

Last week Suella talked about healing as release—

release from distractions;

release for forgiveness.

This week as we prepare to enter Holy Week,

we want to look at release as a particular arc in Luke's Gospel;

a theme; a motif; a thread running through the work from the beginning to the end.

It is a cycle of Luke's release texts—texts that are formed around the word *afi=emi* in Greek,

It is a word that has a wide semantic range: It is often translated as "forgive"

but it can also mean leave, let go, permit, release, allow.

Our theme begins with the song of Zechariah in Luke 1, what we often call the *Benedictus*,

a text that we Protestants take note of during Advent,

but a text with which Catholic Benedictines begin each day.

In Luke's artistry, the *Benedictus* becomes the over-arching text in the same way

that Mary's Magnificat is the over-arching text for Luke's quest stories—but that's another day!

In the opening to the cycle of Luke's release stories,

Zechariah has been silent, not of his will, for nine months and one week.

Nine months and one week to ponder and think through the things of faith,

as well as the things lacking in faith, including his own response to the angel

who foretold the birth of his son, John.

But now the baby is here, a week old, and about to be named and circumcised.

Zechariah still can't talk so he obediently informs his neighbors, in writing,

that the boy's name is John.

Then, his lips are opened and for the first time in almost a year, he again speaks into his life.

"Blessed are you, the Lord God of Israel, for you have visited and redeemed your people...

you have remembered your holy covenant,

to grant that we might be saved from our enemies

to worship you without fear all the days of our life."

He ends the song by turning directly to his tiny son: softly, tenderly, like a lullaby, he sings:

"You, child, will be called the Prophet of the Most High,

you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,

You will give God's people knowledge of salvation

In the *release* of their sins."

There it is--God's purpose for the people of God set forth in Zechariah's lullaby to wee John:

Thus in Luke's Gospel.

the point of the Incarnation, this whole, risky venture of the divine

coming to humans as one of us,

is defined in terms of release: letting go, forgiving.

In chapter three, the baby John,

who first heard the vision articulated in his father's rusty, rumbling singing voice,

is now grown, and finding his own charism,

in the wilderness and on the riverbanks of the Jordan.

He takes up the theme of release in his own rough way.

Repentance and the release of sins, he thunders,

entails the release of privilege, power, and violence.

"What shall we do?" his penitents ask him.

John replies: Let go, let go, let go.

In chapter four, the other baby, the cousin,

now also grown and coming into his own, Jesus of Nazareth,
proclaims release as the center of his own ministry.

The people of Nazareth are preening with pride in their home town boy,

this young man who had come back from the wilderness shining in the Spirit,
and doing wonderful things—to hear tell of it in the village gossip.

They ask him to read Scripture and preach—and he does.

He reads from Isaiah with its ringing promises of release to the captives,

sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed.

He pronounces these promises fulfilled on this day—and they love it;

they eat it up—until he mentions that these promises, these releases,

are not only for the heirs of Abraham, but for all people everywhere.

You know the story—they turn against him, grab him, force him up to the top of a cliff,

fully intending to throw him over it to his death.

Luke finishes the story with the enigmatic: “But passing through the midst of them,

he went away.”

Still in chapter 4, afiemi appears again in the story of Jesus's healing Peter's mother in law.

It is a pair of stories; a pair of releases; although the word only appears in the last one.

Jesus rebukes the unclean demon possessing the man in the synagogue,

and then goes to Peter's house,

where he rebukes the high fever

possessing Peter's mother in law.

At this point, we begin to notice that release **from** is also release **for**.

Peter's mother is released **from** sickness **for** service.

So we can go back and fill in that gap in the previous texts.

In the Benedictus, release from sins is release to worship.

In John's wilderness preaching, release from sins is release to share goods with the poor,
to live with integrity and gentleness.

In Jesus's first sermon in Nazareth, release of the captives is release to include the Gentiles
in the circle of God's beloved.

