John 8:31-38, Exodus 5:1-9

“Let my people go”

 What a great day it is to celebrate the presence of Jesus Christ in our midst. There are a whole variety of topics that we could cover for today. Valentine’s Day is just a few days away so, I’ll have all of you who are married, stand up. 10 years, 15 years, 20, 25 tec. Who won? Happy Valentine’s Day. We also are a Sunday away from our congregational meeting and the Day of Prayer and Fasting. The entire congregation is called to prayer and fasting specifically for the church and its future. Eat lunch, not dinner, not breakfast, no snacks, no coffee. We are going to have a whole bunch of grumpy Presbyterians here next Sunday, maybe not a great time to have a congregational meeting. But turn your heart to prayer and beseech Jesus’ guidance and direction.

 The newest reality that we are facing is after many months we have added a permanent staff person to our team. Karen Blanchard will be joining us and she comes incredibly recommended with a body of work and experience that we can’t wait to put to work here at First Presbyterian. At the same time we would be foolish not to celebrate what Connor Patterson has been able to do here at First Presbyterian with our support, and even frankly at times without our support, to take our church where we never imagined we could have gone. He worked a miracle in our midst, and for that we will be always in his debt.

 But we move forward to where God is taking us. So what do we cover? Wednesday evening I was whining because I couldn’t focus on one topic for this Sunday and Rachel quietly said: Why don’t you just preach on what the Bible tells you. Good idea. Today, the Word of God, the Bible that is to reside in our hearts and minds, that is to be a lamp unto our feet, tells us: Let my people go. We have to trust that God will set us free individually to live a life of freedom, as we focus on His Word that dwells within us. That is what both John and Exodus tell us. Let’s look at that Scripture today.

 **Read**

During one of our last days in Israel we made our way to the Holocaust museum. Our guide, you know the Israeli tank commander, told us this is the history of our people. It is the most moving museum I’ve been to. The death of Jesus at the hands of oppressors has been a historic reality of the modern era and we have played a part in that. But it is also a reality that we find reflected over and over again in Scripture both in John and as far back as our Exodus Scripture where we find them in bondage to Pharaoh and Egypt.

 We are going to flip back and forth between these two Scriptures but in John 8:33 it should surprise you to hear one of Jesus’ Jewish disciples say we have never been slaves to anyone, Abraham has been our father. How quickly we forget, all of us. If we forget the past we will be destined to repeat it. IF we put all of our trust in one person or even conversely all of our trust in an institution and not on the Word of God then we are doomed to a slavery that will end in our lack of freedom. That was true for the people to whom Jesus was speaking as well as the people that Moses and Aaron were trying to lead.

 Let my people go. You’ve heard that before. Moses and Aaron were commanded by God to go and tell that to Pharaoh. If God tells you to do something what do you expect to happen when you go do that? You expect to succeed. If we are convinced that God tells us to take a step forward into the Jordan we expect that the river will part, not that we would drown. If God tells us to move forward in a certain career move, or to engage in a relationship you expect to do well in that job and he will honor that relationship.

 So when Moses and Aaron come before Pharaoh and say: Let my people go they were so confident and sure that it would happen that they didn’t expect what would happen next. Watch this: Let my people go. What? Who are you and who is your God? I don’t recognize him, and I’m not going to let them go. They are lazy anyway and in fact I’m going to make life even harder on them and on you.

 Uhm Moses, you take it from here, okay. Come on Pharaoh, please, just for a few more days let them go or else God will really come down on us. They never imagined that it actually could have been part of God’s plan to harden Pharaoh’s heart so that his true unmitigated glory could be revealed. They start begging and groveling, no longer confident at all that God is on their side.

 You see that in historically oppressed people. You also see that historically in people who have known and loved God for generations, but inevitably for generations they have been beaten down over the years. This is what lead William Jones, a preacher, to make the claim, or maybe just ask the question: Is God a white racist. If historically you’ve been beaten down, you just may find yourself asking that question. Is God not really on my side or is He on the side of the people in power and so when we ask the question, Let my people go, maybe He wants us in captivity after all.

