

It's Time For a Party: Jubilee

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Leviticus 25:8-13, 23-24

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. Leviticus 25:8-13 (NRSV)

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land. Leviticus 25:23-24 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. Gracious God open us up to whatever you have for us today. Open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear your word in the midst of these words. Open our hearts that we might have compassion. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen

My youngest daughter lives in New York City, and she was recently married, and just before the wedding, she and her fiancé came to stay at our house for five or six weeks as we prepared for the wedding. They were able to work from home, so they stayed at our house. And what I learned was that I'd grown quite used to being an empty nester. I mean it was lovely having them there. We had great times and great conversations. But I'm used to my routines. I get up in the morning very early, and I go downstairs; I work at my computer and have my prayer time. I have the coffee that I like and all of that.

We do the same things on Friday and most times we do the same things on Sunday. We have our groove – or some might call it a rut. But we’ve got our rhythms. Well, here they are, and they’ve come to be a part of our house, and they have to live, too. They have to have a place to work, so I come down the first morning early in the morning, ready to do my thing, and my son-in-law is there. And he’s working, he’s got the light on in the kitchen, and he’s made eggs for breakfast. And the coffee that he likes. I had to learn to adapt.

We all live by certain rhythms. The ancient Hebrews built a whole series of rhythms to try and reinforce what God wanted them to do and who God wanted them to be. And they built things around a rhythm of sevens. So on the seventh day, God rested. They’d have a seven-year cycle where for six years they would plant their fields but in the seventh year, they would leave the fields fallow. A whole series of other things would happen in that seventh year that was a sabbatical year. Then at the end of seven cycles of seven, that would be 49 years, they would have something called the year of the Jubilee. Now the word jubilee comes from a Hebrew word meaning ram’s horn. The ram’s horn would be blown on the Day of Atonement in the seventh cycle, the seventh year, and that would begin the year of the Jubilee.

The word then got conflated with a Latin word, and it began to mean a season of celebration. So if you have a jubilee year, usually every 25 years or 50 years and it’s a yearlong celebration.

That’s what this was about. And they had this rhythm of this time of Jubilee every 50 years. So people might experience two of them in their lifetime, one as a child, or one as a young adult and one as an old adult. But many people would only celebrate one of them in their lifetime. They were such a significant calling in the life of Israel.

So what happened in the year of the Jubilee? Well, there were three primary components. The first was that debts were forgiven, and slaves were free – release. The second was that land was returned to its original owner or to whom it was originally allotted. It was a reset of the economy of sorts. And the third thing is that the land would lie fallow for yet another year. It had laid fallow in the seventh year of the seventh cycle, and now after the year of Jubilee would be yet another year it would lie fallow. And the people would eat off of what had been provided in the year before, or they could pick the fruit from the field as long as it wasn’t cultivated or planted.

When Jesus comes, he begins his ministry and comes to a synagogue in Nazareth and he opens the scroll that contains Isaiah, and he reads from it. He says, “I have come to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” That’s another term or phrase that means the year of the Jubilee. He’s saying, “I’ve come to be your Jubilee. I’ve come to set the prisoners free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And then he closes the scroll and says, “Today it has been fulfilled in your hearing. I am the Jubilee.”

So what does that mean for us? What does it mean to say that Jesus is our Jubilee? Let’s take a look at these three components of the Jubilee and what they were and see what they might mean for us.

The first is release. Release from debts and from slavery – from prisons. Here’s how this would work. There were two different kinds of slaves, and these things are connected. One kind were those who were captured. When the Egyptians took over Israel, they took the Children of Israel to Egypt. When the Assyrians were conquering, they took slaves from the Hebrews. When the Babylonians came, they took slaves from the Hebrews. When the Romans came, they took slaves from the Hebrews. That is not the kind of slaves they’re talking about when they talk about setting the slaves free to go back to their families.

The kind they’re talking about is more like indentured servants. What would happen was that I’d have my piece of land, and I would work that land but if for some reason it didn’t go well and I got myself in debt to my neighbor, then ultimately I’d have to sell my land and let my neighbor have it. Then ultimately, if that wasn’t enough, then I’d have to sell myself. I’d have to go into the service of my neighbor and become an indentured servant for a period of time. And what the Jubilee says is that in the year of the Jubilee everyone is set free. You’re set free from that kind of bondage.

