

# “Jubilee At Last”

Leviticus 25: 8-12 and Luke 4: 14-21



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(Temporary Pulpit Supply)

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(Luke 4: 19)

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Kilts and drums and bagpipes! And they say Presbyterians don’t know how to party. It all feels a bit like my student days in Edinburgh. We’d hear the pipes playing off in the city somewhere and away we’d trot, following the sound until we’d find the pipe and join the fun.

I only wish I could boast of being a full-blooded Scotsman. Alas, it’s only my paternal grandmother who squeezed a bit of Gaelic blood in me. She was a Baird – so that’s the tartan I’m wearing in my tie this morning.

Today is a celebration of our Scots-Irish heritage as Presbyterians. But I notice from your bulletin cover, it’s also a celebration of your Fiftieth Anniversary as the Church of the Palms. *Fifty* years!

1957! It was quite a year! The world entered the space age that year with the Soviet Union’s launch of *Sputnik*, the first artificial satellite. Meanwhile earthbound people like us lined up to see the Academy Award film, “*Bridge Over the River Kwai*.”

Dwight Eisenhower had begun his second term and the Interstate Highway system he envisioned and initiated was little more than a dream. You could pick up a Chevy for somewhere in the neighborhood of a couple of thousand, and a three – even four – bedroom house for under thirty!

Back then Sarasota boasted a population of about one-third what it is today. Bee Ridge was nothing but a two-lane road through orange groves *way out there* on the south edge of town.

Steve Alan had just written the popular song, “*This could be the start of something big*.” The Church of the Palms could have been his inspiration. Jesus said, plant a seed in good soil and it will produce all kinds of harvest. It has! Look at what’s happened over the past fifty years!

# Jubilee a Super Sabbath

A fiftieth anniversary is often called ‘Jubilee.’ But jubilee is not a word we use very often even in church. O sure, one of our Christmas carols sings out the question, “Shepherds why this *Jubilee*?” But most of us take this to mean, “What are you so excited about?”

Then there’s that evening hymn, which unfortunately we rarely use, because we rarely worship in the evening anymore. It sings:

“Let our vesper hymn be blending with the holy calm around.  
*Jubilate, Jubilare, Jubilare, Amen.*”

Though admittedly a pretty word, “*Jubilare*” conveys no clear meaning for most of us.

Generally we get the impression jubilee means pleasure, joy – well, *jubilation*! Technically, however, the word ‘*Jubilee*’ has Hebrew roots. As we read from Leviticus this morning, it designated a fifty-year celebration. The question is, a celebration of *what*.

We tend to celebrate fifty years mostly because it’s half-a-hundred, a seemingly important milestone. But the Hebrews arrived at the significance of the number *fifty* by an altogether different route.

Among the Jews, you remember, seven was an important – almost *sacred*! – number. There was the seven-branched candelabra called a ‘Menorah,’ and the seven lambs sacrificed to attest a treaty. But most importantly there were the seven days of the week culminating with the Sabbath.

Stay with this weekly idea a moment. Let days represent years and put together a week of them – seven years. Now, as Leviticus says, “*count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years.*” That produces “*forty-nine years.*” The following year, the “*fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you.*”

Jubilee was designed to be the greatest and best of all Sabbaths.

A Jubilee celebration was built up week-by-week-by-week until it became the supreme fulfillment of a week-of-years times a week-of-years. It was the Sabbath of all Sabbaths – a *super* Sabbath!

The year of Jubilee began on the holiest of all Jewish festivals the Day of Atonement, which, you guessed it, occurred in the *seventh* month! The year began with the sounding of the *johbel*, which in Hebrew means ram's trumpet – their loudest instrument.

It makes sense to me that your Jubilee year here at the Church of the Palms should kick off with another loud instrument – the bagpipe! The Hebrew word *johbel* has come down to us in its Greek form, 'Jubilee.'

## Jubilee the Prophet's Hope

What was the point of this fifty-year celebration among the Jews?

It was to be a year of complete rest. Sabbath you remember means 'to cease.' All work was to stop. The land especially was given a break. It was allowed to lie fallow for the whole year, people eating only what grew of its own accord.

