

A Ransom for Many

Part of “Jesus Saves” sermon series preached at

Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church

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Texts: Psalm 49:14-15; Isaiah 35:10; Jeremiah 31:10-11; Matthew 20:26-28;

I Timothy 2: 5-6; I Peter 1:18-19

Today we are continuing on with our series “Jesus Saves”. Each Sunday in this series we are looking at a different scriptural image that helps us understand how Jesus saves us. Today I am talking about Jesus as a ransom for many. Jesus saves us by being a ransom, paying a ransom with his life.

Being kidnapped and held for ransom is not part of our everyday North American experience. I have never been kidnapped, or held hostage, nor has anyone in my family. And so when I think about Jesus as a ransom, it’s not a concept that I understand in a personal way.

You get ransomed when someone pays a price to get you out of captivity. When we think captivity we might think prison, but captivity can mean any time you are held against your will. And for most of history, captivity has not meant being put in prison, but rather it has meant being enslaved. People were captured and put to work as slaves. Bandits, cruel rulers, invading armies and even courts of law enslaved people.

The captivity story that most quickly springs to mind in the Hebrew Bible, is the story of Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers. In Joseph’s case, on the long walk to Egypt, he likely would have hoped that his father would show up and ransom him from his captivity. But of course, Joseph’s father thought he was dead, so no ransom was ever offered.

Joseph’s experience was not unusual, enslavement was common in biblical times. There are numerous laws in the Hebrew Bible which talk about slaves, and how and when they can be redeemed, or ransomed. Because enslavement was so common, it’s not surprising that people took this everyday image and used it to help understand how we relate to God. “I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm.” (Exodus 6:6) That’s how God talks in the book of Exodus to the Hebrew people enslaved in Egypt. God rescued them by sending a saviour named Moses. Much later, when Israel is taken into exile in Babylon, we hear, “And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing.” (Isaiah 35:10) God ransoms Israel from the forces of Babylon. In the verses from Psalm 49 that we read, death is described as holding human beings captive. God ransoms them from Sheol. You can see that ransom language is used about God long before Jesus came on the scene. The God of the Jewish faith is a ransoming and redeeming God.

People in bible times found it easy to understand the idea of being ransomed. They all knew people who had been kidnapped or sold into slavery. Many Israelites owned slaves, or were or had been a slave themselves. On a very personal level they knew all about the powerlessness of being a captive. God is the one who steps in and rescues the powerless.

God ransoming human beings became a more and more popular idea as time went on. There was a couple of hundred year period between the time of the last book of the Old Testament and the writing of the New Testament. This is sometimes called the intertestamental period. During that time, people talked all the time about the cosmic forces of evil that were ruling the world, and that God needed to break into the world and save us from our enslavement to these forces. For those of you familiar with the term “apocalyptic literature”, that’s where we see this way of thinking in its starkest form. The book of Revelation uses this imagery as it talks of a great cosmic battle.

Jesus grew up with this way of thinking, it was the way many people thought. John the Baptist’s father Zechariah talks about this battle...he prophesies that a mighty savior would save Israel from the hand of its enemies. Jesus himself talks about his ministry using the words of Isaiah: “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free....” (Luke 4:18) It’s a cosmic battle, and God is coming to redeem us!

Many stories in the gospel show Jesus talking about his battle with Satan, “the ruler of the world”. For example, the devil tempts Jesus and offers him the kingdoms of the world. Or remember the story of the bent-over woman? Jesus heals her on the Sabbath saying, “Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” (Luke 13:14) Or Jesus talks about “binding the strong man”; overcoming the power of evil. (Matthew 12:29)

God challenges the evil forces that hold human beings captive through the person of Jesus. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, the reign of God that had come to earth.

Jesus paid a ransom, and that ransom was that he, the son of God, submitted to death, a horrible death on the cross. He died and was buried. What exactly happened there on the cross, and in the tomb? How did dying, submitting to the forces of death out of love for us, bring about a vanquishing of death? That’s the mystery of our faith, “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.” Was Satan tricked into killing Jesus? Did Satan think that he truly was going to be able to defeat Jesus, the son of God, by killing him? Whatever the reason, somehow by dying, Jesus was able to conquer evil. His death was the price he paid to conquer death for us. It was the ransom paid for us. The resurrection shows that Satan did not win. Jesus was resurrected and the power of death, the power of Satan was broken, in a cosmic way, for all time.

Other New Testament writers continue to talk about the image of ransom. The writer of Ephesians says, “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic power of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12) In the book of Romans Paul talks vigorously about the power of sin (Romans 3:9), and human beings “sold into slavery under sin” (Romans 7:14). While Jesus has won the victory, we live in the in-between times, the time when the kingdom is present, but not always visible.

