

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
5 September 2021

10:30 a.m. & 6:30 p.m. MT Worship  
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

***“Free to Be:  
Whoever God Calls Us to Be  
(An Invitation to Join Calvary as We Move into our Future  
as a Community that shares in Onsite/Online/Offsite Ministry)***

Final sermon in the 14-week summer series: *Free to Be*

*Matthew 18:20; Isaiah 43:1-3a, 5-7, 10-13, 19-21;  
Acts 2:46-47; Romans 12:4-5; Ephesians 3:14-21*

New Revised Standard Version

It is one of the most beautiful prayers in Scripture I think. Paul’s prayer for the people of Ephesus. As he concludes the third chapter in this letter, Paul prays for the Ephesians’ inner lives to be strengthened, that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith, and that they would be rooted and grounded in love. Along with all the saints who have died and gone on before them, Paul prays for these faithful church-going people to try to comprehend the *incomprehensible*: the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ. A love that surpasses book knowledge, but that fills the soul with hope, peace, and joy...a love like no other...a love that reflects the “fullness,” as Paul describes, of God’s presence.

If you can remember pre-pandemic life, think of what a packed Broncos stadium looks

like and feels like – all that energy in one place – or what 10,000 bodies at Red Rocks Amphitheater dancing and singing feels like. Or think of filling up a water bottle, and when you go to put the straw in and screw the lid on, water spills down the sides because it’s so full. Or think of sitting on your suitcase, trying to squash it down, clothes and shoes jamming inside – it’s so full you are straining the zipper to get it to close. Or think of how your heart feels when your children and grandchildren are all in one place at one time, gathered together, sitting down for a meal. Or think of the surrounding sound of the organ and the voices singing “The Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s *Messiah* on Easter Sunday. Or think of a quiet moment in your day when you can draw in a deep breath and just “be” – noticing something

beautiful around you – the sunset, your dog curled up at your feet, the laughter of your neighbor’s playing outside, your roses opening for the first time of the season (before the beetles get to them)...think of *anything* that can give you an image of FULLNESS – and imagine *that* fullness as God’s presence and love.

Can you imagine what it looks like, feels like, smells like, tastes like to be FULL with God? So FULL with God that you know good and well that that fullness is what is powering you and empowering you to do what you do. And that even as you do what you do and do it to the best of your ability – God’s still going to take whatever you are doing and accomplish something with it that is beyond your wildest dreams, beyond what you can even think up for yourself, beyond what you can put on a vision board or map out in a five year plan, beyond what you know to be possible by what you have seen and heard thus far in your life?

Because *this* my friends, this is the fullness of God that fuels the church – the gathered body of God’s people. The fullness of God, or the presence of the Holy Spirit we might say, this is why

we are here today. Faith has been a part of humanity’s heartbeat from the beginning. And the church has been a part of Christianity’s story from the beginning. As flawed as we are, as frail as we are, as failing to be relevant as some would say that we are – we get our hope and our strength by being rooted and grounded in God’s love, which allows us to be free enough to grow wings and fly up and around in God’s imagination – an imagination that dreams of a world very different than the one we are living in now, but not so different that God cannot see us in that world and not so different that we don’t get glimpses of it from time to time. It is NOT a fantasy world or a fictional world; it is a faith-filled world – full of the presence of God, which is to say, full of people being fully present to one another.

From generation to generation, from me to you, from you to your children, and your children’s children – from east to west and south to north – God has used human beings to accomplish amazing things. Amazing things like neighbors helping neighbors after natural disasters. Amazing things like developing vaccines in record

time to fight deadly viruses. Amazing things like creating vessels that allow us to fly in the sky, or float on the ocean, or drive through canyons and fields and forests. Amazing things like utilizing all kinds of spices and plants and animals to create dishes that delight our palates – so much so that we crave food for its experience and not just its nourishment.

