



He has already revealed all that you need to know in the Holy Scriptures; beyond that, you are going to have to exercise your responsibility of freedom. Certainly we are called to pray about our decisions, but these prayers have as their ultimate goal to renew your communion with the God who has made you free.

One of the most beautifully written novels that I have read is *Mariette in Ecstasy* by Ron Hansen. The novel begins with Mariette entering a convent to become a nun. Joining this convent has been the goal of her life from the time she was young girl because she wants so much to do the right thing with her life and is convinced that means settling into a devout, regimented life in the convent. But after her arrival, she falls deeply in love with Jesus Christ. She prays differently from the other nuns, focusing not on her prayers but on the one to whom she is praying. She is literally in love with Jesus and develops a relationship with him that is too powerful to be contained by the careful routines of monastic life. She finds joy in what should be hardship. Eventually she even bears Christ's stigmata on her body which is too much for the other nuns. So she is kicked out of the convent for her excesses in piety. The failure is devastating to her; she feels disgraced as she is exiled into the unregimented world.

Thirty years later, she writes a letter back to the convent describing what she has learned about the love of God and freedom. The closing lines of the letter are the closing lines of the novel: "We try to be formed and held and kept by Christ, but instead he offers us freedom. And now when I try to know his will, his kindness floods me, his great love overwhelms me, and I hear him whisper, 'Surprise me.'"

1 Peter 2:11-17
The Pursuit of Freedom
 M. Craig Barnes

This weekend we are celebrating our freedom and independence. It would be hard to find a more cherished American value. But isn't it ironic that while living in a time of unprecedented opportunities most of us don't really feel very free? We are just now telling the truth about our addictions and compulsions. Most of us are not living the lives that we had planned on living. We have trouble making choices. And we wonder if we will ever get to that place where we will finally be happy. Worst of all, when you are free, you have only yourself to blame for being unhappy.

When we were children and had to do what we were told by parents and teachers who just didn't understand us, we knew that if only we could get free of that, we would be okay. But the burden of maturity is having to take responsibility for how your life is turning out. Now that we are free to do what we want, where we want, when we want, and with whom we want, who can we blame for our problems, but ourselves?

Some of us still try to blame others. But the more you listen to someone blame others for their unhappiness the more it sounds like the familiar whining of children. You can blame the office where it is all politics, or the parent who wasn't very loving, or the mythical *they* who are trying to take something away from you. But today the nation is throwing a huge party to announce that you are free. The pursuit of happiness is all yours. So if you are still struggling to get the life you want, the freedom battle isn't really out there. It is within your own soul.

According to the first epistle of Peter, there is a war being waged against the soul. A battle for its independence. Until you win freedom in your soul, it doesn't matter how many liberties and opportunities society provides you will just continue to desire a life that looks a little different from the one you have. And that is not freedom. Conversely, once you have found freedom in your soul, it doesn't matter how many opportunities are taken away, how much health you lose, or how many commitments you have, you will always remain free.

In this passage, Peter tells us two places where the battle for your soul's independence is won or lost. The first is in your perspective on this world. The second is in your perspective on yourself.

You have won the freedom battle in your perspective on the world on the day you are no longer fully at home here. Throughout the letter, Peter keeps calling his readers aliens and exiles. Those are people who are not too attached to the place where they are staying, and who live differently from those around them. One of the things that is most different about how Christians live is that we do not believe it is the world's responsibility to make us happy.

Our society is awash in fantasies of freedom. But it just doesn't matter what you buy, what promotion you earn, or how you rearrange the circumstances of your life. The freedom to pursue happiness is not going to be found in anything from this world. Again, freedom only wells up from the soul.

Those who have found that freedom no longer look at the world as something to be conquered. That allows them to enjoy the world a lot more. You can enjoy a job, the country, or relationship for what it is and not demand that it meet your need to be happy. That's because in Jesus Christ you have already found what you are looking for - communion with the Creator who made you free. In fact, Peter says that you should be able to honor everyone, even the emperor who was persecuting the church at the time he wrote this epistle. To honor someone means you are no longer manipulating them into being what you need. You have already found your Savior.

Jesus Christ was the most free person history has ever known precisely because he did not allow the world to tell him who he was - not the crowd, not the religious leaders, not even his family. That's because he was an exile whose home was in heaven, which means that only his Father in heaven could provide Jesus' identity. That is exactly what the Father did when he pulled back the clouds of heaven to call his son the beloved with whom he was well pleased. The Son took those words deep into his soul and never lost his freedom. But Jesus used his freedom to do the will of the Father becoming a servant. He was freed from the world in order to serve the world.

That leads us to the other battlefield for freedom, which is in your perspective on yourself. You find freedom in your soul on the day you too take on the identity of being a servant. "As servants of God," Peter says,

"live as free people." This is one of those wonderful ironies of the Bible - the only way to be free is to become the servant of God.

How is a servant free? Only because he or she is not burdened with being the Lord of the house. So much of our freedom is lost because we assume responsibilities we were never given. You are not in charge! (That should be cross stitched and hung in every home.) I say that not to demean you but to free you from anxiety. The servant is not expected to know the Lord's grand plan. The servant is free simply to serve.

The hymn that we began worship with today, "God of the Ages," is one of the great hymns of the faith. It was written by Rev. Daniel Roberts in 1876 to help his little church in Brandon, Vermont celebrate the centennial of the Declaration of Independence. Pastor Roberts spent his whole ministry serving that small parish as a way of loving God. Shortly before his death he wrote in his journal "I remain a country parson, known only within my own small world." And yet, 128 years we are still singing Pastor Roberts' hymn, as are churches all over the country. But the servant couldn't see that at the time. He was just faithfully trying to pull together a hymn for another Sunday. He was just free to serve and let the Lord worry about the significance of it all.

The Lord has also asked you to be his servant. Your freedom from the world has always been meant to make you free for holy missions. It may be hard for you to see the significance of your mission today. "You mean I'm just supposed to raise these kids?" "You mean I'm just supposed to love the people in this office?" Like Pastor Roberts you may even die without ever knowing the lasting value of your work. That can drive you crazy with the search for something more. Or you can choose to claim your created inalienable right to be free. So free that you have now found your joy in assuming responsibility for yourself, and then responsibly choosing to serve holy eternal dreams while you pass through this short life.

So then the final question is how do you know which dream to serve in this life? Often someone comes to see me to ask about this question. They love God and want so much to know his will for their lives. "Should I marry again or stay single?" "Should I keep working or stay at home with the children?" "Should I volunteer in the church or in the community?" As a dutiful pastor I listen intently to these important concerns, and pray for direction along with my parishioner. But I always wonder if God isn't shrugging his shoulders and saying, "I'm not staying up nights worried about this choice."