

*Almighty God, Source of all, Living Word, Holy Spirit:
may your Word only be spoken, and Your voice only be heard. Amen.*

God had a plan. God had a plan for these people God loved,
whom God had chosen, who were precious.
And when they had gotten, over the years, into a pretty tight jam,
God raised up a leader, who would lead them out of the bondage in Egypt,
into freedom. *"I drew him out of the water."*

God had a plan. God had a plan for us, these people God loves,
whom God has chosen, who are precious.
As we got, over the years, into a pretty tight jam, God raised up a Son,
who would lead us out of the bondage to sin, into freedom.
"I drew him out of the water."

God has a plan. God has a plan for the all people, whom God loves,
whom God has chosen, who are precious, who have gotten into a pretty tight jam.
God raised up a church, to lead them of the bondage to greed and power,
poverty and despair, into freedom. *"I drew them out of the water."*

In the gospel reading we just heard, Jesus launches his church.
But with Peter? What kind of rock is this on which to build anything?
Peter's not known for his steadiness. But this is a rock not of its own making.
This is a rock of God's own choosing. And what God chooses, God brings into being.

Jesus said, "Bless you, Simon, son of Jonah – and I tell you, you are Petros."
"From now on you will be Petros."
Jesus said, "I choose you. And I will use you to bring my Kingdom into being.
And I will give you authority that only God can give, to bind and to loose."

Jesus was not trying to establish an organization, an institution.
In fact, he resisted all temptations to wield that kind of authority.
The authority he wielded was that of Master to disciples, and Teacher to friends.
He was training his followers in the ways of the Kingdom he preached,
and he intended them to carry on this Kingdom work after he left them –
He sent them out to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom,
and to heal, to set people free and turn them towards God.

That is our main mission, folks, to heal, to set people free, and turn them towards God. What terrifying power and authority we have been given – that what we bind on earth is bound in heaven, and what we release on earth is released in heaven.

“On earth, as it is in heaven,” we pray – but here Jesus reverses that.

“On heaven as it is on earth.”

What does it mean to be in the business of releasing, rather than binding?

It means we always bend toward life, like those midwives saving those babies.

It means we are always seeking freedom for ourselves,

moving toward freedom as communities, alive to where anyone is in bondage.

Boundedness comes in many forms. Some are inflicted from without:

oppressive governments, economic inequity, racism, discrimination, abuse – all these can keep people bound.

Some forms of bondage come from within – addiction, greed, self-centeredness;

unhealthy fixations, depression, anxiety – all these keep people bound.

We are to be in the business of releasing, always working toward freedom.

Paul wrote to the Galatians: *“It is for freedom Christ has made us free.”*

Freedom is what God wants for us above all else.

Freedom is always my goal with people locked in addiction or depression.

I once had a parishioner in another church who was severely and chronically depressed. Once a highly regarded professional, he’d had to give up his practice because his treatment interfered with his functioning.

He was suicidal as well as self-harming, hopeless and pathologically shy.

But we began to meet regularly to talk and do healing prayer –

and he experienced Jesus showing up in those prayer times. This is a way I like to pray with people – invite them to see what place comes up in their imaginations, and then after a while we see if Jesus is there. So often he is.

I did everything I could do tether him to community, so that when the floor fell away there were people he could call. I got him to join a small prayer group.

I had him join the church band, and later he even became a chalice bearer.

He came out of darkness in God’s marvelous light, out of bondage into freedom.

Who do you know who needs to be released from bondage, personal or global?

This is a call for all of us, not just pastors. We are apostles in Peter’s line,

so this binding and loosing authority is given to us all.

If we refuse to forgive someone, we keep them bound, and usually ourselves too.

If we refuse to speak the Good News, tell our God-stories, we keep people bound.

If we refuse to work for freedom and justice for all, we keep people bound. We are in the business of catching people and releasing them into freedom. If God can choose Simon to be Peter, God can choose you and me.

God has chosen us as rocks on which he is building his new community; living stones, as Peter was to write later in an epistle:

As you come to him, the living Rock — rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living rocks, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood. (1 Peter 2:4-5)

We are the rock on which Christ is building his church, his new community of sacrificial love and radical equality.

We are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. Do we think differently about ourselves when we take that in, own it, live it?

Who do you say Jesus is? Is He the risen Son of God, the anointed One?

Is He just a wise Teacher? Just someone we read about in a book?

Is He just a good guy who lived in a manner worth emulating?

Is He someone we honor because He seems to be important to people we care about?

You may not feel ready to answer as Peter did, but the question is there.

Answer for yourself, wherever you are. Jesus honors the faith we have, where we are. And then He leads us to where He needs us to be.

We have been drawn up out of the water, living stones – solid, ancient, but brought to life by our Creator.

Just as stones are made up of accumulated layers of sediment and minerals, so we, the church, carry the DNA of every Christian who has gone before us.

We are rich and diverse in marking and strata and color and shape.

But we are not dry stones, lying in a field. We are living stones, drawn up out of the water, shaped and polished in God's living water.

We are living stones, being built into a spiritual house, made not of wood and concrete, but of flesh and blood, heart and soul, a temple where God himself dwells, here on earth, where anyone, anyone can have access to God, through his church.

We are a chosen people, a royal priesthood.

We are signs to the world of the new community Christ is even yet bringing into being. And nothing can prevail against us, for we belong to God.

"He drew them up out of the water." Amen.

Matthew 15:21-28

When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh **and blood has not revealed this to you**, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."