You see, we *need* Paul's doxology of praise in Ephesians, we *really* need it – especially during times when it feels like everything around us is doom and gloom. What is your “doom and gloom” diatribe these days? Mine includes things like:

- COVID breakthrough cases and overflowing ICUs,
- anti-vaxxers and school board meetings turned shouting matches over masks
- fires and hurricanes and other ways we are experiencing global warming
- legislation and court rulings that suppress voter's rights and women's rights
- the unapologetic oppression and violence of the Taliban, and ISIS K, and the heartbreak of Afghani refugees in crisis
- United States military women and men who were

killed in a war that began before they were even born

- systemic racism that ignores our past, which just prevents us from repairing our present to move toward a more whole future
- and our deeply divided politics that prioritizes party over people.

Maybe some of the things on my “doom and gloom” list are on yours as well, or maybe you have a whole other list – or maybe you don't even have a list – you don't have a care in the world – and if so – God bless you....but if you are like me, many days, it can feel like we are living in a world that is falling apart, and that we, ourselves, are falling apart too.

The desperation and sadness of it all came to a head for me when I heard President Biden use scripture (Isaiah 6: “here I am, Lord, send me”) to equate a call by God with the call of the US military while also mirroring violent attacks with violent language: saying, in response to the horrific attack of ISIS-K at the Kabul airport, “*We will not forgive. We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make*

*you pay.*”<sup>1</sup> Of course, our President is human and he is not the first President to use the Bible for the purpose of unifying people against an enemy or to say things that do not reflect what I believe to read of the gospel good news in scripture, but, nonetheless, perhaps it is that humanity that never fails to disappoint and dishearten me. I do not have clear answers about what justice or forgiveness looks like when a terrorist group kills innocent people – but I do know that the language of violence is not the response we see Jesus giving to those who are violent toward him. Rather, Jesus says, quite remarkably on the cross, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

Now it is hard, impossible perhaps, for us to understand Jesus’ response on the cross – forgiveness in the face of violence. Perhaps it’s easier for us to understand President Biden’s response. But when we say we are “free to be” a people who “follow Jesus” – it means following Jesus in ways that don’t always make sense to us

or to the way our world currently works.

And in a way, the seemingly senseless ways of Jesus at times – sitting with those who have cheated others out of money, forgiving those who have betrayed him, forgiving those who have beaten him to death – these actions perhaps are so far gone to us that they seem unattainable given the state of our world. The fear and threat is so real that our faith feels naïve or fantasy-like.

But this is where I would invite us again to listen to the Apostle Paul – who invites us to dream a bit. To use our imaginations. To be bold and courageous in acknowledging that the power of God is *within* us using our gifts – as Paul (and Pastor Alice) reminded us last week; and that God’s power (not our own) – is what changes the world.

When the news gets to be too much, too despairing, turn it off – and begin imagining. The news isn’t going anywhere – it’ll be there whenever you need it. But take some intentional

---

<sup>1</sup> Eric Schmitt, Helene Cooper, Megan Specia, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Jim Huylebroek, Matthieu Aikins, Victor J. Blue, Fatima Faizi, Najim Rahim, Fahim Abed and Sharif Hassan, “‘We Will Not Forgive,’ Biden Says, Vowing Retaliation for Kabul Attack,” *New York Times*

(Aug. 26, 2021, updated Sept. 2, 2021), accessed on Sept. 5, 2021 at <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/08/26/world/afghanistan-taliban-biden-news>.

time imagining what the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven looks like. Pretend you are a kid again and make up some imaginary friends and build an imaginary world in your mind or own paper or with sofa cushions or legos. Let yourself dream.

During our Facing Racism cohort last winter with Soul 2 Soul Sisters, Rev. Dr. Dawn Riley Duval, invited us to imagine what black liberation looks like, feels like, smells like, tastes like. Because in working to be anti-racist, it is easy to get down on the world and ourselves and just be focused on the “anti” part of everything – on the dismantling and deconstructing. But what about the building up and building back and creating something new part? To have a prophetic imagination is to know what we are working FOR, not just what we are working AGAINST. Rev. Dr. Dawn invited us to write down words that reflect how we would know when black liberation was a real thing in the world. One of the concrete things I wrote down was: Black liberation is black mothers watching their teenage sons walk down the street without fear for their safety.

