

“The deathly king”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Luke 1:68-79*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

The other day an article came up on my news feed titled “74-Year-Old Man Accused of Getting His Entire Church High on Weed Cookies.” That’s right—a 74-year-old man living in Indiana baked weed into the cookies used for the social hour after worship, and no one knew. A nice, old man—for reasons I cannot fathom—secretly laced the fellowship cookies with marijuana. Apparently, the congregation loved the cookies; they reported them unusually delicious, saying they’d never felt better; their aches and pains were gone; they felt the soaring of the Holy Spirit. It was a miracle! Or, you know, an illegal substance.

It made me think... we should better regulate who bakes our cookies.

Also, well, that’s one way to grow a church.

It seems churches have tried everything else to attract members, from rock bands to smoothie bars. I understand the desperation, but I think Westminster will hold off for now on “special” cookies.

Honestly, we shouldn’t need to contrive ways to attract people to Christ. The gospel should be enough. Look back at what Zechariah says when he anticipates the birth of Christ. The vision he offers us is stunningly beautiful. It offers all that we have ever desired in our heart of hearts: peace, and hope; light in the darkness; salvation, and love; the wholeness of self and all creation, unified with God. Wow!

It makes you wonder: Why would anyone reject such a king? Why would people become so afraid, so angry, at this Prince of Peace, that they would put him on a cross? We know the cultural forces that stand today as barriers between people and faith. But even we who speak his name, we who have met this life-changing, freedom-making, love-giving king, even we struggle to turn our lives over to him. We resist. Why? Why resist something so good?

In the 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption*, there’s a man by the name of Brooks Hatlen. He’s been in prison for more than 50 years. He’s an old man by now, with stooped shoulders and white hair, who tends the prison library and a baby bird he keeps in his pocket. One day, this gentle man grabs another inmate, and presses a knife to his throat, threatening to kill him. Everyone’s shocked and confused. He says, “It’s only the way they’ll let me stay.” Turns out that Brooks had gotten parole. After all these years, he finally was free. And it terrified him. That prison was all he knew. Another character, Red, explains: “These walls are funny. First you hate ‘em, then you get used to ‘em. Enough time passes, you get so you depend on them.”

Brooks doesn’t use the knife; he turns it over to his friend Andy. When he gets released, he tries to make it. He gets a job bagging groceries, lives in a halfway house. But the world’s changed, and everything that he’s known for most his life—that prison—it’s gone. He’s tired and scared all the

time. And one day, he gets up on a chair, carves his name into a wooden beam in his room, and hangs himself.

I think we're all a little like Brooks. We get used to being a certain way, and it doesn't matter if that way hurts us, it's what we know. It's who we are. It might be conflict or anger, addiction or violence, a way of tearing ourselves down all the time or being alone. It might be a job, or a family, or a worldview; might be how we never ask for help, or how we define ourselves by impossible standards of success; might just be a shallow way of living, a series of pleasurable distractions. That past—all its experiences, its traumas, its sin—holds us like a prison. We grieve it, we complain about it, but truth is many of us perpetuate the habits that keep us there.

Then here comes Jesus, offering us freedom, telling us the old life is gone and a new life has begun. But when you've been in prison all your life, freedom can feel like a death sentence. When you've lived in the dark, and your eyes aren't accustomed to the light, that light can hurt.

Jesus says over and over that what "was" must die if we want a new life. He asks his disciples to leave everything behind, pick up their cross, and follow him. He asks the rich man to give up his entire wealth. He asks the lame man to rise and walk. Jesus is a strange king, a deathly king, his throne a cross, his crown a ring of thorns, offering us freedom and new life—yes—but also death. Death of our old, familiar ways of being. And that's scary, because when they're gone, who are we?

Our story is of a people on the verge of freedom, who turn back because they were afraid to let go. It's the story of the Israelites escaping slavery, on the verge of a new promised land, refusing to cross the Jordan River because they're afraid of what's on the other side.

It's the story of a people, healed and fed by Jesus, on the verge of the kingdom of God, crucifying him so that the world can stay the way it is.

It's the story of Americans, on the verge of new freedom and possibility, reverting to movements of white supremacy and patriarchy.

It's the story of every broken promise, every failed vow, everything that hurts us but we keep going back to it.

Over and over, we reject Jesus, not because he offers us life, but because he offers us death.

He dares us to take a leap of faith, to cross that river into a land unknown, to follow him outside these prison walls, to put our old life up on that cross, trusting that our new life—completely unknown to us now—will rise from that tomb.

In *Shawshank*, there's another man who was in prison for most of his life. He goes by the nickname "Red." One day, Red is paroled, just like Brooks. Inside, Red was an important man, a man who could get you things, but outside, he feels small. He ends up working at the same grocery, living in the same halfway house as Brooks, same room even. He finds the world strange and scary. He keeps asking his boss at the FoodWay to go the bathroom, because all his life he had to ask someone for permission. And then one day, he thinks about doing the same thing Brooks did. He says, "Terrible thing, to live in fear. Brooks Hatlen knew it. Knew it all too well. All I want is to be

back where things make sense. Where I won't have to be afraid all the time." He goes on to say, "Only one thing stops me. A promise I made to Andy."

Andy was a friend Red made in prison. Andy was innocent, and over the course of years, he dug his way out of his prison cell, all the way past the walls, and escaped. Before, he asked Red to promise that if Red ever got out, he'd go to this field in Maine, and dig up something Andy had buried there.

There, Red finds an envelope of money and a letter. In that letter, Andy asks Red to meet him in this small village of Mexico, on the Pacific Coast. He says it's a warm place with no memory. He writes, "Remember, Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies."

Red boards a bus, saying, "I find I'm so excited that I can barely sit still or hold a thought in my head. I think it's the excitement only a free man can feel. A free man at a start of a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain. I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope."

The film ends on that blue water, that warm place with no memory, as Andy waves to Red.

And I think I know the difference between Red and Brooks. It's not that Red was stronger, or better. It's that Red had a friend. He had Andy who climbed his way through mud and muck to reach freedom. A friend who was waiting for him.

And I think that's what we have: a friend waiting for us. A friend who innocently was sent into our prison and who made it out. A friend who left us a message, a gospel, inviting us to join him on that ocean.

It's scary to leave behind this old life, to face an uncertain future, but we have something that's going to get us across that river, something that's going to let us step outside these walls and put that old life on the cross. We have One who has already made it to the other side. He waits for us there, on that warm blue ocean, where memory is wiped away, and all is free and lovely.

It's there that we realize that the death Christ offers us is actually life, and the life we think we're living, that's the death.

As much as I fear the unknown, I want that ocean more. I want to find out who I really am. I want to shed my old skin, and be the person God made me to be. I'm excited to learn who that is. I know he's going to be OK, because as Andy says, what is good never really dies. Whatever's in us that's good and right, that's put there by God, it persists. No matter what else changes, no matter what else dies, who we truly are survives. But this time, there are no chains. This time, we get to live. So, come on, let's start this journey. **Amen.**