Today, in our passage from Isaiah, we hear a prophesy about the coming of Jesus. It reads, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.” It goes on for a while longer, but I wanted to stop here and focus on the last two promises – those about liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. If we wanted, we could be very literal and read them in a storming of the Bastille type of way, believing that when Jesus comes criminals will receive a Monopoly get out of jail free card, but I think it is more metaphysical than that. I read it as bringing liberty and release to all who are held captive by forces that are not of God. And what I would like to do for the next few moments is reflect on those forces which hold us captive. And I do this because I think it is a neglected, misunderstood and yet an incredibly important part of what happens in the coming of Jesus on Christmas Day and the way it is supposed to shape the lives of His followers.

To start this reflection, let’s think for a moment about how Christmas is generally celebrated in our society. Christmas is a big thing. It consumes months on the calendar and demands lots from us. We must buy presents, wrap presents, decorate our houses, prepare the right cookies, listen to the right music, watch the right movies, do something with ugly sweaters and so on. Christmas manages to insert itself into just about every corner of our lives and insist that we replace the regular version of what we do with the Christmas version. Now please do not think that I am going all Puritan and demanding that we treat Christmas just like any other day. What I do want to suggest, however, is that the message our current societal understanding of Christmas sends is that Christmas is fulfilled in the accumulation of things and actions. I do not want to be overly dramatic but there is an air of captivity to it. Again, I am not saying this is horrible, but suggest that it does not lend itself to the idea of being freed. For what we hear from the prophet Isaiah today is not addition, but subtraction. We are released from captivity. So how do we square these two competing ideas? How can we celebrate release from captivity on the most scripted and overloaded holiday of the year? I think it is not getting lost in the cacophony of the Christmas season and remembering. Remembering from what we are set free.

As I stated earlier, Jesus seeks to set us free from the things that are not of God, or to put it more in church terms, Jesus seeks to set us free from the bondage of sin. And we all sort of know that this is what Christmas is all about, but it may be a little hard to remember or pay attention to because sin has a really good PR firm. Much of the trajectory of our society has been to treat those who oppose sin as the problem and to treat sin as a groovy thing from which the church going squares try to keep people from doing. These days most sins, besides murder, are seen not as a problem but rather as the fullest expression of our individuality. The world is upside down and we are often told to look to sin to fulfill ourselves and are then quite surprised when we wake up in a cheap hotel in Bakersfield wearing a Cookie Monster onesie still feeling unfulfilled.

I heard someone on a podcast years ago, and I wish I could remember his name so I could properly reference him, but as for now, some guy I heard is the best I can do. Anyway, he said something kind of surprising about the Christian church and sex. He said he thought that at some point in the future our society would come back to the church and want what we have to offer on the subject. I was somewhat surprised by his assertion, but he went on to explain. He said that he didn’t think anyone could look at the state of sex in our society and say we are doing a good job. I am not going to get into details about what has gone off the rails because there are few things creepier than hearing clergy expound on this subject so I will let your minds go wherever it is they want to go. But back to this guy’s point. I am not sure everyone would agree with his hypothesis, but it was kind of interesting. For there are a lot of things in our society, not just those dealing with sex, that are not going great. That is the rejection of traditional Judeo-Christian understandings of right and wrong, good and bad has not ushered in the promised age of Aquarius. We live in a world that has convinced itself that obedience to Christ is somehow shackling and giving into our every whim and fancy is true freedom. We have become certain that saying yes to every base desire is freedom and that saying no to them is slavery. But the coming of Christ says just the opposite. It tells us that we will have the power to cast off the chains of that which ensnares us, and that we can experience the true freedom that comes in submission to Jesus Christ.

Think of this silly example: Let’s say you are sitting at home streaming *Three’s Company* and you get really involved. So involved in fact that you decide to ignore everything else you are supposed to be doing that day so you can focus on Mr. Furley’s hijinks. Now let’s further say that the things on your calendar include having lunch with the Archbishop of Canterbury, cashing in your winning Power Ball ticket and catching a flight to a ski chalet in Zermatt. In staying to watch *Three’s Company* we would say you made a very bad choice. You picked something that was okay, and used it as a replacement for some really great stuff. That is often what our captivity looks like. It is captivity to the so-so and mediocre. Our problem seems to be that we are too easily satisfied. It reminds me of an old Far Side cartoon where you see a couple sitting on their sofa watching TV while on a cloud. The wife looks at her husband and says, “You know Vince this really isn’t bad – but the folks up above sure seem to live it up.” The caption to the cartoon reads, “Life on Cloud 8.” Cloud 8 seems to be where we live our lives. Sure, there are some things that are not bad, but they could be much better. And that is the message of Christmas – it can be a lot better. Do we want to be satisfied with the status quo or are we ready to embrace the true change to which Christ is calling us?

St. Augustine in his *Confessions* recounts a prayer he once uttered. It was, “Oh Master, make me chaste and celibate – but not yet.” That seems to be a good summary for many of us in our Christian walk. We want to keep a foot firmly planted in the secular world and are not yet ready to fully embrace God. But I think our relationship with the secular world can be like an addict’s relationship with heroin – we are sure the next time will be the one that satisfies. But it never does and yet we keep holding back something from God. We keep ourselves willingly imprisoned all while Christ has offered us true freedom. Freedom from the mediocrity of this world. Freedom from trying to find joy in things that are not capable of giving it. But with Christ’s coming we are offered something that the world cannot give – release from captivity. The captivity that comes from enslavement to our basest nature. On Christmas we are offered the freedom that is found only in God so that we may be his own this day and forevermore.