So – in the same way – what does the kin-dom of God “on earth as it is in heaven” look like, feel like, smell like, taste like? What are the concrete ways you will know it is here and happening? If you are struggling to imagine, turn to Acts 2. Perhaps the kin-dom of God looks like Acts 2 – groups of people gathering today, living day-by-day, people breaking bread and sharing their lives together, cultivating generosity in their hearts, people praising God and prioritizing the goodwill of ALL people and not just what is good for them. And in turn, God saving, or healing, people in huge numbers until all are free.

Or maybe the kin-dom of God looks like a passage we read from Luke 4 a couple weeks ago, Jesus’ first sermon from the scroll of Isaiah. The kin-dom of God looks like freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, setting the oppressed free.

You see, like any good story, scripture helps us imagine.

In some ways, looking at our historic Baptist freedoms this summer – soul freedom, Bible freedom, church freedom, religious freedom – has been an

imaginative exercise, hasn't it? Because so often, for so many of us, we do not feel free in our religion or in our faith. Our pastors or churches tell us what we must believe and squelch our questioning or doubts. And our country seems to cater to Christianity; we struggle for the separation of church and state to remain intact. Scripture feels like it's been interpreted for us by culture and movies and books – so much so – that sometimes we don't know what the text really says, or we don't even know how to search for its meaning ourselves because to do so requires so much digging out from under the layers of other people's interpretations and thoughts have been piled on these passages.

But just as the Baptist freedoms are not meant to be ideals that we strive for, but actualities that we realize and live day to day – the kin-dom of God is a reality that God wants us to live each and every day. In fact, it's a reality that God is empowering us to live and work for. But we have to imagine it and be creative about how the love Jesus showed us in his life can actually change our lives today – and we need to IMAGINE IT because everything we see

around us is telling us it's impossible.

My hairdresser said to me this week, we really have to work to find the good news these days, don't we? And I said "yes." And then I added, "honestly, I think we have to BE the good news these days." We can't wait for it to come to us or just report on it when we see it – we have to actively be creating the good news we wish to see in the world.

And this ability to BE the good news – together; well, that is the purpose of the church. It's what Paul means in Romans 12 when he says we are one body with many members. He's not just talking about one church – like the church in Rome or the church at 6500 E. Girard Ave. called Calvary. We ourselves are a body of Christ, yes, AND we are also members of a greater Body of Christ – of all churches across all time in all places. None of the churches Paul started are still around today. It's not the job of any individual church to do it all. It's just our job to do our part, while we can, for as long as are called and able to do so with the gifts God has given us. We are partners with others in this work; we do our part, but we

don't do it alone. It's humbling to know that Calvary is not the only church in the world doing good work. There are countless other churches living into their call as God's people too. No church is perfect, all churches have strengths and weaknesses – and we all have to find the church that is best for us in THIS season of our lives. It's expecting a lot of a church to be that for you in ALL seasons of your life; it happens for some, but for many – that just is not the case; and that's okay. Don't get me wrong; Calvary is a great community; I wouldn't be coming up on my 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary here if I didn't think Calvary was a pretty stellar group of people trying our best to follow our calling in this time and place. But we are imperfect. And we keep welcoming imperfect people to join us. Which will make us more imperfect. But, lucky for us, faith is not about perfection, it is about presence – showing up for one another, showing out for others, and recognizing how God shows up in and through us.

And this recognizing how God shows up in and through us – even in our imperfection – is what Matthew 18 is all about.

It's such a beautiful line isn't it? When Jesus says, "*where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am also.*" While the statement can be true for an occasion like worship or small group gatherings or when we pray (even by ourselves), the truth is the *context* of this verse is related to church conflict and disagreement – particularly about someone who is sinning, or missing the mark, and harming others by their actions. And so Jesus is giving some instruction about this and says you can try to handle it in a number of ways; first you address them alone and if that doesn't work, then you take two or three other trusted leaders with you, and if that doesn't work then you bring it before the church. But the point is – *in community* – we gather and we talk about the hard things and we do so in various ways at different levels, but when we do so – God is present. Our church is experiencing this even now – as a Discernment Team (which is four people, not just two or three) is leading us through a conversation about our regional affiliation. God is present in our discussions and conversations, in our decisions and deliberations. God is always present – in our times of worship, fellowship, and prayer,

and in times of conflict and consensus building.

