

Why Jubilee?

A sermon expositing Leviticus 25:8-55 *excerpts*

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The moment is upon us, dear friends. A day of celebration has arrived! Having already entered our 200th year as a congregation and today beginning our program year the festivities begin now. To guide us in our merriment, the Anniversary Planning Committee has chosen for us a theme, but choosing that theme wasn't an easy task.

It was clear from the beginning that we need a theme that will be more than just a cute way to tie our activities together, more than just a nice graphic, though we have those things. Our theme for this year, we knew would have to do more than just dress up our celebrations, it would actually need to inform the *way* we celebrate. We need a living theme that is not only *descriptive* of our celebration, but actually *prescriptive* of how we might embody the celebration.

We *should* be joyful, we *should* celebrate, there *should* be merriment and there will be and we will, but shouldn't there be more? Shouldn't the way we celebrate honor the past *and* look forward to what comes next? Shouldn't the way we celebrate inspire us and fill us with excitement for the next 200 years? Shouldn't the way we celebrate make us want to come up out of our pews, get out into the world bearing the justice and love of God for all people? It should. It *should* inspire us! Our celebration *should* awaken the Spirit of God within us and enliven our work, our ministry, our life together and our theme *should* drive all that and I believe we found it!

We have chosen as our expansive, holy, and inspiring theme a set of esoteric economic regulations from the 5th and 6th centuries BCE Mediterranean world. I knew you'd be excited! I knew you would.

Wait. You don't seem... I was really expecting... Well, you don't seem excited at all! You don't want a Jubilee do you? A year full of it? Just a party all the time and merriment everywhere, just Jubilee all over the place! Well, now you're confusing me. A second ago you didn't seem all that excited about ancient Mediterranean economic reform, but now you're saying you do want a Jubilee!?

Oh. Did I forget to mention, that's what Jubilee is! My mistake. Yes, our English word Jubilee, which means a celebration, a party, a joyous occasion has filtered down through the linguistic centuries apparently originating from a Hebrew word or one of its cousins. The word means, "ram's horn", or as you may have heard it called, a shofar. That's the horn that would be blown on the highest holiest day of the Israelite's year to signal the beginning of the festivities and the festivities were – a really esoteric set of economic regulations! That's right the party and the regulations are one and the same. These strange rules that we'll read more about in the days ahead are both the cause *for* and the mode *of* the celebration. They are, Jubilee!

Don't worry, though you're not the first people to turn up your nose at the whole idea. You see, these strange rules, the Jubilee rules are actually the third tier of regulations that were set up under the banner of Sabbath. Now that's a concept maybe we're more familiar with. You may recall that in the story of creation God created the earth and everything in it, on it, and around it, the entire universe, all the cosmos in just 6 days. Then on the seventh day, God rested. This is the story that explains for us the tradition of setting aside a day of the week for worship and rest. The need for rest, the story proclaims, is woven into the very fiber of the

universe – so much so that God has ordained that every seventh day is a day of restoration, redemption, recovery, rest, Sabbath. Later though, we find a second layer of Sabbath. It is described in more than one place, but one of them is in Leviticus just before we read about Jubilee. Just as people need rest every seven days, so too even the earth God created needs rest and it is decreed that the land will lie fallow every seventh year. God promises that the harvests around the seventh year together with the volunteer crops during, there will be plenty to eat without cultivating the land. Again, the people rest and in so doing even the earth rests. It turns out, that's actually good agriculture I'm told. The soil has a chance to regenerate itself and be ready for the next six years of provision. People need rest and renewal and redemption. Even the earth needs rest and renewal and redemption. These it seems the people were all for. God commanded rest? Who wouldn't do that!? I'm gonna take a nap this afternoon, I promise you that! But then came the third layer, Jubilee. Every Sabbath of Sabbaths, the seventh year of the seventh set of seven years marks the coming of jubilee. If you're playing at home that's 49 years and in the following year, the fiftieth, on the day of atonement the shofar sounds and the people rest, and the earth rests and now...the entire social order is also renewed. Rest, renewal, redemption is woven into every part of creation. Even the social systems that govern the way the people live on the land need rebooting.

You see, that's why Jubilee in Leviticus takes on the form of some esoteric laws, because it is instituting a reboot of the most fundamental human system – the economy. Now those goofy, old rules are starting to sound a little exciting aren't they? How would you like that now? With the gridlock we're facing in the political system, wouldn't you like to walk right into the middle of the capitol building and blow the trumpet and JUBILEE!! A fresh start. Wouldn't you like to walk right into the middle of the neighborhoods hardest hit by poverty and proclaim a Jubilee? Or into the middle of the major industrial centers of our world that have become so vital to the way we live, but are destroying the earth and proclaim a Jubilee. Take a breath, let's start over.

It sounds so wonderful, but way back then they turned their noses up at it just like you did a few minutes ago. Where we have some record of Sabbath both the day and year having been actually, materially practiced at some points in human history, we have absolutely no trace, not even a faint allusion to the notion that the Jubilee year has ever been observed even a single time in human history. Why not?

Well, I can't claim rightly to know, but I have a good guess. You see an economic reboot or a social reboot is really wonderful news for a great many people, but it requires something from those for whom the news isn't quite as exciting. If the poor are going to be restored, the rich have to give something up. If the weak are going to be set right, the powerful have to give up some of their power. If the marginalized are going to be re-centered in the social order, those at the center are going to have to make room. Are you starting to see? For Jubilee to work it would require that those who benefit most from the social order give up their own benefit. Historically speaking those who benefit most have also been the ones in power, the ones who give order to the social systems, the ones who make the rules. For them, Jubilee tends to sound like a bad idea. Jubilee has never been politically feasible. It's never been economically sensible. While it sounds like a real party for many, for those with the power to implement it, it has always sounded absurd and so the world has never seen Jubilee.

But that's it, that's just why it makes a great theme for us, for our bicentennial celebration – because the world has never seen it. To be completely honest, I am quite aware that the people within this room alone cannot have any hope of altering the world so dramatically that all of our social systems become redemptive, that even the earth can be redeemed, that every person might find new beginnings and certainly not inside the scope of one year even if it is our 200th year. But we do have it within our power to *show* the world what Jubilee looks like. To put on a demonstration. In this year we're going to celebrate what we have been given and we're going to give thanks for those who've given it to us and we're going to worship the one from whom it all comes. In so doing we're going to take notice of something. We're going to take notice of just how blessed we are as a congregation. We're going to see just how much God has entrusted to us. That sets us up, do you see that? The world has never seen Jubilee, because historically those who have held the resources and the influence to make it work have held on tightly to them. But not this time.

Yes, Jubilee calls us to something deeper than mere celebration. It calls us to justice, liberty, mercy, forgiveness, stewardship, and redemption – but let us not forget these things give rise to the celebrations. Here, 200 hundred years into the life of the First Baptist Church of Rochester, we have an opportunity to let the world see a thing it has never seen before. Why not us? Why not now?

Let the Jubilee begin!