Everything was to return to its original state. Jubilee aimed at putting the entire social order back on an even keel. It leveled the playing field. All economic imbalances created in earlier years were to be relieved. The 'Year of Jubilee' was to accomplish this correction by –

- bond slaves being released from their bondage
- property being returning to its original owner
- debts being forgiven and bankruptcies annulled

So the Year of Jubilee was not so much a celebration of past accomplishments as it was a correction of past imbalances. Jubilee cleared the decks for the future. It was rather like Paul saying, "*forgetting what lies behind...I press on toward the goal*" (Phil. 3:13-14). Every fifty years your slate was wiped clean and you got a shot as a brand new start.

But here's the irony. We have no clear evidence in the Old Testament that the Year of Jubilee ever actually happened. It was a law on the books, all right, but it was quickly recognized as impractical. You can see why.

Consumers, mired in deep debt, would have loved the Year of Jubilee. Imagine: 'All my debts – forgiven!' Creditors, however, would have seen the Year of Jubilee as their worst financial nightmare. Imagine: 'Everyone who owes me anything must be forgiven!'

Who's going to do business in an economic environment like this? Jubilee was a nice idea until you tried to make it work. Actually practicing it might have brought the national economy to a standstill, perhaps with attendant civil unrest and class warfare.

So, although Jewish law prescribed the Year of Jubilee it apparently never got celebrated.

Only the prophets kept alive the utopian dream. Jubilee became a symbol of God's eventual personal intervention in the human mess we make of things. Only God could bring about Jubilee with its forgiveness of the past and its hope for the future.

Isaiah told of One who would come with the anointing of "*the Spirit of the Lord*" upon him. It is he who would "*proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" If Jubilee ever became a reality it would be God – *and God alone!* – who made it happen.

## **Jubilee a New Start**

Now, fast-forward a few hundred years to Jesus' time and the little village of Nazareth where he grew up. It's the Sabbath and Jesus – the hometown boy made good – is the preacher of the day. He is handed the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah and finds the place we call chapter 61.

In that passage the prophet envisions the Year of Jubilee described by the phrase, "*the year of the Lord's favor.*" Isaiah foretold that one-day – at a time of God's own choosing – all that Jubilee ever promised would occur.

- The poor would receive good news
- captives imprisoned by debt would be released
- the oppressed would be freed from bondage

All this would be accomplished, wrote the prophet, through One who was anointed by the Spirit of the Lord.

Jesus finished the reading, rolled up the scroll, and assumed the posture of a teacher. The congregation held its breath. What would this local boy turned celebrity preacher do with this text?

In Luke's Gospel, the very first word we hear Jesus utter (apart from the reading of Scripture, of course) is the word "*Today!*" "*Today,*" said Jesus, "*this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*"

All that the law of Jubilee ever promised to accomplish, the grace of Jesus Christ now delivers. Jesus is our Jubilee! In Jesus the slate is wiped clean. We affirm this every Sunday morning – "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven."

We need no longer to be controlled and manipulated by the past, because Christ opens up to us God's possibilities for our future.

- However poor your past decisions may have been, listen for the Good News of God's gracious decision about you
- However bound you have been to addictive behavior and destructive habits Jesus promises release from bondage
- However blind you may have been to God's purpose for life, He can open your eyes to see Jesus and to follow Him
- However oppressed you may be with past mistakes and failure, Jesus offers forgiveness and a new abundant life

Jubilee awaits you in Christ. He is the path of new beginnings. This is the way C. S. Lewis puts this.

“The more we get...‘ourselves’ out of the way, and let Christ take us over, the more fully ourselves we become...Our real selves are all waiting for us in Him.

It’s no good trying to ‘be myself’ without Christ. The more I resist Him and try to live on my own, the more I become dominated by my own heredity and natural desires...I am not, in my natural state, nearly so much of a person as I like to believe...

It is when I turn to Christ, when I give myself up to his personality that I begin at last to have a personality of my own.”  
(C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, “The New Man,” ¶ 13)

Christ gives you himself and with him *yourself* as well.

For like Jesus you, too, may taste a fresh bite in the New Wine of God’s Kingdom as you hoist the rugged weight of the cross Christ has given you to shoulder.

## **Jubilee At Last!**

During this year long celebration let the Hebrew ‘Year of Jubilee’ serve as your guide. Set it for yourself that your Fiftieth Anniversary will not be merely a celebration of your past, but will be a clearing of the decks for your future.

Claim as your own Paul’s healthy perspective to “*press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 3:14).

For Christ is our life and Christ our hope! He is Savior and Lord and Head of the church! He is preparing to start something big with you right now – even today!

*Through Jesus, it’s Jubilee at last!*

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