And, so to come full circle, it's because God is present that can believe and have hope that God is doing a new thing in our midst, which is what Isaiah 43 speaks to so beautifully. The people are in exile in Babylon when this is written; they can't see the light at the end of the tunnel; they are wondering where God is. And so God reminds them of how God was with them in the past – how God brought them up out of Egypt – through the waters of slavery and oppression – to the promised land of freedom, which of course, was not perfect, but was a place of opportunity for the people to become what God is calling them to be...a covenant people that trust God and trust themselves and trust one another.

I love verse 19: *"See I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?"*

Ah! Well, no! The truth is – no, we often do not perceive it! Sometimes things are right in front of us and we do not perceive them. I often think about this in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has

been full of such devastating loss, and anxiety, and division – and yet – looking at the pandemic from the aspect of our church's flexibility and adaptability and growth – it's been quite remarkable. We had the rug pulled out from under us overnight – and had to adapt using new technologies and ways of connecting and organizing ourselves. But here's the thing – none of what we did was actually new. It was just new *to us* and our community and our way of being in community together.

Congregation members calling on other congregation members to check in on them and see if they were okay? That's an ancient method of congregational care. Delivering meals to one another's homes or helping pick up prescriptions or groceries? Another long-time church practice that just falls by the wayside when we're all so busy we don't have time to add one more stop to our maxed out after-school carpool schedule or our traffic-jammed commute. And Zoom and YouTube and video cameras and PowerDirector video editing software? Yep, all that existed already too. All these technologies existed before the pandemic, we just had not



collectively utilized them as a way of gathering together in meaningful ways or as a source of our primary connection. It took our world being turned upside down for us to see and perceive technologies and gifts (gifts like humor and creativity and stuffed monkeys) that were among us and around us already! And now – even as we are gathering in person again – we continue to see and experience the ‘new thing’ that God is doing in our midst by allowing us to be a church community that connects onsite, offsite, and online – which you’ll hear more about next week on Gathering Sunday! But the point is – many of us are connecting more freely and fluidly than before.

We are FREE TO BE Baptist, because first and foremost we are created freely as God’s beloved children, we are invited to freely follow Jesus, and we are free to allow the Spirit to work within us and around us to do more than we could ever ask or imagine.

Our world needs churches that are *Open to All, Closed to None*, because the heart of God is *Open to All, Closed to None*. And churches need people like you that give all of us a glimpse

of God, a reflection of Christ, that we would not have otherwise. We are missing out on God when we miss out on you. It is only in sharing our lives together that we share in the life God created for us and dreams for us to have together.

It is good to be Baptist. And our Baptist heritage and connections remind us that we are *Free to Be* whoever we want to be Calvary. But know that our freedom is even freer when YOU are a part of us. And when we CHOOSE to allow God to change the world through us...when we allow God’s power to dream within us and ignite our imaginations beyond what can ask or imagine.

For God IS doing a new thing; and if we can imagine it, maybe we’ll perceive it; and if we perceive it – maybe, just maybe – it’ll come true.

Amen.

**Benediction for The  
Gathering Contemporary  
Worship service:**

Just for fun, to get your creative juices flowing, I invite you into a space of imagination for our benediction. Isaiah 43 is a passage that offers promises to us that defy what we think is possible or how we understand God working in the world...but this is the spirit of the prophetic word – belief in the unbelievable, faith in something beyond what we see before us.

So close your eyes and imagine with me, listen to Isaiah 43 re-phrased and re-purposed:

“But now, the Lord who is the Divine Presence and Essence, the God who created you and birthed you into being: the God who was around before country or empire was formed or feared or failed, that God? Yeah, that God...these are the words of that God, your God, our God:

“Do not freak out or doubt my presence, I have brought you this far – do you think I’m gonna leave you hanging now? Look at my track record; check my references; I still choose to claim humanity – with all your faults and frailties; you are caught up in my love,

unconditionally conditioned as my beloveds.”

