

# The Year of Jubilee

Joel 2:23-32; Luke 21: 1-4

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I had the pleasure of taking a hike in the Wilton Woods on Friday. It was my very first time there! I needed an experience of **forest bathing**. Forest bathing, or *shinrin-yoku*, is a Japanese form of nature therapy that originated in the early 1980s, which aims to bring healing through connection to nature and trees. The practice is said to enhance well-being, reduce stress and restore calm. From my vantage point, I needed to be in the forest to experience the fullness and abundance of God's presence and bounty.

I went on that hike right after I had received word from a relative that could potentially have a substantial negative financial impact on my nuclear family. And interestingly, I received that email letter, right as I was preparing for this sermon on the topic of God's vast abundance. I had to laugh! (Once again, God has a funny way of getting me to experience the words I am preparing to preach. It happens all of the time.)

You may or may not know this, but this is the year (2019) of Jubilee! The Year of Jubilee is the year of Freedom. In the Jewish calendar, dating back to ancient times, God had commanded the Israelites (as recorded in Leviticus 25:11) that the fiftieth year should be celebrated as the Year of Jubilee. It is set after counting off "seven Sabbath years" or after every 49 years. This year, 2019, is the Jubilee year. It was/is a celebratory time in society when debts were cancelled, slaves were suddenly free, those who had wronged others were forgiven, land was returned to its original ownership, and even the land lay fallow for rest and replenishment. It was/is a time to celebrate God's abundance for all people! The idea comes out of the abundance of God being experienced as an overflow in the here and now.

The Greek Orthodox Church has a great saying that right now in heaven there is a fabulous party going on. The table is laden with food, the best drinks are flowing, the saints are swinging from the chandeliers, shouting hallelujah! And every now and then the heavenly floor opens up and crashes into ordinary time and space, and we call that Sunday morning! It's the heavenly banquet that crashes down...it's the Jubilee year and all are forgiven, all are freed, and all are included. (as told by Tom Long).

The children of Israel certainly needed to hear that message loud and clear. The prophet Joel wrote his words to the people in response to an ecological disaster, a plague of locusts that exceeded their regular breeding and feeding cycles. You can just imagine; everything was at risk. Food resources were being devoured and there was a mass sense of panic over their well-being.

In verses 25-27 of chapter 2, Joel makes it clear that God's promised abundance is still on the way. Eating, praise, and satisfaction are all promises of the wonders to come, as is the twice repeated promise that "my people shall never again be put to shame" (verses 26, 27). The foolishness of faith will be repaid by God's generous provision and, more importantly, by God's presence in the midst of God's people.

But, even in our day, we often have to be constantly reminded of that truth, don't we? In an era like ours and in a culture hallmarked by a fear of scarcity, and financial insecurity, it is difficult to live lives that are unstinting and free of anxiety about the future. We create ceaseless activity as a result of our anxiety, and we fear that whatever little security we have, whatever joys and satisfaction that we cling to may be snatched away in an instant. Many of us live, waiting for the proverbial "other shoe to drop."

A seminary colleague, Rev. Dr. Scott Johnston, is the current pastor at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. He started there in 2008. You remember back in 2008, the world financial markets crashed. Like everyone else, Scott felt it in his congregation, many of whom are Wall street. Their congregation, was really on edge, and not only that but the congregation had just taken on a huge mortgage to build an educational and outreach facility. The officers of the church were panicked. One meeting after the next, you can only imagine. Each meeting, would end with the nervous church officers saying..."Ok I think we've got it, as long as another shoe doesn't drop!" But as we all remember, another shoe would inevitably drop.

Scott says, "I was doing ok with it. Calming them down. But one afternoon, I lost it. I was in my office all by myself, and I got afraid that we weren't going to make it. That my leadership was not going to be enough." And he said, "I put my head down on my desk, and I prayed and the spontaneous prayer that came out of my mouth was, 'O God, please...no more shoes!' No sooner had I uttered it," he said, "but there was a knock on the door. It was the custodian saying, 'Dr. Johnston, I think you'd better come down right now to the overnight shelter.'" (They have a little overnight shelter for homeless people). So, he went down to the shelter and there standing in the doorway were two uniformed NY City police officers. Johnston says, "And I thought, 'Oh no, now what?'" And one of them said, 'Pastor, we have just raided an illegal factory in Brooklyn. They were making counterfeit Timberland boots. **We've got 700 pairs of shoes here!** '"

He said, "I didn't know whether to laugh or cry!" This God of abundance....it's the Jubilee year!!

Nevertheless, believers can and do live freely, hopefully, and generously because we know a secret: the God of abundance has promised to care for us at the "hungry feast" until our longings -- and those of the world -- are fully and forever satisfied~~And sometimes the gifts may come in surprising ways and from unexpected sources.

Think of the widow whom John read about this morning. She had what many in our society and hers would consider as nothing, and yet her heart recognized God's abundance, and she gave accordingly.

Over the last decades, the church across the board has been in decline~~that's mainline, catholic and even evangelicals. Those who are unaffiliated are on the rise as a result of scandal and disillusionment in many cases. People want authenticity. Additionally, the founding generation of many organizations is dying off and younger givers don't have the same way or means of giving. It's putting many churches and other organizations to the test, including ours.

Organizational strategists have had to adopt the idea of "Change or die", as the phrase goes. But that concept is not new to "church". We are a community of believers who knows that life comes out of death, and that indeed, old things must die, for resurrection to occur. Those in church leadership have been telling those who will listen that God has been tearing down what was in order to raise up something new.

We are reminded that we are guided by God, who will lead us, and who has always led us. We're not the powerful church...we serve a powerful God! A God of ABUNDANCE, who has proven that time and time again. The church is not in fear of extinction...but what it will look like in the coming decades will be different!

We cannot do everything, but we can do what we can do. And we celebrate that! We celebrate that God has called us to this campus to serve alongside our Episcopal neighbors; we celebrate significant ministries we have had in the past: years of going to Mission to the Eastward in Maine, house building in Nicaragua, and money sent to build a manse and school in Kenya; ABC houses and Wilton Commons, senior affordable housing here in Wilton. Ministries in which we are currently engaged: Homefront and Midnight Run, Open Doors Shelter, Wilton Youth Council, Rise Against Hunger, Abilis, a partnership with interfaith friends, and with Grace Baptist Church in Norwalk; significant church school and youth ministries, faith formation for all ages, a spiritually stirring music ministry, pastoral care given by staff and deacons...and next week, a ministry to aid the mental health of people in our region through our Day of Recovery and Wellness.

WHAT ELSE DO WE CELEBRATE???

So even in the midst of life, when everything around us in the physical world tells us that there is not enough; that we will not be ok; that we are not ok, God comes to remind us time and time again that, God is good! God is faithful, still! And it's time to celebrate that!

Today we will mark that celebration together at our feast following worship, the abundance of God's goodness in our lives as a community. We'll celebrate our community for the coming year, knit together, in Faith, in Love and in Action.

You know, after my walk, yesterday in Wilton Woods, I came home and promptly filled out my pledge card for the coming year. It was my way of saying to God, "Thank you, God, for your faithfulness. I trust in your continuing goodness and abundance!"

Let us celebrate God's abundance in this year of Jubilee, as we look toward our future together!