I hope I've shown you that Jesus as a ransom is a strong biblical image. Does this image still work for us today? I said before that I don't have personal everyday experience with being held for ransom, but I do think it is still a powerful image. A story I heard in the news a long time ago, still comes to mind when I think about ransoms.

This story happened in Columbia in 1998, but it involved two Canadians. Norbert Reinhart, from Raymond, Alberta, was a 49-year old owner of a drilling company called Terramundo. Terramundo was contracted to look for gold and silver in Columbia. Reinhart had a number of employees working for him in Columbia. One of them was Edward Leonard, a 60-year old mining veteran, with a long history of working in the industry. Reinhart had not personally met Leonard, but had hired him because he was a brother of one of his existing employees.

In June of 1998, just a week after starting his job with Terramundo, Edward Leonard was kidnapped from a mine site by rebels known as FARC (revolutionary armed forces of Columbia). They demanded a \$2 million dollar ransom for Leonard. From the time Reinhart heard that his employee Edward Leonard had been kidnapped, he was frantic to have him released. He talked to lots of different people about the logistics and then flew down to Columbia. He decided that he personally wanted to negotiate the freeing of his employee. He gathered the money that was needed. The day before the meeting was to take place, he phoned his wife and told her, “We've got a meeting and if it doesn't work out, I'm trading myself.” It was a heart-rending decision for him; he knew he was putting his wife and his two daughters (aged two and six) in a terrible position. But he felt that as the owner of the company, he wanted to personally pay the price if there was a price to pay, rather than have his employee suffer any further. He hired a bodyguard, and went to meet the kidnappers, trekking deep into the mountains.

That's how Edward Leonard came to meet his boss, 106 days after he had first been kidnapped. There, high in the Columbian mountains, on a dusty road, the two men met each other for the first time. Reinhart greeted him with the words, “You must be Ed Leonard. Your shift is over. It's time for you to go home. I'm going to take your place.” Leonard walked free, and Reinhart went with the kidnappers back into the mountains.

If you are old enough, maybe you remember this story. Norbert Reinhart's wife did a lot of press interviews as they tried to negotiate her husband's freedom. What Reinhart did was not popular with the governments of Canada or Columbia. Paying a ransom, and giving himself in exchange is not what any government recommends. There was no guarantee that Reinhart would ever see his family again. When Edward Leonard came back to Canada a free man, he was interviewed at the airport and he said, "There is no way to put it in words when somebody basically gives their life for you ... I'll be forever grateful to him."

As it turns out, 90 days later two Catholic priests were able to negotiate the release of Reinhart: they never revealed how much they had to pay to secure his freedom.

This story touched my heart; I am still thinking about it, years later. It reminds me of the words of Jesus, "Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13) Reinhart did such a loving and courageous thing for someone he had never met. To me it epitomizes the best of human nature.

When we try to think about what God is like, God is beyond anything we can think. But we take the best of what we know in the world, and apply it to God. Wouldn't God's love be like and even greater than the best love we can possibly have in the world? God working tirelessly, endlessly for our freedom. Never resting, always trying to negotiate, working to redeem us. This human story helps me to understand the work of Jesus, challenging the powers, paying the ransom, taking our place, setting us free from the power of death.

It doesn't surprise me that the idea of Jesus as a ransom has been very popular. In fact, for the first one thousand years of church history, it was the dominant, and almost exclusive way that people understood salvation. This way of understanding salvation is sometimes called "Christos Victor", because Christ is victorious, winning our freedom from the forces of evil.

Gradually this image of God ransoming us fell out of popularity in the West (although it still is very strong in the Orthodox tradition). In the West it has largely been replaced, especially in the Protestant world, with quite a different image of salvation. You'll be hearing about that image next week when Randal Rauser comes to preach. That's the idea that God has to punish us for our sinfulness, but that Jesus, God's son, saves us by standing between us and the wrath of God. You can see that is quite different than what I've been talking about today, which shows human beings in captivity to evil forces, and God fighting a cosmic battle against evil to win us back, to pay a ransom for our freedom. That way of thinking also sometimes uses "ransom" language, so it can be confusing. But it all depends who you are being ransomed from. The way of thinking I am talking about today always sees the ransom being paid to the forces of evil.

Over time, there was a gradual shift from one way of thinking about salvation to another way of thinking. The Bible didn't change, but the way we read the Bible changed. Instead of emphasizing these verses we read today, people started reading other verses and downplaying or ignoring these verses. There are many images of salvation in scripture, or you could say, using the metaphor from my first sermon in this series, that there are many clubs in the bag. People found reasons why they didn't like using this club anymore.