“When you pass through the COVID ICUs, I will mask you; and when you pass through the hurricane flood waters, they will not drown you. When you disagree with family about politics and vaccines – I will plop myself down on the cushions of your discomfort and patiently be present with you – and your teens and your third cousin, twice removed, Irene. When you breathe in the smokey air, your lungs will not be enflamed; and the flames across the West will not set your home ablaze.”

“For I am the Lord your God, the one set apart, the One who was with your ancestors through their pain and strain – the flu of 1918, World War I and II, Vietnam and Korea, cancers and car wrecks and communism conspiracies, assassinations and acquittals; through it all – I was there – in the hope and in the despair – and I will be your Liberator too, if you will let me repair...and just – be there.”

“Do not worry or obsess, for my Being is not about absolute protection, but unwavering presence in life AND in death.”

“I will bring together refugees from Afghanistan and Syria and gather up the children of Haiti and Juarez. I will say to the oppressors who clock their gavel, ‘Give up!’ and to the oppressed who gasp for breath, ‘Do not hold back.’ I will bring together my sons from South Sudan and my daughters from the Mississippi Delta – everyone who is called by my name – all will radiate in glory as they share their stories.”

“And you? (Yeah, I’m looking at you.) You are the ones who have to get things done,” declares the Lord, “and I have chosen this special One, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he – the One who saves and serves by being me.”

“Remember, before me there was no unconditional love. I am the originator of love, the transformer of cruelty into compassion, the miraculous inventor of hope.”

“I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no Superman or Wonder Woman coming to save you or sweep you off your feet. I have shown up and spoken out, helped and healed – I, I and not some fantastical wishful thinking or

strategic five-year plan for success. I have done this. I am God, I am the One who saves – not Tik-tok influencers or two time Olympians, not people of Fortune 500 fame or celebrity-status name. But I, I, who am God – your Creator, your Redeemer, the One who Sustains.

“And you? *You* are now the ones who keep my story going,” laughs the Lord, “you bear witness and shine brightly that I am God. Hope. Peace. Love. Joy. I am the Dream coming true – in *You*.”

“Yes, and further back than [ancestory.com](http://ancestory.com) or any of your genealogies can go, there is proof for all who are in the know that I AM God. When I do something? No one can touch it. No loose ends here, nothing to unravel. No one to string along or wind up or wrap around your finger.”

“So reach deep into your imagination, nation, for I am doing something brand spanking new! Don’t tell anyone, but the tags are still on it. And this newness...it formulates, it appears, it gains momentum, and it launches; have you not heard? Were you tuning out instead of tuning in? Get beyond

your headphones and get into your headspace, your heart place – listen to the voice within and ignore the ones droning on and on around and about.”

“Close your eyes and when you can see it, and dream it, you’ll know it to be true. Because it will become real in you: the kingdom of God – on earth as it is in heaven. In your lives, as it is in your eyes. No longer a longing – but a place of belonging.”

“Because...I am making a maze through the flooded subways, pouring rain down on the western fire plains. The family pets – dogs, cats, gerbils, and rabbits – they cuddle up next to me, and so do the wild ones – coyotes and possums and raccoons, because I provide loot in the alleys, and water on the street corners, to quench the thirst of my creation, the ones I choose each day to love, and provide for, the beloveds I formed for myself that they might tell other people who I am and what I’ve done and what I can do for them, too. And if I do this for the animals, the coyotes and possums and raccoons? How much more will I do it for you?”

“So – are you one of these dreamers? One of these who

sees me and knows me, who proclaims me and shares me?”

“The world is waiting and watching. The night is falling; a new day is dawning. Take off your headset – this ain’t virtual reality – it is gospel reality, in 3D, HD, panoramic views, Imax, surround sound – you name it. All the goodness raining down around you, springing up beside you. Do you not perceive it? Because, come on people, life is better when you believe it. And bring it. The kingdom of God – on earth as it is in heaven.”

Say it together - Amen.