown heard and interpreted the Scripture as a promise of God's exclusive covenant with them, offering them freedom from hardship and oppression. Jesus did come announcing freedom, but it was not a limited freedom for that community. Jesus announced God's promise of liberation for all the poor, oppressed and captive, regardless of nationality, citizenship, criminal record, health, gender or race.

In the end, they were unable or unwilling to open the boundaries of their community. They could not, or would not, share in the bounty of God's deliverance, and so they themselves were unable to receive it. They were limited by what seemed realistic or prudent and lacked the prophetic imagination to open wide their community for the unlimited grace that the gospel offers to pour in.<sup>7</sup>

Are we ready to transcend the boundaries of community and the limits of love that we have erected, once the captives are released? Are we ready to accept the task of prophetic

imagination and ministry to engage the promise of release and restoration, once the captives are released? Are we ready to be the prophetic community that proclaims the radical inclusivity of Christ's message and stops short of nothing less than true freedom and forgiveness, once the captives are released? Are we ready?

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<sup>1</sup> "One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008," [www.pewcenteronthestates.org](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org)

<sup>2</sup> NY State Department of Correctional Services, [www.docs.state.ny.us](http://www.docs.state.ny.us)

<sup>3</sup> Women's Prison Association, [www.wpaonline.org](http://www.wpaonline.org)

<sup>4</sup> Exodus Transitional Community, [www.etcny.org](http://www.etcny.org)

<sup>5</sup> Interfaith Coalition of Advocates for Reentry and Employment, [www.nyicare.org](http://www.nyicare.org)

<sup>6</sup> The New Sanctuary Movement, [www.newsanctuarymovement.org](http://www.newsanctuarymovement.org)

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *The Prophetic Imagination*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978).