

Penned  
Malachi 4:1-6

When some people hear that God knows everything about them it is a scary thing. Such words can be found in Psalm 139: *You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before...* It can feel as if we are penned in – as if we can't go anywhere or do anything.

Words from our text in Malachi describes what it is like to be released from that pen: *You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.*

There are two different pictures in my mind of what this could look like. The first is from a rodeo. The second is from my experience on the farm.

The calf that is released into the rodeo rink takes off like a shot. It wants to be anywhere but in that little pen. It runs free for a while, but then a rope comes flying out of nowhere and tightens around its neck. And then there is a second rope that lassoes its back legs. With a might the calf cannot resist, it is slammed down on the dirt to a tumult of cheering and applause.

The second calf was born in late winter in the warmth of the barn. It is the only home it has ever known. Mom has plenty of water, hay, and grain. And mom supplies everything the little one needs. Then, one day, the barn door is left open.

Mom slowly makes her way out. The calf follows close behind. It soon discovers how great this wide open space is. It runs and jumps, and then it runs and jumps some more. It feels so good to be free.

We know what it looks like when a person lives the life of that rodeo calf. “God, with all His rules, is penning me in. He is cramping my style. I'm going to break free of His control. I'm going to do what I want to do, and no one is going to stop me.”

Sometimes rebellion against God is this crass and bold. There is no regard for God or His Law. It's all about self all the time. Maybe you know someone like that.

For other people the rebellion is a bit more subtle. The person does think God has some pretty good rules, and that if everyone would live by them this world would be a much better place. And so this person makes a sincere effort to live the way God wants.

But, here and there, a little bit of that rebellion shows itself. Impatient angry words are directed at a family member. The person acts in a dishonest way, or is just plain lazy. God's name is used carelessly or in cursing. Sexually impure thoughts or deeds occur.

We all know a person like that. It is each one of us. We know God's rules. We are penned in by them, but we know it is a protective fence. If we live inside of them we are protected from the consequences of breaking them – the shame, the guilt, the retaliation of the one we have wronged,

or their disappointment in us because of our sinfulness. And yet we still give in to temptation and fall into sin.

Also looming over us is the fact that our sins deserve God's wrath, just as much as the crass sinner. All sin is sin no matter how big or small it may seem to us. Because we have sinned, God's judgment against us is just. We heard from Malachi: *For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.*

We might like to think that arrogant and evildoer doesn't apply to us, but it does. We have sinned in thought, word, and deed against God and against those around us. We should rightly expect to be roped in and slammed to the ground. What we thought was an exercise of our freedom actually sealed our fate as one condemned under the Law. When we seek to free ourselves from God's Law the noose only tightens around our neck.

We can be free, but it is only God who can give that freedom. Malachi describes it this way: *But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.* God Himself opens the barn door for us to set us free from our sin.

Jesus Christ came into the world to open the door for us. In fact He refers to Himself as the door and the gate by which His people enter the freedom of His pasture. Jesus opened the door for us by having slammed shut on Himself. It is hard for us to picture God turning His back on His Son,

Jesus, but that's what happened. Jesus was removed from His Father's grace. Jesus suffered the punishment for the sins of all people of all time as He hung there on the cross. The agony must have been unbearable. It did cause Him to cry out in anguish, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

We know why. It was to pay for our sins. It was to suffer the wrath that we deserved so He could set us free. And we are free! We are free to run and jump for joy because Jesus has taken away our sin. We are completely forgiven. And He gives us His Spirit to live within us to see the Law as a protective pen around us. The Spirit creates within us the desire and strength to live in a God pleasing way. The Spirit leads us to repentance when we stray from that way.

We are free to run and jump with joy in what our loving God has done for us through His Son, Jesus. This paints a glorious picture in my mind of you running and jumping for joy on Sunday mornings to be in God's presence and receive His gifts – running and jumping for joy to confess your sins and hear words of forgiveness, running and jumping for joy to hear His word read and proclaimed, running and jumping for joy as you make your way to His altar to celebrated His Supper.

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. One day that will no longer be the case. The end is drawing near. Today we are one day closer to Christ's return when He will give us new bodies that will be able to run and jump for joy in His eternal presence. On that day we will be truly free forever. Amen.