And when you think about it, you can understand why some people find the ransom view of salvation hard to stomach. People today might not like to think so much about Satan, or visualize evil in such personal forms. Today we might like to think about evil as the absence of good rather than a malevolent force that is consciously plotting our overthrow. When you take that ransom view to its logical conclusion, it can even seem dualistic; the idea that God and Satan have equal power. People often reject that view, because isn't God the Lord of all?

If you read the Wikipedia articles on the Ransom theory of atonement (or salvation), the final line reads, "Today, the ransom view of atonement is not widely accepted in the West, except (and here is the kicker line, get ready for it) by some Anabaptist peace churches."

Mennonite theologian Denny Weaver wrote a whole book on the ransom image of salvation. He points out the strong scriptural basis for the ransom image. He argues that this image helps us understand not just Jesus' death but his life as well. It helps us understand what we are called to do as Christians. Everything Jesus did and said, including his death, were a challenge to the forces of evil. Weaver describes how Mennonites emphasize the importance of discipleship, following Jesus. Like Jesus we have to stand up to the power of evil today too. Salvation, in a Mennonite view, is not simply about saying "Yes" to Jesus in your heart and being washed in the blood of the lamb. It may include that, but it also needs to include being part of Jesus' kingdom of God on earth. Jesus challenged the forces of evil, so we do that too. Because Jesus conquered those forces, we can with confidence continue his work; setting captives free, delivering the oppressed from the forces of evil. Death doesn't scare us anymore.

Maybe I like this ransom theory because I am a Mennonite! But as a Christian living today, I find the ransom image of salvation compelling, because I do feel that there are forces of evil in the world. If Jesus was born in 1985 he would be around 30 years old now in 2015. Who or what would he be confronting? How would he show that the kingdom of God has come to earth? Who would he release from captivity?

I want to share two examples of places where people are in captivity today. I have known some people who were addicted to drugs, and hearing their experience, I have felt that there are forces of evil in the world. It's not just one individual thinking, "Hmmm...I think I'll take this pill to get high." It's not just a biological fact of someone ingesting some chemicals. There are networks of people making money from selling drugs, showing up on the doorstep of vulnerable people, peddling drugs to them, pushing drugs. These are systems that are set up to create addicts, to create an insatiable desire for more drugs, whatever the personal or societal cost. Greed and the love of money lies behind the production and selling of drugs. The drug lord thinks, "I want to make money, and I do that by running a drug empire. If it destroys people or families or even countries, too bad for them. I worship the dollar." I think Jesus cares about setting captives free from the forces of addiction.

Another example of captivity comes to mind because today is international women's day. Statistics on sexual trafficking are hard to pinpoint, but everyone agrees that multiple millions of people, the vast majority of them women and girls, are sold into sexual slavery every year. Think of Boko Haram kidnapping hundreds of schoolgirls in Nigeria. They were kidnapped not to be put into prison, but to be used as sex slaves. Other girls in different parts of the world are sold because their parents are desperately poor and need the money. You hear of sex tourism and the brothels in Asian countries, and the famous red light district in Amsterdam. But every country has prostitution. How many thousands of women are smuggled into North America each year with the promise of a new life, only to be coerced and threatened into working in massage parlours and call agencies?

If Jesus was working to release captives today, where would he be standing? I think he would be standing with Oby Ezekwesili. She's a woman in Nigeria, who has spearheaded a demonstration in the Nigerian capital every single day since the girls were kidnapped by Boko Haram. She and the others standing with her each morning will not forget: today is day 329 of captivity for the 219 girls. The protestors give their time, every day going to protest in front of the government building, holding up pictures of the girls. Every day putting pressure on the government to do something concrete to get those girls back. These protesters are doing kingdom of God work, working for release of the captives. Or I think of Leslee Udwin, maker of the documentary "India's Daughter", a film that points out the sexual violence that women face in India. Or I think of all the people who are working to find missing and presumed murdered First Nations women in our country. It is not OK that women and girls are disappearing. It is not OK that they are raped and murdered. These women need to be rescued. This has got to change.

I don't think that Christians have an exclusive corner on the kingdom of God. Wherever cruelty is challenged, wherever hatred is countered by love, wherever violence is met with courageous non-violent action, I think God is working in the world. We believe that Jesus was a ransom, part of God's continuing action to save us. I think the church needs to be at the forefront of this work, taking on the word of Jesus, "He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..." (Luke 4:18)

The word of the Lord came to the people at Lendrum. God saying still, "I am the Lord, and I will...deliver you from slavery...I will redeem you with an outstretched arm." Belonging to a church, a world-wide community of hope, protects us from feeling frantic or powerless in the face of widespread systemic evil. As followers of Jesus, we continue God's saving work, speaking truth to power, ransoming the captives. We strengthen each other with the words of Jesus, "Take courage, I have conquered the world." (John 16:33) Thanks be to God!