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“Trapped” The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (12/31/2023, First Sunday after Christmas)

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Let us pray Almighty God, the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In 1972, the Jamaican reggae artist, Jimmy Cliff, you know him for, I can see clearly now the rain is gone, which is a pop standard, a wonderful one.

But he was first a reggae artist and he wrote and recorded a song that was pretty much not noticed. It was released as a single, never on an album.

But it never charted, nothing really happened with this song until Bruce Springsteen, 10 years later, was touring through Europe. And he picked up a tape that had this song on it. He was a fan of Jimmy Cliff.

And he heard the song. He said, this is great. And he started incorporating it into his live act. He put it to a rock beat and changed it a little bit. And then it was recorded at Wembley Stadium. And then included as a track on the We Are the World album. You were there for this. You remember when artists would get together and sing to do something meaningful.

Well, it has, it's a fantastic song and I highly commend it to you and encourage you to listen to it a lot in 2024 so that it will show up on your Spotify raft about a year from now.

It has this spare minimalistic beginning of a very low key synth line and then this little two note arpeggio.

And then it crescendos every chorus and the whole e-street band comes in and the saxophone and everything. And Bruce, St. Bruce sings.

Anybody know this? Anybody know where I'm going? Yeah, Jesse Lee, Praise God. So this song is trapped and Bruce sings as Jimmy Cliff sang. But now I'm trapped. It's great. Seriously, listen to it.

The reason I bring it up is because this song, to me, conveys powerfully whether Bruce is singing and or Jimmy singing and you're singing it in your key as a rental.

Whatever, this song conveys to me what many people live with every day. This feeling of being trapped, being sort of stuck.

If you watched the movie, filmed right here in this church in March, a Christmas in New Hope, hopefully coming to a Christmas movie channel a

year from now.

But there was a screening in Austin and it showed the lead character doing that thing you often see in movies when it's trying to convey financial stress. They're opening their mail and they get a final notice and pass due and it's always stamped in red.

And there are people for whom that is a reality and you feel very trapped, you know, which, it's in Fargo right now, the detective, the police officer is also going through a similar crisis where they're finances.

And again, this is a thing many people live with. Do I pay this bill first and when do I date this check based on when this paycheck comes in or maybe it's a tuition payment or whatever, this feeling of being financially trapped. And that's an anxious and common place for many people.

Maybe that's not where you're trapped. Maybe it's in a relationship. I'm careful not to make eye contact. I'm not looking at anyone here. But there are some people that in some relationships, they feel like they've had the same conversation 85,000 times and yet the change does not occur and you just feel trapped.

It could be not a conversation that you've had over. It could be a dynamic in my own family. Sorry. In my friends family, there was there was one parent who's attitude about money was similar to Martin Luther, you know, the great Protestant reformer, hair, Dr. Martin Luther.

And he said God gave us fingers so that money could flow through them. That was his attitude. His wife, Katie Von Bora, former nun had the opposite attitude and that dynamic existed between my parental figures.

There was one who was like this and one who was more like this. And when I went shopping, when we went on a shopping trip to the marshals or whatever with this family member, we had this, nobody ever told to do this.

We just kind of figured it out. We, maybe this, I don't know if this happened to you, we had to sneak the bags into the house, the shopping bags.

It's like somebody who created diversion and then everybody else would grab bags and run upstairs like some covert off and put them in this closet.

And then new clothes would trickle into the house sort of over time so they wouldn't be noticed. Not you guys, but this is a reality in my family.

And that was just a trapped thing. We never stopped doing that until I went off to college. Maybe you're trapped geographically. Many people want to be somewhere other than where they are now.

Many people are trapped and unresolved past trauma. If you watch as we do in my household, the Christmas episode of Call of the Midwife every year, you will have seen in this most recent one, a retired member of the Indian Royal Air Force who now lives in London and a little basement apartment that's flooded, it's dank, it's terrible.

