

Sermon Series: Summer Reading
Sermon Title: Captive to the Spirit
Acts: 18 - 20

by Laura Byrch
July 23, 2018

In 1819, Jarena Lee was sitting in church, listening to a sermon on the book of Jonah.¹ Although she had been denied permission to preach 12 years earlier, because of the church's ban on women preachers, when she felt that the preacher had "lost the spirit," she found herself jumping up and taking over. She describes it this way:

When in the same instant, I sprang, as by altogether supernatural impulse, to my feet when I was aided from above to give an exhortation on the very text which my brother Williams had taken. I told them I was like Jonah; for it had been then nearly eight years since the Lord had called me to preach his gospel to the fallen sons and daughters of Adam's race, but that I had lingered like him, and delayed to go at the bidding of the Lord, and warn those who are as deeply guilty as were the people of Ninevah.

I now sat down, scarcely knowing what I had done, being frightened. I imagined, that for this indecorum, as I feared it might be called, I should be expelled from the church. But instead of this, the Bishop [Allen] rose up in the assembly, and related that I had called upon him eight years before, asking to be permitted to preach, and that he had put me off; but that now he as much believed that I was called to that work, as any of the preachers present.

And that is how Jarena Lee became the first woman authorized to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Still, she faced much hostility because she was black and a woman. She was granted permission to preach both on a circuit and to hold prayer meetings in her home, both huge concessions to be given to a nineteenth century woman of any race.

She preached throughout the northeast, and even in Canada, traveling thousands of miles on foot. In one year alone, she recorded having "travelled two thousand three hundred and twenty-five miles, and preached one hundred and seventy-eight sermons." She was an extremely strong woman, often passing into dangerous slaveholding towns to preach the gospel. She did it as one captive to God's Spirit and captivated by Christ's love.

¹ "Jarena Lee" photo up the whole time I'm talking about her

Born the year after Jarena Lee preached her first sermon, Robert Sayers Sheffey became an itinerant Methodist preacher several hundred miles to the south.² Sheffey was known throughout Virginia, West Virginia, and parts of Kentucky, North Carolina and Tennessee as “the Saint of the Wilderness”. He spent most of his life as a circuit rider, travelling the mountain ridges, valleys and hollers, preaching in country churches and camp meetings and going house to house praying with and encouraging the country folk who lived there. He was known for his gentle spirit, his generosity that would give those in need his only winter coat, the pair of socks off his feet, or once even his only horse when he saw someone in greater need, so Sheffey had to walk the rest of his journey without it. He loved all of God’s creatures, and would get off his horse to help a turtle across the road or lift a beetle out of a wagon rut. He was often found praying in the woods or by the roadside for hours on end on his sheepskin prayer rug, and the power of his prayers was renowned throughout the region. Once, after praying and preaching against the evils of distilled liquor, asking God to destroy the stills, some moonshiners knocked him off his horse and beat him up. He couldn’t travel for several days, but when the judge was preparing to convict them, he begged that they be shown mercy and released. In many ways his simple, humble life of proclaiming and exemplifying God’s loving kindness was a reflection of the life of “his sweet Lord” as Sheffey often referred to Jesus. He, too, was captive to God’s Spirit and captivated by Christ’s love.

Fast forward a hundred years and travel another 100 miles or so south farther still, and we come upon a “saint” of an entirely different kind. Perhaps no one would look at this hard-living bartender, with long hair, tattoos, and motorcycle in the parking lot and think “here’s someone captive to the Spirit”. Yet, a year later, God had captivated his attention with a great need in the world, and a desire to do something about it. Doc Hendley’s life was turned upside when he discovered the water crisis faced by so many in the world, and felt a desire to do something it.³ Wine to Water was born, which some of you learned about at VBS the other week. The next year, working with Samaritan’s Purse in Darfur, Doc found himself working on water projects in one of the most dangerous parts of the world. Providing life giving water to those living in refugee camps, he also, through his actions shared the water of life...the living water. In a letter home to family back in 2005, he told it this way:

“Last week...I was reading the Bible and doing a lot of thinking about what I have done with what God has given me when Amir asked me about the book I was reading, and if I could get

² “Sheffey” photo up the whole time I’m talking about him

³ “Wine to Water Doc Hendley” photo up the whole time I’m talking about him

him one. Well, I came across a Bible in Arabic and I gave it to him. I told him that I wanted him to have it so he could understand what and how I believe. He seemed excited but didn't say much about it. Then, today...he told me through Hilary [the translator] that he had been reading the Bible, he said to me, "This book speaks truth." I was blown away." (*Wine to Water*, p. 145).

Now Doc shares that little testimony in his book *Wine to Water*. The subtitle of the book is "how one man saved himself while trying to save the world". Although it's a catchy book title, if you read the pages of that book, it seems clear that God is much more at work in the story than the subtitle would lead you to believe. Doc, the son of a preacher, might not describe his sense of being compelled on this Wine to Water mission as the work of the Holy Spirit, but as I read his story, and the encounters that deepened his faith while in Sudan and beyond, it seems clear. In releasing himself to this work of bringing clean water to those across the world, he was released from what kept him captive to his selfish desires in his former hard-living, heavy drinking life, and he was freed to be about God's work in the world. He, too, was captive to God's Spirit, captivated by Christ's love.

