

April 13, 2008

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MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Jubilee

Call to Worship: We are living in the season of Easter as we explore the new life that is offered us in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jubilee is an ancient tradition of restoration. The sound of the shofar, blowing on a ram's horn, announced the beginning of the year of Jubilee. We will need our imaginations this morning as we explore a world that God envisions. It is a place of justice, a place of equity and a place of peace. Sound too good to be true? It is unless we rely completely on the goodness and power of Almighty God. The sound of the trumpet fanfare will begin our celebration this morning followed by our opening hymn. Christ is alive, we have been restored into God's grace; we are released from the past and step into the salvation story as the followers of Jesus Christ. Let the celebration begin! It is Jubilee, hear the trumpets and rejoice!

Two basic requirements for people of faith are a big heart and a great imagination. We cannot see before us that which we so deeply desire. God's reign surrounds us and we are partners in developing the Kingdom of God here on earth, but our work is clearly not yet done. We are a people who become easily distracted, so we need a great imagination to see as God sees so that we can live into the reality God holds before us. We need a big heart to allow God's love to overshadow our fear. In the words from the book, *The Little Prince*, "Here is my secret. It is very simple: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." We see with our mind's eye - our imagination - and our heart when it comes to the Kingdom of God. On this day, we will need to reach well beyond what we know of this life to imagine what God envisions for our lives.

In his book entitled, *The People Called*, author Paul D. Hanson writes that the ancient practice of Jubilee was "the time of God's restoring the condition of righteousness constituting the shalom (shalom) intended by God for all peoples." We hear of this restoration as we encounter the words of Leviticus Chapter 25. It is a long chapter, so I am only going to share a few verses, but I invite you to read this chapter and a companion to it in Isaiah 61 and allow the concept of Jubilee to become a part of your spiritual vocabulary. We encounter Jubilee in scripture, imagine it now in your heart and then imagine how we might begin to live it!

Hear these selected words from Leviticus 25.

"Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the Lord your God. I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years. The land must be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land. If one of your

countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; he is to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. Then he and his children are to be released....”

The crops have been harvested. There is more than enough food! There is enough to feed your household and all those who are connected with your household for a year. Rejoicing with your neighbors over the abundance, you hear the shofar! The sound of that horn signals the beginning of the year of Jubilee. Every 50th year ancient Israel was directed to honor Jubilee.

Injustices are set right, those who have been enslaved are freed, debts are cancelled and even the earth itself is allowed to become refreshed.

Again in the words of Paul Hanson, “The imprisoned were to be released. The family inheritances, which had been decimated by the unjust practices of the powerful, were to be reapportioned. After the exilic community had been given this lesson regarding their role in Yahweh’s drama, their attention was directed toward a description of God’s ongoing sustenance of his people.”

The scripture speaks of an ancient society that was agricultural in nature. Yet the essence of the concept of Jubilee continues to speak to us this day. We still need release. We still seek to be liberated. We are not seeking to be released from slavery, but we continue to allow ourselves to be bound by practices that restrict and diminish us. We who think we have control over our lives, we who go to great lengths to secure our present and our future, we who agonize, analyze, and align our lives with the concept of success presented to us in this culture are called to rely mind, body, heart and soul on our God. That trust is the foundation of Jubilee. All that is belongs to God. That means all the land, the water, the air, the creatures, the plants, and the planets belong to God. Our very lives belong to God. Awareness of our dependence on God grows as we become ever more faithful in our daily living. Liberation from that which continues to bind us is the hope of God in Jubilee and the gift of God in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are stewards, not owners of this world.

We are partners in creation, but we are creature, not controller.

We are created for living out God’s vision, not for going our own direction.

As the quotation on the front of the bulletin suggests, we are not called to live a life of faith by seeking God’s blessing, we are called to live a life of faith by living into that which God has already blessed.

Americans are in the top 8% of the world’s wealthiest people. If the entire population of this earth lived the way that we live, we would need four more planets to sustain humanity. Now I don’t know about you, but I am not interested in moving to Mars.

This planet is our home. The people of this planet are our extended family. Restoration, renewal, release, liberation and the dependence upon God are the themes of Jubilee.

Imagine – being liberated from the judgment. Imagine looking to God for direction. Imagine truly embracing the affirmation from God that you are loved beyond measure not for what you have or what you do, but just because you are a child of God. Imagine liberation.