And he's conveys metaphorically kind of the trapped nature of his

life. But what comes up, some folks visit him and try to cheer him up and one of them lights a fire in the fireplace. And this man begins to panic.

And he's clearly having PTSD kind of episode because of what he's seen in combat. And for that reason, he never lights a fire in his apartment. And there are many folks who have something that I never do this.

Or people who sleep with the lights on or the television on often, not always, but many times it's rooted in some sort of past trauma or difficulty. And trauma doesn't have to be a big thing.

Trauma means wound. It can be a big wound or it can be a little wound. But there's lots of ways we're trapped in this. New Year's is always a time when I feel like we get in touch with another trapped part of us. That part that seems resistant to change because this is the time of year where everybody's trying to change, trying to make resolutions. And so next year will be different than this year. And finally we'll get it together.

And just as an example, I want to talk about Samuel Johnson. So Samuel Johnson, Dr. Johnson was this English writer in the 1700s. He didn't invent the dictionary but kind of made it popular and famous and had a huge impact on his time.

And on the language week continue to speak today. He was a literary critic. He was a poet. And a really faithful, deep Christian.

With also a very sensitive conscience. When his dad died, he felt great guilt for not spending as much time with his father as he could and so take note children.

So he to a tone for that. He went and stood outside at the little place where his father always had his bookshop and just stood there in the rain with his head uncovered a tone for this sense that he had maybe not done everything for his parent while he was alive that he could have.

So this is the kind of guy Samuel Johnson was. And Dr. Johnson kept a diary every day.

And when he was 29 years old in 1738, he wrote, Oh Lord, enable me by your grace to redeem the time which I have spent in sloth, vanity and wickedness and to lead a new life in your faith, fear and love.

29 years old. 20 years later, when he was 50, he wrote, enable me to shake off idleness and sloth.

So he hadn't gotten better. And then five years later, age 55, he writes, I have made no reformation. I have lived totally useless, more sensual in thoughts and more addicted to wine and meat, grant me, oh God, to amend my life, my purposes from this time to avoid idleness, to rise early, to read the scriptures.

Two months later, he writes, I have now spent 55 years in resolving, oh God, grant me to resolve a right and to keep my resolutions, I resolve to rise early, not later than six if I can.

One year later, 1765, I purpose to rise at eight. Because though I shall not rise early, it will be much earlier than I now rise for I often lie till two.

10 years later, age 66, 1775, when I look back upon much resolutions

of improvement which have year after year been made and broken, why do I try to resolve again.

And this was a man who was a giant in his time, got more done in his life than any of us will, and yet this is where he is living psychologically, trapped in his own inability to get more done. You almost feel like there's some sort of domineering boss behind him, try harder, work more, accomplish more.

And he feels so guilty about not doing enough. He was trapped. St. Paul wrote in a letter we heard read this morning, he wrote in the first century to people who were also trapped and I think it's fitting at this New Year's time when we are tempted to like Johnson resolve again to be better and this will be the year.

He's writing to these Christians, one of the earliest gatherings of Christians in a city that is part of what is now Turkey, Galatia, and he says in chapter 3, verse 23,

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned. Paul is simply naming the fact that we are trapped, imprisoned. He says we were guarded under the law before faith could be revealed, trapped, imprisoned, guarded. This is the basic reality I find for many people, if not you praise God, but you might be surprised if you feel the way how not alone you are. You are in the good company of none other than Olivia Rodrigo. I say her name is Hushed tones. Olivia Rodrigo, the 20-year-old yet much wiser than her age singer-songwriter who was, her album was declared by Rolling Stone, the best album of the year, and this song, which I'm about to quote, that idea right, was named the song of the year by many people.

It's a fantastic, angsty pop rock, kind of teen feeling song, but it's something that is so universal, and it's the same thing as Samo Johnson.

