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“Live Free”

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Galatians 1: 11-24

I do not make it to movie theaters all that often, but I have noticed that the trend in Hollywood movies this summer is sequels, sequels, sequels. We currently have Shrek 3, Spiderman 3, Pirates of the Caribbean 3, and later this month we will have not a third, but a fourth Die Hard movie starring Bruce Willis.

The Die Hard movies are entertaining. Bruce Willis is wisecracking police officer John McClane in this franchise that was launched in 1988 and has made more than \$700 million so far. Although you might think that Willis is way past his prime in the action hero department, he is only 51. Sylvester Stallone recently returned to the ring as Rocky Balboa and he's 60, and Harrison Ford is picking up his whip again as Indiana Jones, and he is 65. So there could be 7 or 8 Die Hard movies before Bruce Willis collects Social Security.

In the fourth Die Hard movie, Willis will attempt to stop a techno-terrorist who is determined to shut down the nation's computer systems on the 4th of July. The threat is much bigger than anything seen in the earlier movies, because this time, a criminal plot is put in place to take down the entire computer structure that supports the economy of the United States — and the world. The villain is high-tech and dangerous, and Willis will get beaten up pretty badly defending the forces of goodness. But what is important is that no matter what happens to our action hero—he is free. He is not afraid because nothing can ultimately defeat him. And therein lies the secret to his success—he is free and he is not afraid.

The apostle Paul has something in common with Bruce Willis, when you think about it. He too follows a “die hard” approach to life, and takes his knocks as a loner who is willing to stand up to the forces of corruption and evil. He gets beaten up and bloodied, flogged and imprisoned — but he remains free. “Three times I was beaten with rods,” he tells the Corinthians. “Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked. ... I faced danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters” (2 Corinthians 11:25-26). Nothing can ultimately defeat him, because he is free. And, also like the Bruce Willis action hero, the apostle Paul has some skeletons in his closet. The very first *Die Hard* movie begins with Willis fighting with his estranged wife over the details of their separation. In a similar way, today's passage from Galatians

begins with Paul admitting that his own personal past is anything but perfect. “ain I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it,” he admits. “I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.” In his zeal, Paul breathed threats and murder against the members of the Christian church, and set off for the city of Damascus to capture and abuse any Christians who might be there.

Of course, along the way Jesus Christ himself appears to Paul, asking why he is persecuting him, and calls upon him to share his love with all people. This conversion launches Paul’s career as a Christian action hero, and he spreads the gospel on a number of missionary adventures. “I did not confer with any human being,” he tells the Galatians, “nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.” There could be 3 or 4 Hollywood movies made about the missionary adventures of Saint Paul. He delivers a message that is as surprising and unorthodox as anything Hollywood could offer. Paul says that he cannot be made right with God through good works or correct behavior — only faith in Christ will do that. He says that he is now dead to the flesh, and alive to God through his relationship with Jesus. “I have been crucified with Christ,” he writes to the Galatians; “and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” He says that the Gospel is pure foolishness, but that foolishness makes more sense than all of the wisdom of the world. He says that he is happy to be persecuted, abused, imprisoned, for when he is weak, then he is strong. Paul is insisting that he has already died — he has been crucified with Christ. But after losing his old life, he has been given a new one. Christ now lives in him, and Paul finds himself living by faith and trust. Paul has died hard — and now he lives free.

What would it mean for us to live free like that? In all of his letters, Paul is challenging the followers of Jesus to join him on the unpredictable adventure of Christian living, one in which we put faith in Christ above everything else. You’ve been crucified with Christ, insists Paul, and Christ is living in you. So that means you are completely free! Nothing can defeat you—not even death.

When we move into this life of spiritual freedom, we realize that we are no

longer in charge. We discover that our choices are now shaped by the presence of Christ, and we are being guided by Jesus into new forms of service. Christian freedom is not permission to do anything we want — instead, it is freedom to do what *Jesus* wants. We have been freed from captivity to sin and mindless living so that we can be free to serve the Lord who loves us and gave his life for us.

The basic test of freedom is perhaps less in what we are free to do than in what we are free not to do. We are free not to be seduced by the values of the culture of success and status, free not to indulge ourselves and our need for comfort and security, free not to be shallow, greedy, self absorbed individuals. Instead, we are free to be better people, free to serve and follow the God who liberates us.

To live a life of Christian freedom is to discover that Jesus Christ is at work inside you. It is a journey of miracles and blessings. It really is an adventure worthy of an action hero. There is a fascinating footnote to Paul's conversion story that is often overlooked. According to the English translation of the Bible, Paul says in verse 16 that God was pleased "to reveal his Son to me," a line that makes us think of Paul's encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus. But that's not really what he says. In the original Greek of the letter, Paul says that God was pleased "...to reveal his Son *in* me." Not *to* me ... *in* me. That is the gift of Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit. The risen Christ is not only with us, but within us. Jesus says, "I will send the comforter, the spirit of truth to be with you and within you." Christ is not only with us, but within us, and that is what we celebrate in Holy Communion. Christ within us is a gift of spiritual power, and liberation from so many of the burdens of this life on earth.

Christ in us brings tremendous freedom. We are free to do the impossible because we trust in the invisible. We are free to love the unlovable, rejoice in our suffering, find our lives by losing our lives. We are free of the opinions of others and the values of this world. Free from the mindless pursuit of wealth, status and success. Free from compulsions. Free from ourselves.

In 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt identified four essential American freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Those are essential freedoms that many have fought hard to preserve for us. Christianity expands those freedoms to include freedom from self, freedom from suffering, freedom from death.

In his autobiography Long Walk to Freedom, Nelson Mandela tells of a place he came to during his 27 years in prison. Mandela writes: "It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people

became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew that although I was behind bars and treated as an animal, that I was free. Nothing could take away my inner sense of liberation and hope. They could beat me, they could torture me, they could kill me, but still I was free. I resolved then to work for the liberation of all people in every place, the oppressed and the oppressor alike.”

(Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom. Little, Brown and Company, 1994)

Our faith gives us a liberation that this world can never give. No matter what our circumstances, we can choose peace, hope, and love. Who can judge us, condemn us, persecute us, separate us from the love of Jesus Christ? If Paul could survive his adventures of shipwreck, torture, imprisonment, abuse, and stay centered in God’s love in Christ, then surely we can too.

As you come forward to receive the bread of life today, remember that Christ is not only with you, but within you. When you belong to Christ, you are truly free.

(Some ideas taken from Homiletics, May–June, 2007)

Let us pray:

Come and fill us, gracious God, with your Holy Spirit. Touch us, transform us, and bless us as we lay our lives before you. We are yours and you are ours, now fill us with the spiritual power of the Risen Christ. Amen.