I don’t know what that means for us, but I suspect there are other kinds of bondage. That when Jesus says, “I have come to set you free – to set the prisoner free,” that maybe that speaks to us in a different way. Maybe it’s freedom from the anxiety that just grips you all the time. Maybe it’s freedom from alcohol, or addictions or eating disorders, or some other addiction or compulsion that takes hold of you and won’t let go, and you’re just longing for that freedom.

Maybe it’s freedom from anger that rises up inside us and gets us to yell at people on the freeway or at those around us. Sometimes we scream at them or even scream at the people we love the most. Maybe it’s to be set free from a dysfunctional family that’s so full of abuse and

anger that it's hard to function. Maybe it's to be set free from that judgmental attitude that is just in your heart all the time as you see others, and you find yourself looking down your nose at them and isolating yourself from others. I don't really know what it might be, but I do know that we're all in bondage to something. And Jesus says, "I've come to set you free from that. I want the power of the Holy Spirit to work in your life to set you free."

Now the main thing that Jesus sets us free from is the guilt and power of sin. That sin which all of us do, living in a broken relationship with God. Jesus has come to heal that relationship, to reconcile us and set us free from the guilt and power of sin.

When we do memorial services, we always want to talk about the person, and we want to talk about good things about the person. We want to talk about how God worked in their lives and how God spoke to our lives through them. And to lift up the good things about them. But the truth is in that moment where we're facing the reality of our own mortality, the real gift we have is not the good things that we've done. The real gift we have is what Christ has done for us. Christ has set us free from the guilt and power of sin. And so death has no dominion in our lives. That realization when it sinks in! You've been set free!

You go to Philadelphia, and you can see the Liberty Bell. What you might not have realized is that inscribed on the Liberty Bell are the words from this Scripture that we read. It's from Leviticus 25:10, and it encourages us to "proclaim liberty throughout the land."

Friends, our Jubilee – our celebration, the way we live with joy because we've been set free is a proclamation of that liberty throughout the land. First, Jesus came to release us from bondage from sin and death.

Here's the second thing. The way the Jubilee worked was about a reset. Here's what would happen. Every 50th year the land would go back to the people to whom it was allotted. When Canaan is conquered God awards to each of the tribes a certain portion of land, and the Scripture outlines that. Then within each of the tribes are various clans, and each of those clans would be awarded a part of that tribe's lands. Then within each clan, a family would be awarded a part of the land given to the clans.

But here's what's important. The Scripture makes it clear that the land doesn't belong to them – the land belongs to God. And they are to be stewards of it and to have the use of it. And what would happen would be over time, for whatever reason, economics would be bad, or people make bad decisions, or for whatever reason, they find themselves in debt. They'd sell the use of

their land to their neighbor or someone else. Once that happened, everyone understood that after 50 years, it was going back. So if there were 30 years left before the Jubilee it was worth a lot more than if there were only two years left before the Jubilee. That was part of the understanding. But the realization was that every 50 years, there would be a reset, a reset of their life together.

Now I'll be honest. There's not a lot of evidence in Scripture that this part of the Jubilee or really the Jubilee at all was practiced on a regular basis. Today there are many who say that it was practiced when all the tribes are together in Israel, and that isn't the case now, so it's not to be practiced. It's not listed in First or Second Samuel, First or Second Kings, or in the Chronicles. Many historical books don't show the Jubilee. So what it is is an ideal. And what God is saying is, "Look, this is what we want to do. We want to reset life. Our life together."

You remember we used to have telephones that had little squiggly cords that ran from the receiver to the telephone. And you'd talk, but as time went on, that little cord would get all goofed up, and it would get tangled, and then you'd have to take the receiver and hang it upside down, and it'd spin around until you got it just right. You'd reset it. It'd gotten twisted and out of kilter, and you would reset.

