

Pastor T.C. Arnold
4th Sunday in Lent
Isaiah 49:8-13
March 31st, 2019

Leviticus 25 describes a year of celebration and deliverance called, “The Year of Jubilee.” The word “jubilee” – in Hebrew *ha-yobhel* – literally means, “ram’s horn”—is defined as the sabbatical year after seven cycles of seven years (49 years). The fiftieth year was to be a time of celebration and rejoicing for the Israelites. The ram’s horn was blown on the tenth day of the seventh month to start the fiftieth year of universal redemption.

The Year of the Jubilee involved a year of release from indebtedness and all types of bondage. All prisoners and captives were set free, all slaves were released, all debts were forgiven, and all property was returned to its original owners. In addition, all labor was to cease for one year, and those bound by labor contracts were released from them. One of the benefits of the Jubilee was that both the land and the people were able to rest. It’s like a complete exoneration – and this one is absolute and full and no one, neither the democrats nor President Trump argued about what it meant. The reason: they knew what it meant. It meant they were free.

The prophet Isaiah in the text appointed for this day, refers to the year of jubilee when he says, *“thus says the Lord: In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people...”* During the Year of Jubilee, God’s favor and forgiveness was demonstrated from neighbor to neighbor with the release of debt, from contracts, and the bonds of slavery. In Jubilee, for you and me today, God has released us from the debt of sin, forgiven His people from all unrighteousness, and given us an inheritance that comes through the one Isaiah is talking about... *“I will give you as a covenant to the people.”* That’s the promised Savior. That’s Jesus for you and for me.

The “Jubilee” presents a beautiful picture of the New Testament themes of redemption and forgiveness. Christ is the Redeemer who came to set free those who are slaves and prisoners to sin. The debt of sin we owe to God was paid on the cross as Jesus died on our behalf, and we are forgiven the debt forever. We are no longer in bondage, no longer slaves to sin, having been freed by Christ, and we can truly enter the rest God provides as we cease laboring to make ourselves acceptable to God by our own works. We can celebrate with exuberant hearts the joy that comes with God’s faithfulness and forgiveness.

This Sunday is unique in the midst of Lent. It’s called, “Laetare,” which means “rejoice.” What in the world are we doing by “rejoicing” right in the middle of this penitential season? The reason why we have an Old Testament text about the Year of Jubilee and a Gospel text about the joy of being filled by God when bellies are aching for sustenance, is because this is sort of the “Mardi gras” of the Lenten season. Next week, we begin what is called, “the Passion-tide.” Next week we start to get real serious about coming along side of Jesus in His sufferings and reflecting upon the sufferings we have caused Him in our sins. So, today is like a “little season” of rejoicing before the passion of Jesus becomes more prominent in our worship, our readings and our reflection.

They also serve as a reminder. It reminds us that what we will endure together, through these penitential days... through Holy Week... and the suffering and death of our Savior... will come to an end. For this reason, I want us to see what we go through in these next few weeks as a commentary on our lives. The reason: I know it reflects our ups and downs of life pretty well. For example, today, in the church year, we rejoice. We rejoice that God has set us free. That He has

come to forgive His beloved children. Today, we rejoice and we are feeling pretty good, perhaps. Today is a good day... today things aren't so bad.

But then your day or your week changes. You hear a bit of bad news... and maybe it's much more than just a bit. In a blink of an eye your day of rejoicing over freedom has become a day of sorrow over the bondage of pain that has unexpectedly been thrust upon you. Your days turn on a dime and you wonder what to do next. You wonder if you are going to sink in the middle of all the grief or if you are actually going to make it to the shore and once again find relief. The burdens of your nights and your days come on quickly and unexpectedly. You sometimes think, "This is it, I can't take it anymore. This is the big one. This will end me!" But it never does. And it won't.

Even when it's your own sins that are the cause. Oh, there are repercussions to your sins. They affect your families by hurting the ones you love. They may cause your wife or husband, your children or your parents to be thrust in the midst of that grief we just talked about and it might be you who causes it. Your sins that serve your selfish interests instead of the needs of your neighbor also harm you. We might not think so, because you are the only one who knows. But they come between you and your Lord when your thoughts, your words and your deeds are placed before your total devotion to God's Word – His law that He would have you keep for your own good and for the good of your neighbor. Life's more grievous moments have at its very root the fact that you live in a fallen world, that you are fallen people, and that you are the cause of the distress that befalls you. You might as well be honest about it, know the truth, and take responsibility. Repent and turn from your sinful ways.

Repent and Rejoice. Yes, in the middle of Lent, rejoice. Christianity without joy is a betrayal of the One we follow. You are a forgiven, redeemed people, who belong to the faithful flock on the way to heaven. You are a people with great joy even in the midst of hardship and struggle.

It takes a Christian to understand joy in the midst of hardship. It takes a Christian to realize there is gladness smack dab in the middle of Lent. It takes a Christian to know that Jesus loves you so very much even when troubles abound on every side. While this is true, I want you to know, that Christians know this joy, but it doesn't always mean we feel this joy – no matter what season it is. Here is where I would like to make a distinction for you.

There are times of joy – feeling joy. And, there are times of joy – receiving and having joy. One comes and goes all the time. When bad times are upon us, the feeling of joy is difficult to find. When days are good and happiness abounds, the feeling of joy comes easy. The feeling comes and goes. But that's not the kind of joy that lasts. That's not what true joy really is. Real joy is a gift and it comes to every person who has faith in the one true God – Jesus the Lord. Joy is more than a feeling – it's substance that penetrates into the lives of sinners and makes you into a new creation – a saint in the eyes of the Lord.

Laetare – rejoice! Joy comes to us right in the middle. We are slowly descending toward holy week. We've crested the hill and are making our way down to Jerusalem together. And although we remain firmly grounded in the midst of this penitential season, reflecting on the suffering of death of our Savior Jesus, joy still consumes our days and our nights. Perhaps not the feeling, but definitely the gift... Joy embodied. Joy which is Christ the Lord. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.