

# Prepare the Way of the Lord!

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December 4, 2022

Second Sunday of Advent

## Scriptures: Matthew 3:1–8, 11 and Leviticus 25:1-14

**Mathew 3:1** In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

**Leviticus 25:1** The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: 2 Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. 3 Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; 4 but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard...

8 You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. 9 Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. 10 And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family...

14 When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another.

## Sermon

Each year, on the second Sunday of Advent the lectionary's gospel reading is always the introduction of John the Baptist. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all include a rather similar story about him as a necessary precursor of the cosmic importance of Jesus' entry into the world.

And of all the Advent/Christmas characters, John the Baptist is my personal favorite of all because, well... he's such a character! He's crazy, untamed, uncompromising and unbathed. He is far out side the mainstream and out of control! So unlike what civil society would expect as a messenger from God!

That is of course really only the case if one fails to pay much attention to the actual biblical texts - cause when you do pay close attention you will see that John the Baptist is not so unusual at all.

The scripture passages from this Sunday's lectionary, which also includes Psalm 72 and Isaiah 11 got me thinking about what is called the "Year of Jubilee."

What is the year of Jubilee you might say?

The year of Jubilee instructions found in Leviticus 25. Now there are 55 verses in Leviticus 25 and they go into great detail on just exactly how the Jubilee year was to be conducted. Far too many details for me to deal with this morning, so I mostly gave you a few introductory verses.

The book of Leviticus contains the religious, social and political "rules" that Moses had given to the children of Israel, God's people, those rescued from slavery in Egypt as they traveled through the desert before they entered into the land that God had promised.

But the actual final codified edition that we now have as part of our Old Testament wasn't likely completed until the nearly 100 year exile of Jews in Babylon in the 5th century BCE. A time, coincidentally not too long after the prophet, Isaiah of Jerusalem, was actively warning the people of Jerusalem about their coming destruction. And only a "stump" would remain after Israel's defeat.

The cause of the catastrophe was, according to Isaiah, their failure to follow God's laws, primarily those laws that demanded justice for the poor!

The Year of Jubilee was to be observed every 50 years, or the year after the accumulation of seven rotations of sabbatical years which occurred, as we read, every seven years.

Now there were several reasons, politically, spiritually and socially for letting fields go fallow every seven years. As a college trained agriculturalist, I can scientifically vouch for the fact that regularly fallowing of crop land does make it more productive. As a pastor I can also attest to the incredible value of regular work sabbaticals and the importance for us all to balance rest and work.

But really the main reason was that God's people would be less likely to get "too big for their britches" with a regular reminder that not only was it actually God's land but it was also God who controlled both the weather and the seasons and even the land's productivity. Therefore, society's prosperity was based upon God's generous provision - "It's God, fool, who gives us what we need, so show some respect!"

And so, on the tenth day of the seventh month, which is the "day of atonement," a trumpet (or actually a ram's horn) sounded throughout the land.

And at that very moment several seismic social shifts would occur. Liberty was proclaimed, specifically all monetary debts were wiped out, slaves were emancipated, the jails were emptied and any land that had been sold during that 49 year period was returned to the previous owners.

Something, I guess, to really look forward to, wouldn't your say - maybe even better than Christmas?

God can and will miraculously supply us with all we need. However, by giving the Israelites such specific Jubilee instructions, it would appear that God must also be quite interested in actual social structures and organizing them in a way that God's faithful people met the needs of all.

In the agrarian society of ancient Israel there were many reasons for accumulating large debts, such as bad weather, diseases, and the death or disability of the primary bread winner.

Unfortunately, there were far fewer good options for getting out of these potentially crippling debts. Herds, land, and one's own labor would have been the only forms of collateral available to most families.

And creditors could easily throw a debtor into prison. The debtor's only recourse would have been to sell their herds, or property, or themselves and their family into slavery to satisfy their creditors.

The jails were overwhelming filled with debtors hence the rationale for the Jubilee release of prisoners and the emancipation of slaves (or in this case, indentured servants).

It is of course not at all clear from historical record just how closely these rules were actually followed in ancient Israel. But it does appear that Jesus throughout the gospels does refer often to many specific instructions concerning the Jubilee. So, it's safe to say he was likely a proponent of it.

For instance, consider this same John from our earlier reading. When he got thrown into jail for insulting Herod, his emissaries came to Jesus pressing him to again confirm if indeed he was the Messiah that John had actually proclaimed.

Jesus answered by telling them to simply look at what he was doing – causing the blind see, the lame walk, captives to be free, prisoners to be released, and the poor having good news proclaimed to them. It all sounds like a Year of Jubilee to me!

Of course, the Jubilee laws of Leviticus 25 make little practical sense in our world of global commerce, given the electronic movement of capital and the ways in which human labor is forced to relocate.

But, I would like to think that some of the principles, some of those things that makes the Year of Jubilee really "good news" for the majority of the world's inhabitants can still apply.

The biggest take-away, I think, of what the Jubilee rules were trying to accomplish was to strictly limit the potential for extreme disparities between the poor and the wealthy.

While Jubilee did allow for the accumulation of personal wealth, it set a very real limit on the accumulation of generational wealth.

And the same would have been true regarding poverty. Yes, there would be folks who for a variety of reasons might fall into poverty. But the Year of Jubilee held forth the promise of future release, since neither debt nor poverty would become generational.

The debtors' prisons were to be emptied, the indentured set free, and land, the main source of income and self-sufficiency, were to be returned on a regular generational pattern.

Both debtor and creditor, both the wealthy and the poor alike, would get at least a "once in a lifetime" shot at a new beginning.

Considering the current disparities of wealth that we experience in our world - where the wealthiest need to shoot themselves into outer space because they've seemingly run out of stuff to spend their money on down here on earth - and where millions of children die of hunger and preventable diseases, maybe some limits to wealth accumulation would be a good thing?

We also know far too well that with increased wealth accumulation comes the ability to accumulate more power. You know, the "Golden Rule" - those with the gold make the rules!

This morning's Advent focus is on "Preparing the way" for Jesus' arrival.

John calls us first to "repent," to give up the lies that we are willing to live with. We are not self-sufficient but interconnected. Admit it when we've gone wrong and make true efforts to rebuild what we have helped to break. And to remind ourselves, once again, of our dependence upon God's love and forgiveness.

All of which is the similar challenge of the Jewish day of Atonement. To own our failures and then seeking to restore, or "atone" for that which has become messed up.

Atonement is all about restoration. Restoring both our broken relationships with each other and especially with God as well.

God is involved with a great restoration project and Christmas is smack dab in the center of it. But in a world where power holds sway, Jesus is a different kind of judge. And we are called, once again, to prepare the way for this new kind of ruler who truly seeks the welfare of the poor.

Last week the focus seemed a bit more on us as individuals and truly accepting God's promise that our restoration is happening.

This morning our scriptures still give God all the credit for coming to our aid, but it's also interesting how the modus of this salvation is animated by others in society.

There seems to be a demand for a new kind of leader, who truly hungers for true justice.

Judges for instance (from the Supreme Court all the way down to FC municipal court) who seek righteousness and provide true justice to the poor. A demand for a new society where wealth and power are shared. A new humanity that can repent of the damage we have wrought, by taking action to repair God's good creation. The formation of a new legacy that we can pass onto the next generation.

We long for that great Day of the Lord's Jubilee and we can also work to build it - a place and time where righteousness will flourish, justice will abound and peace will become the default setting!

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