In the song, she's talking about a relationship which she knows is not a really good thing for her, but she keeps going back to it, and she tries to rationalize it and justify it, and I know I shouldn't, but I keep doing it, and she says, I know I should stop, but I can't. The reality of being trapped, and this is what Paul was talking about. We were imprisoned, and this is something that I feel like in the church, especially, but just society in general, people forget this, and sort of think we're not trapped.

We think we're not wearing handcuffs as we go through life, and so we try to do all these things, and we don't do them so well. We don't fix our problems, and you have really two options.

And we always go for the first option, in my experience, we go for the law. Paul says, before faith came, we were imprisoned, and he says, under the law, and he's talking religiously, he's talking about God's law, all the rules, and there's lots of those rules, there's the Ten Commandments, there's the two that Jesus used to summarize the Ten Commandments, love your neighbor, love God.

There's also the, just all the things that churchiness kind of tells you to do, there's all the stuff the world tells you to do, eat more fiber, sleep eight hours, meditate daily, get 30 hours of exercise a day, all the things that you are not doing, let's be honest, all these

things.

And so this is option one, we attempt to buckle down more, try harder like Dr. Johnson, we just think of we tighten the straight jacket a little bit more, this will be the year that we get it done.

The law as our school master, as Paul says, the law as our accountability partner, your life coach.

But there is another option, and this is the one that Paul is getting it, he says, we were imprisoned, but then faith came, and faith, he's talking about trust in somebody other than yourself.

See, when you go under the law, what often happens is you say, I will do it, and I will finally make God happy, and that means you're putting yourself in the driver's seat.

Faith is this other thing, and it's not something you do so much as it is a yielding, a giving up of control, which is terrifying.

And that's why most preachers rescue the law from the jaws of the gospel at the end of the sermon.

If you know what I'm talking about, so we talk about the law, we say, this is why we're these preaching bands, this is the symbolism, the law of God and the gospel, the two words that come from the preachers mouth, that's the symbolism of this.

But many preachers should have three, because they preach the law, love God, love your neighbor, and then they preach the gospel, but if you don't, you're forgiven, and then they say, but don't get crazy. You're forgiven, right? This is what Bon Quiquit said. Welcome to King Burger, where you can have it your way, but don't get crazy.

It's very special for some of you. Early meme.

Right, but you've heard sermons like this. Jesus loves you. You're forgiven.

Nothing in my hand, I cling, you know, empty, nothing in my hand I bring, totally the cross I cling, nothing but the blood of Jesus, et cetera, like, but then the preachers like, but, but hold on.

And then they start talking about obedience and sanctification and all that, and it's just a rescuing of the law from the jaws of the gospel at the end of the sermon, which is what we do at New Years.

And the thing about New Years is whether you're in church or out of church, it's like the great secular season of everybody trying to get back under the law to do better this time.

And I get that. It feels good to be in control. It feels good to make a resolution. Some pride and sense of dignity. I will do it.

Grace is risky. That's why preachers don't like to talk about it. What if you go nuts? What if you, you know, eat the whole bucket of KFC or watch in the bachelor?

Well, here's the thing. I want to invite you in 2024 to consider the idea that when Jesus Christ said on the cross, it is finished, that he wasn't crossing his fingers and that his grace is real.

And you can rest in that. If you want to go back under the law, try 2025. Maybe it'll work then. But for this year, give Grace a try. And I know you may be thinking, well, what does that look like? Give me something to do. See, that's the law.

But I'll give you two examples of what Grace might look like in actual

life. I have a friend who has a sister who was deep in addiction and had tried to get clean for several years and had sort of done that path of trying and then failing and then trying and then failing and then failing and failing and this seemed to be sort of the end of the rope situation.

And the entire family was telling this person, you have to go to rehab, you have to go to treatment, you have to go, you have to go for this reason for that reason, you really, it was just calls and texts and all of this telling them, you need to go, you need to go, you need to go.

And this was the law. This was demand. It was true. It was right. It was good. But that pushing, that pressure seemed to have the opposite impact than what was desired.

