



First United Church of Oak Park

With Jubilation

Leviticus 25:8-12, 18, 24

Rev. John Edgerton

February 27, 2022

If you look back a few weeks in the worship life of the church, you will see that in January we read a passage from Luke Chapter 4. Jesus was in Nazareth—his home town—and read aloud from the scroll of Isaiah, inaugurating his ministry, encapsulating and summarizing his work with these words:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, who has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, this is the inauguration, encapsulation, summarization of Jesus’ ministry. So what is it? What is the year of the Lord’s favor?

It is spelled out in rather a lot of detail in the passage I read a few minutes ago, from the Book of Leviticus. The Book of Leviticus is easy to overlook; it is filled with a great many laws that seem esoteric and anachronistic. But it’s important to understand what was going on with the people when this set of laws was given. The people were wandering in the desert, and had been for a long time. Merely surviving in the wilderness was a challenge, requiring people to understand the ties of common life that united people. During the wilderness wandering, all the people were on equal footing, arranged into family and tribe. People invested with different work to support the whole, but every person knew that the common good was their own good.

The Book of Leviticus was the law for how to keep people a single united people once they had settled back into something like a normal life, their peregrinations and wandering behind them, the wilderness nothing but a foggy memory. The law stood in for what had been a natural unity and equal footing that existed when the people were wandering in the desert.

Because once the people reached the Promised Land they began building homes and planting, some going into this line of work, some that. One family prospered, another began to fall behind. This one fell into debt, that one earned interest. This farmer bought up neighboring farms, that one became little more than a farmhand on land they had once owned.

But then there was the year of jubilee. The year of jubilee is meant to restore the people to the sense of unity and fellowship that existed when they were wandering in the desert.

It is built into the law. Every fiftieth year is to be the year of jubilee. It is a quite uncommon occurrence; a person would only ever see one in their entire life. But, also, if a person lived a full life every person would experience one. In the year of jubilee, no work is to be done. Not by citizens, not by resident aliens. Even the land itself is to be left to rest—the fields are to be left unplowed and to lie fallow.

This raises a very natural question—if no one is to work, and even the land is to be left to rest—how will the people survive? How will they not simply starve? Is it not by working hard that impoverishment and hunger and want are to be prevented? How will there be enough?

It's a very natural question, one that the Book of Leviticus assumes you are going to ask. And the answer is simple. In the year before the jubilee, God will make the harvests triple their normal size. Enough to last three years! God will give a bumper crop to the people, with an overflowing harvest. That's great, of course, and I suppose it is the sort of thing that God is able to arrange. But the mere presence of abundance does not mean the people will have enough. Because that triple-sized bumper crop will belong to the landowners, to the people who had been doing well enough to have the means to support themselves. If that abundance sits in just a few hands it will not help the people, not the way it needs to. If anything, that bumper crop would make things worse. Those who already had enough would ride out the year, and those who had to borrow would wind up further behind than they had been before.

Well, the year of jubilee predicts this as well. Because at the very time that the triple-sized harvest is brought in, the trumpet would sound on the year of jubilee. And at that moment, in the year of jubilee, all debts were erased. In the year of jubilee all captives were set free. In the year of jubilee all property and land and wealth transferred back to the tribes. In essence, the economic and polity realities of the nation were reset back to how they were at the time when people wandered in the desert, back to equitable footing, back to a sense of common good.

Overflowing blessings will mark the start of the year of jubilee, overflowing blessings that will—on the spot—be given over to the common good. The overflowing blessings will be enjoyed by all equally, for none will be forced by debt or bondage to give up their share. A year of community, of togetherness, of fellowship, of justice, of peace. In the year of jubilee there will be none who are impoverished. Because in the year of jubilee all property and wealth that has accrued in just a few hands is to be returned to the use of the common good. The year of jubilee, and a trumpet will sound to mark its beginning. It is also called the year of the Lord's favor. It is an episodic and occasional festival that would ensure equity among people.

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Release, recovery, freedom to the oppressed, good news for those who have eaten the ash of bad news. The year of jubilee: Jesus declares that it is no longer an episodic and occasional festival, but instead the year of jubilee is to become a way of life. His ministry and the path of those who follow him are to be ministries of jubilation, of release, recovery, freedom, good news for the poor. In the Holy Land, an overflowing harvest would precede the jubilee. For Christians, out of jubilation we ought to share what we have, being open-handed that the world might be one of equity. In the

ministry of Jesus and for those who follow Jesus, we are to give from jubilation, so that the common good might be served. Life among the faithful is to become one of community, of togetherness, of fellowship, of justice, of peace. Every year, the year of Jubilee. And if we do that, if we each of us stretch and trust in faith that in generosity the common good will be enriched and we will not be impoverished, if we each of us give with jubilation, then it will make glad the heart of God.