

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher- by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 5th Sunday after the Epiphany, February 4, 2018.

Welcome to Super Bowl Sunday, otherwise known as the 5th Sunday after the Epiphany. You probably didn't know this, but the lessons for today were selected to bring attention to today's Super Bowl.

You probably thought that Isaiah (**Isaiah 40:21-31**) was talking about God, but, no, he was talking about the Commissioner of the National Football League. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing."

And you probably thought that St. Paul (**I Corinthians 9:16-23**), when speaking of the "gospel," was referring to the Good News of Jesus. Oh no. Paul was talking about the many efforts to generate revenue from the Super Bowl. It's no longer a simple contract with a single television network. Now there are multiple contracts with multiple companies who deliver content in multiple ways to people who receive content in multiple ways. Again, it is the Commissioner speaking: "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them." He then goes on to describe his various audiences and the different strategies used for these different audiences. The end-game is "I do it all for the sake of the contract, so that I may share in its blessings."

If this sounds far-fetched, I refer you to today's gospel (**Mark 1:29-39**). What Mark is describing here is clearly a Super Bowl Party. All sorts of people are coming to the party. And immediately they wonder about refreshments, only to learn that Simon's mother-in-law is not feeling well, thus putting a hold on the refreshments. Jesus comes to the rescue. He goes to the woman's bedside and helps her up. "Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." Well, when this word got out, all sorts of people came to the house, hoping that Jesus would make them well too. And, bless his heart, he did his best, until he was exhausted.

At that point, he had to find some peace and quiet. "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."

But the relief didn't last long. His friends found him and begged him to help others. And so "he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in synagogues and casting out demons." For Jesus, this activity was actually more rewarding than rehashing a football game.

This sentiment is captured in today's Collect: "Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins and give us, we beseech thee, the liberty of that abundant life which thou has manifested to us in thy Son our Savior Jesus Christ."

Each of us, I suspect, experiences some kind of bondage, an unhealthy attachment to something or even someone. An attachment that doesn't bring out the best in us or others, but rather saps energy and resources and time. Causing people who care for us to say things like, "Put that thing down," "Turn that thing off," "Why do you have to go there all the time?" "We have nothing left because you spend it all on that thing."

One of the attachments for me is our basement. This is where I prepare for Sunday, where I store things, generally in 3-ring binders, and where, every once in a while, I do a little purging. Emphasis on "little." Otherwise known as "not nearly enough."

The challenge is that bondage for one person is liberty for another. Often, we attach ourselves to things or people because we feel more alive or more valued or just happier. And that very sense of liberty for self can be a source of concern for others.

So, what to do? Well, one choice is what you and I do on Sunday mornings and many other times. We attach ourselves, we submit, if you will, to God, in and through Jesus Christ. It's a choice we make for ourselves, and a choice we suggest to others.

The bondage we recognize is our inability to save ourselves, no matter how hard we try, no matter how good we are. We are subject to sin. That's our nature, or at least part of it. Sometimes we do the things we shouldn't do, and don't do the things that we should do. That's what we can't break through. That's the trap that we are in. We need help. We crave liberty. We long for a sense that we are forgiven and that we can do better.

And, thanks be to God, God remedies the situation. He confronts the bondage. What better describes bondage than the Crucifixion? And what better describes liberty than the Resurrection? Here is true liberty. Not because of anything we did, but because God desires salvation, especially for His creature to whom He has given responsibility for looking after the Creation.

As we need God, so God in a way needs us. And it is in acknowledging that relationship, in saying yes to God, in thanking God for Jesus, in attaching ourselves to him, at His invitation, that we find the liberty that we crave. In raising Jesus from the dead, God raises us. In the words of this morning's Psalm (**Psalm 147:3**): "He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds." Another way of saying: "From bondage to liberty."

Sorry, I got a little carried away. We were talking about the Super Bowl, weren't we?

Well, I trust that you don't think Isaiah is really talking about the NFL commissioner. And I trust that you don't think St. Paul is really talking about a contract with those delivering the Super Bowl to various audiences. And I trust that you don't think that Mark was describing a Super Bowl party and aftermath. I confess. Sometimes I submit to the bondage of bad humor.

Thankfully, though, for you and me, these moments don't last longer than 15 minutes. At which time we can get back to the really important things in life. Not nachos. Not Budweiser. Not flyovers. Not half-time shows. But a simple meal of bread and wine, made possible by the Risen Lord Himself, shared with simple folks grateful for all the blessings of our lives. We have our own version of "Play ball." It's called "Let us bless the Lord."

With apologies to the Commissioner and Isaiah and Paul and Mark and Simon's mother-in-law and you all and, yes, to Jesus who saves us, even from sermons like this, I say "Amen."