And the head of the treatment center who was in conversation with the family was trying to prepare for the person to arrive heard about this and said, let me, if the person will allow me, I'd like to call your sister and let me talk to her and this person had been in recovery for many years and so knew this path.

And on that phone call, whereas the family had been saying, you need to go, you need to go, you need to go.

The director of the treatment center said, go or don't go, I don't care. You can come or you not come.

We both know that if you don't come, you'll run out of money in about five days and you'll probably end up here anyways.

But come or don't come. We're here for you if you want.

The pressure was off. And somehow that enabled her to say, okay, I'll go.

When the pressure was relieved and some space was given, that's the moment of change.

And again, that's terrifying. If you know somebody that you're trying to change and you want them to get better and you can see why.

But isn't it the funniest thing that the more pressure you apply, it doesn't seem to achieve the desired result.

Daryl Davis is a man who played keyboards for Chuck Barrett and a lot of people for many years, an incredible musician.

And he grew up overseas to his father was in the State Department and he was a black American and when he was a child moved back to the United States.

And for the first time in his life, experienced racism in the United States, lived in a little town north of Boston and they were like the only black family in the town.

And he was hit by a rock in a parade on Patriots Day as a child carrying a banner for the Boy Scouts.

And that left in his mind a great question, why would somebody hate me who doesn't even know me?

And that question just stuck with him for his whole life. And as an adult, he was in a town where the clan was coming to have a rally.

And that question still stuck with them. Why would somebody hate me who doesn't even know me?

And so as a person of faith, he had heard about this loving your

neighbor thing and this thing about grace.

And so he went to the rally and stuck around and started talking to the grand track into the clan of that region.

And invited him over to his house, they had long conversations, hours and hours of conversations.

And really for the most of it, he just listened and said, tell me what you believe and why you believe it.

And a few months later, after many conversations, the funniest thing, the grand dragon quit the clan.

And Daryl Davis has done this again and again and again. There's dozens of folks who have quit the clan.

I heard him speak once and he brought out all these clan robes from his bag that people had given it to him because once they quit, they say, here, you do with these what you want.

And he shows them as an example of something that has now lost its power.

But Daryl didn't go in saying, you need a change, although that's absolutely what he felt and he was 100% right.

But he went in with this very odd grace of just listening and trying to understand what made you the way you are and why do you believe what you believe.

And somehow that removal of the demand to change is what allowed the person to change.

This is the time of year we're tempted to put ourselves back under the law.

That's what the world says. And sadly, that's often what the church says.

But notice, John chapter 1, what you heard Debbie read today.

The law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

We are invited to something different, not more law, but grace and truth.

Which means we can say, honestly, what's going on in our lives, you can actually be who you are, not who you pretend to be.

And in that reality, God meets you with grace, with forgiveness, with prior belovedness and acceptance.

The way Paul talks about it like an adopted child.

You become children of God. John says the same thing. You become children of God.

And what that means, and this is what I want to end on, and I hope you bank on it and live on it and just embrace it and hug it in 2024.

And forever.

You are no longer a servant, someone who's bowing and scraping and trying to keep God happy through your efforts at obedience and your sincere intention to get better.

You are a child.

Servant. That's someone you pay to do a job.

And if that's your relation with God, yeah, you should be worried.

Because a servant can be fired. If you ever hired somebody to do your taxes or detail your car or something that you can get fired.

Sometimes you have to let those folks go. But your children.
Whether they get a bad grade or break curfew.
Or live in squalor. You know that room in the house that you tell
guests don't open that door.
There's five half empty ramen bowls in there right now.
You know the laundry paws up. Or maybe someone else you live with is
like that.
They are still your children. They can never stop being your children.
And this is the relationship we have with God.
You are embraced. You are adopted. You are a child by grace, your
faith.
And nothing you can do can change that.
So try that out for 2024. Resolve to rest.
Resolve to trust in the grace of God.
Even if you don't get better, as God has finished the job in Christ.
Happy New Year.
Thank you.