

“Count off seven sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. 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; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan. Leviticus 25:8-10

In the name of the One who sets us free—Jesus Christ, our Lord, dear friends,

We think of the Liberty Bell as a symbol of our nation’s independence from England. Ironically, the Liberty Bell was originally cast in London, not in this country. The bell had been commissioned in 1751 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of William Penn’s Charter of Privileges, Pennsylvania’s original constitution. The leaders of Pennsylvania wanted to honor Penn for guaranteeing religious freedom and political liberty for all, including Native Americans. The leaders requested that the words of Leviticus 25:10, **“Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof,”** be inscribed on the bell. What a fitting tribute to Penn—a bell that proclaims liberty! And what a fitting choice for the inscription!

What was fitting back in 1751 is equally appropriate today. This Sunday is truly a Sunday for rejoicing and jubilation, for our Lord reigns over all and guarantees the most wonderful blessings to his people. So today we want to reflect on the words inscribed on the Liberty Bell. Not to honor the founder of Pennsylvania, but to honor the King of kings. To do this we will go back to the passage from Leviticus that is inscribed on the Liberty Bell. Those words remind us to:

SOUND THE TRUMPET OF JUBILEE!

- 1. Announce Atonement for All Iniquity, 8-9.**
- 2. Proclaim Liberty for Every Slave, 10a.**
- 3. Signal Restoration of Our Eternal Inheritance, 10b.**

How do you celebrate a Jubilee? How do you commemorate 50 years of blessings? In 2002, Queen Elizabeth celebrated her fiftieth year on the throne of England. One of the public observances was a concert on the lawn of Buckingham Palace, the first time the monarchy had opened the grounds to the public. And, in a symbolic gesture, Brian May, the drummer of the group *Queen* (believe it or not!), played the drums from the top of the palace throughout the concert.

How different was the beginning of the Jubilee celebration for the Lord’s Old Testament people. A musical instrument was involved. But where the instrument was sounded and how the celebration began was not what we would have anticipated. In fact, it seems to be a most unlikely setting for a jubilee celebration. The Lord, speaking through Moses, says **“Count off seven sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. 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.”**

Just before our text, the Lord gave the Israelites instructions for the “sabbath years” (or years of rest). Every seventh year the fields were not to be sown and the vineyards were not to be pruned. That year was to be **“a sabbath of solemn rest for the land,”** to quote the Lord. Then, as the Lord says here, God’s people were to have an even more special sabbath year—a year of Jubilee—every fiftieth year. They were to go through seven cycles of sabbath years, and at the end of those seven cycles (or after forty-nine years) there was to be what we might call a “Super Sabbath,”—the year of Jubilee.

What’s interesting is when the year of Jubilee was to start. Did you catch it? The priest was to **“cause the trumpet of Jubilee to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month.”** That may not mean much to you if you are not well-acquainted with the festivals of the Old Testament. The seventh month is Tishri on the Jewish calendar, roughly September-October on our calendar. And the tenth day of Tishri is the great Day of Atonement, the most solemn day of the entire year. (Today the Day of Atonement is called by its Jewish name, *Yom Kippur*.) That’s when the trumpet was to sound the beginning of the year of Jubilee—on the Day of Atonement.

Do you see how fitting that is? On the Day of Atonement the priests offered sacrifices that gave absolute release from all sins and uncleanness, known or unknown, both for the priests and all the people. Through the sacrifices of a bull for the priests and a goat for the people, everyone was “atoned,” that is, they were “at one with God” once more. Their iniquity was removed, and they were reconciled to the Lord. The debt of sin was gone. Peace with God was restored (cf. Lev. 16:1-34).

Isn’t that a fitting time to begin a year of jubilee or celebration—when we see with fresh eyes, almost as if for the first time, what God’s grace has done for us?

We today see that more clearly and feel that more fully than God’s Old Testament people did. After all, we know the One who has fully atoned for all sins of all time. Our Savior applied the Jubilee celebration to himself and his redeeming work in the sermon he preached in his hometown synagogue. In that service our Lord read the words of Isaiah 61:1-2, which speak about the Year of Jubilee in a spiritual or messianic context. When Jesus sat down to speak, he told the people, **“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:16-21)**. Jesus is the sacrifice of atonement, the One through whom all our sins are removed, the One in whom we are brought back to the loving arms of our Father. In Jesus, God himself announces atonement for all our sins.

Think about this for a moment. The trumpet has been blown, sounding God’s declaration that your sins have all been removed, that not one transgression still clings to you. Jesus’ redeeming love has atoned for them all. As you reflect on this, aren’t you amazed that no matter what ugly sins have been yours, you are now back in the arms of our loving God? That is the starting point of our jubilee celebration, the incomparable, undeserved love God has shown in offering Jesus as our sacrifice of atonement.

There is no better starting point for our church body's Jubilee celebration. Part of our Year of Jubilee is a special, year-long offering with a goal of gathering \$22.4 million dollars. That offering is important, because it will allow us to remove a debt that requires our synod to pay \$2.7 million dollars in interest and expenses each year—\$2.7 million each year that could be used better in debt *proclamation* than in debt *repayment*. Think of the new mission fields we could enter with an additional \$2.7 million a year—fields around the world where we could assure people that their debt of sin has been paid and their peace with God has been restored. Think of how many additional mission congregations we could establish with that money—missions in which we could assure the hurting and lost that in Jesus their sins have been paid for and God's just anger has been turned away.

You and I want others to know the peace and joy that are already ours in Jesus. We know what it's like to have the terrible burden of sin weighing so heavily upon our souls that it almost crushes us. We want people still weighed down by that burden to know that Jesus has taken away their guilt and paid their debt. And the special jubilee offering will help us share that joyous message of Jesus with people still under sin's terrible load.

