

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Thy Will be Done: Believe  
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Exodus 12:1-13; Acts 16:22-34

Two stories about true believers. Story one: They had heard the rumors and had done their research. Though there were skeptics around them, these true believers knew what was real and what was fake. They knew that two weeks ago John F. Kennedy junior would appear in the same plaza where his father was shot and announce that he was the real vice-president of the United States. It did not matter that authorities had pulled Kennedy's body, along with those of his wife and another passenger, from the wreckage of his plane that had gone down at sea. It did not matter that the passengers had been identified through dental records. It was all a lie. It was a way for the government to hide Kennedy away until the time was right. And so, these true believers gathered in the plaza awaiting his return. They took time away from their jobs. They traveled thousands of miles to see the event. Then, when he didn't turn up the rumor spread that his real appearance would be at the Rolling Stones concert later that night. Story two: They believed that Covid-19 was real and deadly. While they watched the number of children being infected soar, they did their homework. They watched as the trials for children progressed and as the nation's medical authorities debated the efficacy of the vaccine on younger and younger children. Some even enrolled their children in the trials. They believed in the science and technology. Then, the moment when the government approved the vaccine, they lined up their children to be immunized.

It may be difficult for us to relate to both these stories. Some of us will see one as an appropriate belief and the other as not. Yet these two stories each contain the two fundamental ingredients of believing. These two ingredients are an acceptance of a perceived reality and a willingness to act on that perceived reality. Let's unpack this. First, the acceptance of a perceived reality means that an individual, or a group of individuals looks at the world, takes in certain information and then creates a reality around that information. Those waiting for J.F.K. Jr. took in information that he was still alive and created a reality around that information. The parents of young children took in scientific information about the safety and efficacy of the vaccines and created a perceived reality around that. Second, those who believed that J.F.K. Jr. was still alive and that he would appear in Dallas took whatever measures they thought were necessary to be present for his return. As I said a moment ago, they used their time and treasure to be there. In the same way, those parents who desired that their children be protected from Covid-19 stood in line at one in the morning, or got on the phone to their pediatricians as soon as possible to ensure that their children were inoculated. Belief is about acceptance of a perceived reality and then a willingness to act on that perception.

These two ingredients are also present in the Biblical understanding of believing. We can see how this idea plays itself out in both of our stories. First, our Exodus tale: The Hebrew people had been slaves for decades. They were powerless against the Egyptian Pharaoh and his minions. And even though Moses and Aaron had continued to tell the Hebrews that this God of their ancestors was going to set them free, their lot had only gotten harder. Their work had only become more difficult. But as the plagues began to ramp up in severity, something began to change. The attitude, the belief of the Hebrew people began to perceive a new reality. They began to perceive that this God of their ancestors was indeed a liberating God. This God was one who not only desired they be free and had the ability to free them, but was going to do so. Their response was to listen to the commands to prepare for this God to act. In the face of overwhelming odds, they roasted their lambs, prepared their meals, placed blood on the door frames of their houses, and waited for this God to act. This was belief, belief in a liberating God, a belief that would have cascading effects across the years.

We can see these same two parts of belief at work in the Book of Acts in three separate incidents in this one story. The first incident has to do with the reason for Paul and Silas being in prison. When Paul and Silas arrive in Philippi, they are followed by a woman who's a soothsayer who says sooths...she tells fortunes. She does this because she is possessed by a spirit. She follows Paul and Silas around crying out that they were followers of the great god. Paul finally tires of this and casts out the spirit...meaning he sets this woman free. While this is an act of liberation for the woman, her owners see it as an act of because this woman can no longer make them any money. The owners then raise a riot against Paul and Silas, thus leading to their flogging and incarceration. These events lead to the second cascading effect of the perceived reality of God as liberator.

The second effect concerns Paul and Silas praying and singing even while in chains. They do so because they believe that God is a liberating God and so, one way or another God will free them. But then an unexpected event leads to an unexpected liberation. There is an earthquake. The quake throws open the prison doors and tears the chains from their walls. People have often seen this as God liberating Paul and Silas, but I would argue that is not so. It is not so because neither the text nor Paul link God to the earthquake and because Paul and Silas do not escape. Instead, they stay put and liberate the jailer. The story tells us that the jailer was about to take his life because he was afraid that the prisoners had run away, and he would be tortured and executed for their escape. Paul stops him by telling the jailer that no one had left. Rather than being relieved at this revelation, the jailer asks, "How can I be saved?" This is not a question about how to get to heaven. It is a question about how he can be liberated from his fear of what might happen to him. Paul and Silas answer his question by sharing their perceived reality that God is a god of freedom and liberation. The jailer accepts this new perceived reality and then acts on it by bringing Paul and Silas out of the jail, dressing their wounds, and feeding them. In other words, the jailer becomes God's agent of liberation. Finally, the jailer and his family give thanks for believing in God. This is the cascading effect of believing that it can move from Moses to Paul, to a Roman jailer...and to us because we are the beneficiaries of this cascading effect of believing.

What I mean by this is that we did not invent the particular perception of reality that God is a liberating God. It is a perception that has been shared for thousands of years by more than a billion people. People have believed that in Jesus of Nazareth they can and have been set free; can be and have been liberated. This perception of reality that we share helps us see and experience that Jesus can turn the prison of hate into the freedom love; the prison of fear into the freedom of fearlessness; the prison of doubt into the freedom of conviction; the prison of sadness into the freedom of joy; the prison of hopelessness into the freedom of hope; the prisons of racism, sexism, and homophobia into the freedom of shared humanity; the prison of sin into the freedom of forgiveness; and the prison of death into the freedom of life. And we do so because we have witnessed the truth of this perceived reality; because we have seen it at work in our lives and in the lives of others. And I believe in this perception of reality because there was a moment in my life when I thought there was no hope, but through the witness of others I was introduced to this perception of reality that God wanted me to be free. And slowly, over time and with help, my prison doors were opened and I was able to see the light of hope again. And whenever I have my doubts about this perception of the reality of God, I remember those moments and believe.

Every day we are offered multiple realities in which we can believe. Some are worth believing in, the efficacy of vaccines, and others are not, the return of J.F.K. Jr. But the one on which I would argue we can all depend is the perceived and realized reality that God is a liberating God, who desires our freedom so that we might experience the fullness of love and joy. My challenge to you then for this week is this, to ask yourselves, "How am I allowing God in Jesus to set me free from the prisons that hold me fast?"