 But haven’t you also wondered at times if God has forgotten you? Let my people go here is a public call to be liberated from bondage that is physically keeping you down. But haven’t you at times made that statement at a time when your options had just run out and where in the world is God?

 When I graduated from college one of my brothers had been missing for 2 years already. He had struggled with schizophrenia for some years. We last heard from him in Mexico. I went to Brownsville, Texas and lived on the street and slept on porches hoping to be where he was so I could find him. I then spent a week in Matamoros, I was, and am, naïve and didn’t think anything of when I checked in they asked me for how many hours was I going to stay.

 After two weeks and nothing I was crushed. My prayers, my efforts were all for naught. God, this is what you told me to do, I expected to return to Princeton knowing where my brother was, but nothing. I was thinking maybe God wasn’t on my side after all. Besides meeting Stacy that first week, it was hard to imagine anything except that God wasn’t on my side on this one, I pretty much gave up on that. A few weeks later he contacted my parents and said he wanted to come home.

 Once Aaron and Moses have done all they could then and only then in 6:1 we find these wonderful verses that bring light into a very dark situation. In vs. 1 we find God saying: Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh. Indeed, by a mighty hand he will drive them out and let them go. Our efforts, no matter how successful or not, are nothing compared to what God can do in any given situation. If we are able to step back and not trust in our own confidence, our own efforts, and rely upon God’s word to take us forward, then and only then will God truly set us free.

 That takes us to John 8 and Jesus’ words that speak to the only true freedom that we can experience as people. You see, we often go through life thinking that our hopes and dreams and even our futures are built around our allegiances, our spouse, our church, our friends, people who have had a significant impact upon our lives. In John, the people say we are free and we can realize all that you want because we have Abraham as a father. To which Pharaoh replies, that means nothing to me.

 But what we find is that the more we rely upon these earthly allegiances for our identity then the less we think we need God. When Bethany was much younger and we told her to go to her room for punishment she used to stick her big toe in her room and then stretch out her body as far as she could into our living room. We would say your whole body and she would stick her body in and stretch out her foot as far as she could. She was the master at interpreting literally her punishment for her benefit.

 We often think our freedom is bound up in what we know, in how far can we stretch our liberties, in keeping that foot out in the open where we want it. In making sure our desires and our emotions are met because we always know what is best for us and for those around us. We rely upon the people around us, on our jobs, our families, our churches, and that becomes the only reality that we know and we can’t see anything else beyond that either in the short term or in the long term.

 Did you hear about the Puyallup man who burned himself and his two sons up in his own house because he felt that was the only way that he could be free indeed. That was the reality in which he surrounded himself. What is happening in Syria with the veto of China and Russia is that they are choosing to live in a reality where politically it is expedient to sacrifice thousands of lives of women and children because their reality is all that counts and nobody elses. The short term reward is worth the present carnage.

 But when Jesus says in vs. 32 that you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free it is a direct call to all of us to find a freedom that is outside of ourselves and the reality that we think is the only reality that exists. In fact, in vs. 37 Jesus accuses those around him of having limited vision and being in bondage because there is no place in their lives for the Word of God that Jesus gives.

 Jesus commands us to look at God’s future for your future, not what anyone has imposed upon you or the limited future that you’ve created for yourself. The truth will set us free but only if we find a place in our lives for God’s word. This day of prayer and fasting has come at a very appropriate time. Originally it was for the congregational meeting, but events of this week provide us with a great opportunity to discern how we are to move forward in our second service and in the life of this church in general. Pray for God’s hand upon it in a powerful way.

 We always have a choice whom we will follow. We can choose our emotional needs and desires that limit us or we can follow God’s will that opens up an incredible future before us and allows His kingdom to break through. Let my people go is a call to each of us to allow God to give us the freedom that he wants us to have by denying ourselves and taking on his Word. Amen.