I called the IT department here in the church the other day because my computer was messed up and I couldn't figure out what to do with it. The cursor was moving all around, and I couldn't find documents. Then he said, "Why don't you turn it off and turn it back on again? Hard stop and reset it." So we did, and it was fine. It's like something had happened inside it, and it had gotten messed up, and it needed a reset.

I look around our world, and I realize that in so many ways, we need a reset. That there are people down the street who lack food security while I have plenty. We end up throwing food away. That can't be the way it was intended. How can we reset life together?

Friends, I don't believe there's just a button you push though I do believe that God comes to us to begin to put our life back together – our community back together in the way that it's intended. Or maybe just make it more personal for you – this idea of reset. Don't you ever have those times when you think, "I just need to start over. Man! I've made such a mess of this part of my life, and I just need to start over."

There was no bankruptcy. This is one of the ways that a bankruptcy situation was dealt with in those days and that after a certain time, there's be a reset.

Let me tell you about Milton. That's not his real name, by the way, but Milton was a man in our church who started a business when he was young. He got married, worked like a dog – worked 14-hour days, seven days a week. He said, “I was so tense, I was so intense, I worked so hard, I neglected my wife. I neglected my kids. Then one day I found myself so lonely, and I ended up in an inappropriate relationship with a co-worker. Everything got so messed up. And one day, in one single week in July, my business failed, and my wife left me. It was like the lowest moment of my life. I just wanted to start over.”

He'd come to see me because he had been able to start over with his wife. They'd pieced their marriage back together again with great counseling. He'd begun to reconcile with his children. He'd started a new job that left him more space and more energy for his family. He'd come to me because they wanted me to do a renewal of their vows in the chapel. So we did that. We renewed their vows in the chapel, and they started over.

All of us need time to just push the reset button and start over. It doesn't mean that we don't have to deal with the consequences of our actions – we do. But we don't let the mistakes we've made, the places where we've messed up, the sins we've committed – we don't let those define us. God says, “You're my child, and you start over in my eyes.”

So we have release, and we have reset, and the last component is rest. On the last year of the year of the Jubilee would be the second year of the land lying fallow. That's a long time to not plant or cultivate. Here's what it says in Leviticus 25:21: “I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year...” That's the sixth year of the seven-year cycle. “I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year so that it will yield a crop for three years.”

Wow! To provide that way! So why is this rhythm of Sabbath and sabbatical and Jubilee – why is that built into the rhythm of the life of Scripture? Partly it's because we need rest, but partly it's to remind us that God's got this. That God will provide. That it's not up to us.

Every year my family and I go on a “Pacecation.” I love Pacecation. It's one week of the year I look forward to all year long. This year we didn't do that because of travel restrictions and because of all sorts of challenges. And I sure miss it. We wish we had gone ahead and done it. But nonetheless, when we used to go on a “Pacecation” when I was much younger, I'd work a lot of the time I was there. I'd go to bed early at night, and I'd get up early in the morning, and I'd work and study, return emails and try and stay in touch because I felt that made me feel like I could go the rest of the day being caught up. Then the next morning I'd do it again.

But as I've gotten older, I realize that I was missing the whole point. The point of this holiday – this holy day – this time of Jubilee – this weeklong celebration – is to remember that God can do this without me. That God is at work. That I get to be a co-worker with God. But I'm just a bit player. God's the one who holds it all together. I learned that the church goes on fine without me. And that the Scriptures are read, and people are taught, and all of those things can happen. That there was a Messiah, and I'm not him. He came a long time ago. To be able to really trust God and give up our need for control of everything – what a gift that is!

So this rhythm of release from our sin, to be set free from our sin - to have this reset of our lives, of our community, and of our own lives to be able to start over. And to be able to trust that God will provide everything that we need so we can rest. That's worth a party! And it's a celebration that we need to carry forth every single day.

Let's pray together. *Gracious God, we thank you for this year of Jubilee, this offering you give to us. And we thank you, especially that you are our Jubilee; that you have set us free from our sin and our bondage; that you have given us the opportunity to reset our community and our lives. And that you love us so much that you provide for us even when we can rest. So, God, keep that song on our lips and celebrate the incredible God you are. In the name of Christ, we pray, Amen.*