In chapter five, 1-11, we have the lovely, haunting, and humorous story
of Jesus calling his first disciples.

Jesus is out by the lake and people are pressing against him, wanting him to talk to them.

There's a small fishing business there, two boats—two crews—partners,
working together for profit and safety.

The crews have been out all night,
the catch has been disappointing to say the least,
they are cleaning up and anxious to get home.

Jesus commandeers one of the boats, Peter's, after all he healed his mother in law,
and they push out a little to give Jesus some breathing room from the crowds.

When he's done with his homily, Jesus tells the crew to push out into the deep and let down the nets.

Peter is skeptical—how can this guy who's never fished for a living,
know more about fishing than he does, the seasoned fisherman?

Despite Peter's skepticism, we the readers are not caught off guard in the same way.

Of course the catch is huge, requiring both boats, both crews, and still almost sinking them
with the mammoth catch.

Peter, never one to do anything sedately, falls into the fish at Jesus's feet
and, rightly, proclaims his own unworthiness.

But Jesus tells him not to fear, that from now on, they will be fishing people.

It's a curious word in Greek—containing within it the word “life”

Capturing something in the wild for the sake of its life—is about the nearest we can get.

So perhaps something like catch and release?

At any rate, the disciples act in faith and courage.

They release everything and follow Jesus.

Released from all they had known; released for this strange new ministry.

The theme continues:

In chapter nine, Jesus is talking to would be followers.

In an interesting play on words, these would be followers first ask for release

from following immediately in order to take care of certain responsibilities.

In language that sounds harsh to us, Jesus tells them to release these responsibilities,

“release the dead to bury the dead,” and come and follow.

It is a mirror text to the fishing text

—release for commitment to the gospel means releasing competing responsibilities,

no matter how compelling.

In chapter 11, there is the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples:

Specifically, release for us our sins,

as we also release anyone who owes us anything.

More broadly, release from anxiety, comparison and competition,

release to ask for what we need.

In chapter 13, with the stories of the fig tree and the healing of the bent over woman:

Release from judgmentalism and exhausted failure; release to unbend and to stand up straight.

The theme of release comes to its climax, its high point, or perhaps its low point,

its point of greatest intensity, at any rate, at the cross.

Barabas is released; the one who has been preaching and teaching release is not.

For the one preaching and teaching release, the end has come.

The disciples, even dear Peter, the one who followed him almost to death, have disappeared.

The women who followed from Galilee stand at a distance, with others of his friends.

There are of course, hordes of other people around.

There are the two criminals with whom he is to be executed.

There are the technicians of death, the people who nail his hands,
and raise the cross.

There are presumably the judicial types to see that everything is done in good order,
according to the law.

Most excruciating are the crowds, come to see the spectacle,

criticizing, jeering, thankful that it is not them or their beloved on those crosses.

In all the chaos, clamoring, cruelty, there is, however, a moment of stillness,

a moment when the gasping voice from the middle cross can be heard.

“Father,” that one says, “Father, release them;

they do not understand what they are doing. Release. Release.

The song goes on:

In Luke 24, the disciples are released from fear and disillusion

to proclaim release in the name of the one who released them.

In Acts 2, all sorts of people are released from their sins

to find community, to break bread, to worship and serve.

Released from power and privilege

to repent and be free Luke 3:1–14

Released from religious pride

to worship and be free Luke 4:16–30

Released from feverish ways

to serve and be free Luke 4:31–44

Released from possessions and ambitions

to be called and be free Luke 5:1–11

Released from the need to control

to follow and be free Luke 9:51–62

Released from anxiety

to trust and be free Luke 11:1–13

Released from exhausted failure

to thrive and be free Luke 13:6–17

Released from ignorance and death

to forgive and be free Luke 23:13–38

Released from doubt and illusion

to proclaim and be free Luke 24:36–53

Released from alienation

to commune and be free Acts 2:37–42

As we prepare for Holy Week,

what do we need to be released from?

what do we need to be released for?