The offering will also help us make the glorious announcement of the original jubilee celebration proclaimed: **“Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.”**

One of the great documents in our nation's history is the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. We already learn about that as kids in grade school. Try to imagine what that glorious proclamation meant to the millions who were literally enslaved in our country. Imagine the joy, the excitement, and yes, the feeling that this was too good to be true, when someone ran through the slaves' shanties on southern plantations and shouted, *“President Lincoln says we're free!”* Can you begin to grasp what that meant to people whose whole life, from their first breath to their last, was spent in absolute slavery? It was like a dream. It seemed too good to be true. Did they dare believe it? *“President Lincoln says we're free!”*

That's the proclamation that rings out in our text as well. **“Proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants.”** In the year of jubilee, not only were all debts forgiven, but each slave was set free. At times the children of Israel would sell themselves into slavery to their fellow Israelites. Perhaps they could no longer make a good enough living to provide for their loved ones. Maybe crop failures kept them from feeding and clothing their family. Whatever the reason, they could sell themselves into slavery for a price. And they belonged to their new owner as his indentured slave.

But that wasn't a “forever and ever” slavery, like the slavery that existed in our country since the first 20 slaves were brought to our shores in 1609. There was a time limit on the Israelites' slavery. The most it could ever be was 49 years. In the fiftieth year, the Year of Jubilee, the sounding of the trumpet was accompanied by an emancipation proclamation. Liberty was proclaimed throughout the land, and all the slaves were free.

Did you notice to whom liberty was proclaimed? The Lord said, “**Proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants.**” It wasn’t just the slave or the slave owner who was to hear this proclamation. All the land and all the inhabitants were to hear this joyous news, showing that this was not merely a social proclamation. It had spiritual implications as well, as did the forgiving of debt. The people of Israel could not hear the proclamation of liberty without realizing that their gracious God had freed all of them, slave and free alike.

We know, of course, the slavery from which we have been set free. Our Lord Jesus spoke about that to people much like us, people who insisted, “**We’ve never been slaves to anyone**” (John 8: 33). Jesus offered them and us a much-needed corrective when he said, “**I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin**” (8:34). As horrendous and degrading and dehumanizing as political or social slavery is, sin is the worst kind of slavery. The moment we turn from God and go against his will, Satan clamps unbreakable shackles on us and claims us as his own. We are *his*, his *slaves*, and there is nothing we can do to set ourselves free.

Do you remember how Paul speaks about the slavery of sin and Satan? He describes it at some length in Romans 7 as he talks about the internal struggle each of us faces. Paul, like us, knew the things he should do before God, and he wanted to do them. He also knew the things he shouldn’t do, and he didn’t want to do them. But what did he find? Exactly what we find when we’re living by our sinful nature and are then under the slavery of sin and Satan’s malignant control. The good we want to do, we just don’t do; and the evil we don’t want to do, that we do continually. Our slavery to sin shows itself every day in so many ways.

What a comforting message our Lord speaks to enslaved people. He proclaims liberty to all the inhabitants of the land. Jesus paid for our sins on the cross and has done away with Satan’s claims and accusations. He assures us that we have been set free! The shackles of sin have been busted open, the death-grip of Satan has been broken and our slavery has been brought to an end! The Lord says we’re free! Our God proclaims liberty to each of us, assuring us that in Jesus we have been set free. And we have the unshakable assurance that “**if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed**” (Jn 8:36).

Listen to the Lord’s emancipation proclamation: “*My Son has set you free! You are free from every sin, and Satan has no claim on you, nor can he now control you!*”

Doesn’t that make all the difference in our lives? Now we say with Paul, “**I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me**” (Gal 2:20). We now want our whole life to sound the jubilee, to proclaim the joy we know because our Lord has set us free from sin.

And we want to sound the trumpet of jubilee not only because of what we have been set free *from*, but because of what we have been set free *for*. “**It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan.**”

One of the interesting things about the Israelites families and their property is that they could never lose the land they had inherited! The children of Israel were allowed to lease and even sell to others the land they inherited in Palestine, just as they could sell themselves into slavery. But their land could only be sold for 49 years, at most. When the Year of Jubilee began, each person in Israel was to receive his inheritance land again. He could **“return to his family property,”** as the Lord puts it here. His inheritance was restored. The land was to belong to each family forever, even though they might forfeit the rights to that land for a while.

The picture of God’s ancient people receiving their inheritance again still speaks to us today. This is a picture of our spiritual inheritance, the land of promise, which the Lord has set aside for all who trust in him. Jesus spoke of this on a number of occasions. In the Sermon on the Mount he said, **“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Mt 5:5)**—“the earth” being not just a piece of property on this planet, but a special place in the Promised Land of heaven. And in the upper room, as he comforted his disciples, our Lord made that even more personal when he said, **“In my Father’s house are many rooms . . . I am going there to prepare a place for you . . . that you may be where I am” (Jn 14:2-3).**

What a glorious day that will be, when we enter the land of rest that Jesus has prepared for us! What a reason to celebrate, that our eternal inheritance has been set aside for us in the presence of our God! Can we hear about the heavenly land grant the Lord has reserved as ours forever and not want to sing and shout for joy?!

Instead of a Liberty Bell which proclaims our freedom from slavery, let our voices shout with jubilation. Let our voices ring out like a trumpet—a trumpet of jubilee that announces atonement for all iniquity and proclaims liberty for each slave to sin and signals restoration of our eternal inheritance. **SOUND THE TRUMPET OF JUBILEE** for all the blessings and salvation we have in Jesus! Amen.