In the world today, when we think of freedom, we think of being able to do whatever we want—freedom is having complete control to choose where we will go, how we will act, what we will say or think. Captivity, we think of as the opposite—being without choice, completely under the control of another. Last week, we looked at how Jesus turns the world upside down—or perhaps right side up. Here again, we find Jesus flipping the script in our thinking about freedom and captivity. Yes, God gives us freedom to choose—we can live a life aligned with God's ways or not. But the ironic thing is that if we choose what seems like freedom—going our own way, pursuing our own ideas of what we want to do or be—we soon find we have become captive to our selfish desires and the ways of this world, captive to our desire for more wealth or power or control, captive to ambitions or the desire to please our friends, our loved ones, our boss or our idea of what society expects. Ultimately, we often find that our so-called freedom leaves us unsatisfied.

However, when we choose to submit and surrender control to Jesus as Lord, we actually find ourselves truly free. We are free to do what God calls us to do, freed to bring order the world God made, which is our purpose. In following God's Spirit and living into our purpose, we are freed from selfish desires that never seem to satisfy. In a sense, we are captive to God's Spirit, as Paul writes, but the captivity is more like captivation with One who we see loves us unconditionally and empowers us to live a life of sharing that love in the world.

Now, that we've heard some testimonies of people who were captive to the Spirit and spread the good news as those captivated by God's love, we turn to Paul's own witness. In our reading from Acts this morning, we hear Paul's testimony of what it looks like to live a free life in Christ, fully surrendered to God's control and captive to the Spirit. **Hear the good news from Acts 20:17-35.**

In this testimony, we see Paul's life following closely the pattern of Jesus' own life—living among the community, serving in humility, enduring trials and plots to put a stop to his work of proclaiming the kingdom. Paul, like Jesus, had a ministry of both public proclamation in the synagogues and teaching in homes. Paul too is setting his face towards Jerusalem, knowing it may be there that his earthly life will end. Like Jesus, he warns the followers of deception to come and urges them to be generous, not desiring riches for themselves. Paul tells us of his life as it has been redefined by Jesus, and urges his listeners to likewise redefine their own hope and suffering in life.

Through this, and the rest of Paul's writings, we see that Paul's life, like Jesus', was his most effective sermon, embodying the words St. Francis would later speak "there is no use going anywhere to preach unless the walking is the preaching."

So what might it look like for our lives to do the preaching? What would be your witness, your testimony of a life totally surrendered to God, where God has control of every area of your life—your relationships, the way you spend your time, the way you spend money, where you live, who you associate with? Relinquishing control over our lives is not easy—and we must daily offer God the parts of ourselves, our lives that we want to hold on to most tightly.

But when we do, our testimonies can be as powerful as those of Jarena Lee, Robert Sheffey and Doc Hendley.

Captive to the Spirit, captivated by Christ's love you might lay aside hesitation or fear of awkwardness and decide to be a lunch buddy mentor or a community mentor through Western Youth Network, becoming a consistent, loving adult presence in the life of a young person in our community. Just this past week some men from our church helped organize an event to raise awareness about this need, particularly for male mentors, as there are 44 boys from our community on the waiting list to receive a mentor.

You might even be led to take it a step farther—perhaps you decide to open your home to a child in the foster care system. This year, there is an increased average of 40-60 children in foster care

in Watauga County at any given time, meaning the need for loving homes for these children is bigger than ever.

Captive to the Spirit and captivated by Christ's love, you might find yourself strengthened to overcome fear of differences, language barriers, and the possible criticisms of others as you build relationships with an immigrant family in our community. Seeing their gifts and contributions to our society and learning their struggles, you might join them in the fight to protect their rights and seek justice in a broken system.

Captive to the Spirit and captivated by Christ's love, you might go and serve somewhere in a faraway place, learning to join your life to the lives of people in a different land and culture. Even if only there for a time, you might find yourself more connected to the joys and struggles of your brothers and sisters in Christ in another part of the world, and your eyes might be opened to see how our actions in this country affect others around the world.

Or perhaps the Spirit will lead you to discern a call to share God's love to those who are hurting in our community, building others up and supporting the weak.

Maybe like Paul and Jarena Lee and Brother Sheffey your love for God will be shared in public squares, in places of worship, and house to house—building up the followers of Jesus and forming others in the way of Christ. Maybe you will feel called to start or lead a small group, or to start a fresh expression of church to reach people in a new way.

Whatever it is, what matters most is our surrender to God, listening for the Spirit's leading and whole heartedly giving of ourselves, filled with the love and grace of Jesus.

Lauren Welsh, a young woman nurtured by this church and youth group and supported as one of our Faith Promise missionary partners this past year, just returned from nine-months of serving in Thailand, Malawi and Guatemala. As an even closer-to-home example of the everyday, ordinary, extraordinary way of life captive to God's Spirit and captivated by Christ's love, this is what she wrote on her blog to summarize her year:

“I don't really have a lot of words right now about coming home so I'll let Paul do the talking...

‘The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why, because of Christ. Yes all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand,

everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I’ve dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn’t want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ—God’s righteousness.” (Philippians 3:7-9, The Message)

Lauren goes on to say, “Yeah I traveled and served but I just can’t stop saying ‘Jesus, you are every good thing about me.’

Hers, too, is a beautiful testimony.

When we look back at what all these different stories have in common—Jarena Lee, Robert Sheffey, Doc Hendley, Paul, Lauren—they are all reflections of Jesus’ own life and heart in many ways. In keeping with his witness, they cared more about sharing God’s love with others than their own comfort or personal desires. They followed God into unknown and even risky or dangerous situations, trusting God to lead, guide and protect them. They trusted God’s provision for every need and, in living a simple life, were drawn to the ‘least’—those forgotten and most vulnerable in today’s society.

This, church, is what Christ invites us to experience—to find joy in the paradoxical freedom of being captive to God’s Spirit and letting our lives be fully hidden in Christ’s own life as we are captivated by his love and become reflections of the love and goodness of God. Amen.