Imagine – being reconciled to God in such a way that we would trust in God’s goodness. Imagine looking at the reality of life on this earth and seeing the multitude of ways God is blessing us. Release anger, resentment and disappointment for what has yet to be fully restored in the name of God. Imagine being an agent of reconciliation and hope in the name of Jesus Christ in our every encounter. Imagine hope.

Imagine – being released from the tyranny of consumerism. Imagine not adding to all the clutter that already consumes our lives. Imagine resisting shopping as our national pastime. Imagine what it would mean to stop the madness of accumulating and grow ever more committed to the process of distributing. What if we were to reorder our living based not on what we can afford, but rather on what we truly need? Imagine becoming a benefactor to the world in word and deed. Imagine stewardship.

Imagine – setting aside our bigotries and prejudice so that we begin to see all of humanity as worthy beings. Imagine being released by stereotypes and judgments that fracture relationships rather than encourage them. Imagine reconciliation.

Imagine – our fears being replaced with confidence, our anger with peace, our brokenness with wholeness. Imagine how we might reorder our living so that we would live out the values of our faith we profess. Imagine new life.

Imagine being liberated to live simply. Imagine the amount of food, energy and material we would stop wasting. Imagine releasing what we do not need so that another might benefit from it. Imagine gentling our footprint on the earth so that there will be resources for those who come after us.

According to Hanson, “Preceding and following our own participation in God’s drama was the ever present, all sufficient grace of the righteous, compassionate Deliverer. Through proclaiming the good news of divine forgiveness, through healing the sick, releasing those from bondage and freeing the oppressed, Jesus would inaugurate the Kingdom that would finally restore peace and justice on earth. The reign of shalom (shalom) envisaged by early Israel and kept alive by the prophets in the concept of Jubilee had begun with the ministry of Jesus. Jesus’ kingdom...brings into the world the redemptive power of God that has the effect of changing the quality of life in a fundamental way by healing all that is broken and restoring all that has fallen.”

Jubilee sets right injustice that has caused harm to others. Jubilee liberates those who have been enslaved. Jubilee restores our dependence upon God rather than humanity. Jubilee is essential to the salvation story and is brought to life in the ministry of Jesus and through the Resurrection. Because he lives, we are made new. Because he lives, we live in the kingdom that God has blessed and that kingdom becomes evident as we live our lives in Jubilee ways.

Last quote this morning from Hanson, "...thus the reality of God's reign still is an important reminder to the faithful that the unjust structures of this world are not to be tolerated as inevitable. Rather, to the extent that the community of faith allows itself to be drawn into the reality of God's alternate order of righteousness, it becomes an example of the future God intends for all creation. Believers should therefore pray daily that the Jubilee vision of a redeemed and healed creation might captivate the imagination of every community of faith leading to a deeper commitment to global harmony, justice, and peace throughout the world."

We have the heart for Jubilee. We need the imagination to allow the vision that God holds for reordering this world to become a reality.

I read an article once about a man who wanted to die with \$1.00 to his name. It was a familiar expectation to that of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley. What if we set our hearts to ending hunger, fighting the realities of poverty and focus on giving rather than hoarding? What if we sought wholeness rather than worldly success? How would we live differently? What changes would we make to our lives today?

Jubilee is so much more than just giving money away. It is setting right relationships that have been damaged. It is restoring life, reordering life, based on God's love for humanity. Jubilee creates the shalom community that Jesus preached, a place of peace and wholeness that the gospels describe. Jesus came to usher in that very reality.

Yesterday, I saw a man walking two dogs. A real dog lover would be able to tell you the breed, but I will just say that the dogs were not very big, but quite adorable. So, I am sitting at a stop light at Westfield Blvd. and Meridian Street. The man with the dogs is crossing the street and one of the dogs is pulling on the leash trying to get across the street as quickly as possible. The other dog was lagging behind and taking his sweet time in getting to the other side. The man was stuck in the middle trying to manage both animals.

We are the people of the Resurrection; we are the people called to lead. Jesus declared the community of Jubilee, he instructed us to live a righteous and just life. When it comes to stewardship, to justice, to hope, to living into the Kingdom of God, we are not the followers in this world, we are called to be the leaders. Shaped by the teachings of Jesus, we not only imagine Jubilee as reality, we live into it one step at a time. What step are you ready to take this day? Jubilee awaits!