

# *Proclaim Jubilee*

Peter JB Carman, January 24, 2010, Binkley Baptist Church  
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21

## I.

What are you and I waiting for? What do we hold sacred? How do we picture God—how do we name the unnameable?? And where do we get our pictures and our words from? This past Wednesday evening, a conversation with a group of Binkley members and friends reminded me of how children imagine God! \*

When I was first studying for the ministry, I worked at a Baptist Church in Wallingford, Connecticut, a church that was pretty conservative-looking from the outside, but prone to occasional surprises. One day the pastor, Walt, asked the congregation how they pictured God. Then he grabbed two pictures from a Sunday school class, where the children had responded to the same question. They were done by some of the youngest Wallingfordians there—children from the first and second grade. One was a picture of a female stick figure—complete with triangular dress and long hairs pointing everywhere. “This is how one of us sees God,” he declared—. The congregation laughed good-naturedly, with that tone of “Isn’t that cute”. “She’s right, isn’t she?” He continued matter of factly. “God is just as much female as male, after all. Since we know we are all in the image of God, both female and male!” And then he picked up a second piece of paper—with a swirl of crayon of every color all over the place—bright and dark and chaotic. “I wasn’t sure what this was,” he said, “so I had to ask. It’s a storm.”

I don’t know about you, but my own childhood experience with God started with asking my mother and father questions. Like the adults and children recorded in the passage we read from Nehemiah—people in that case who had lost touch with their religious tradition—all of us need to be taught some basic things, need to be reminded of what we have forgotten. But not all of the learning comes from people or books. Some things we know deep within our bones. Some things we remember. At the age of four, I remember this: I am alone in my parents’ bedroom, leaning up against their bed. My mother comes in and says, “Peter, what are you doing?” I say something vague about “remembering”. “Aren’t you lonely?” she asks warmly. Startled (I have not yet discovered “lonely”) I say “No”. She smiles. Her smile is caught like a photograph in my mind. But preserved forever next to that picture is the recollection of what I am actually doing in their room at that moment. I am remembering the place I came from, the One from whom I came, before I was born: remembering light and love—no face but a Presence, a power, a unity, indescribable.

We need to be reminded sometimes of the One from whom we come, the one who made us each and every one in the divine image, the one who sends us forth into this world to do good, to rejoice in living, to love mercy and justice and to practice the work of Love. We need to come full circle, to start over.

## II.

In the time of Jesus, his people, captive to foreign occupiers, losing their lands, sold into slavery or simply left to get by as best they could, still remembered. They remembered—but they needed to be reminded of an ancient tradition, the tradition of the sabbatical year and the jubilee year. In their tradition, you couldn’t just take land—or property in payment of debt. In that biblical tradition, every seventh year was a year of partial restoration. But every time there were seven times seven years, there was to be another, a jubilee year. In the jubilee year, slaves were to be set free, land returned to its original rightful owners, the earth allowed to

go back to its rightful order. Relationships were to be restored—captives liberated. The oppressed were to be released from their suffering. And every one was supposed to do this! A year of Jubilee.

When Jesus showed up at Galilee to read from the various Jubilee portions of the book of Isaiah and to give some commentary, he said “Today this has been fulfilled...”. He was reminding the people of his home town of Nazareth of this sacred tradition of a cycle of liberation and restoration, of debt forgiveness and national healing. And he was making the bold claim that it was starting to happen right then and there. He was reminding them of an ancient promise—a revolutionary tradition. And he was also saying “Right here, right now.” The tendency of Christians over the thousands of years since has been to spiritualize away that economic justice proclamation! But there is no indication in any text that Jesus had any desire to liberate spirits while leaving bodies in bondage- nor that he was limiting good news to some spiritual process. He had come to fulfill the promise of a year of Jubilee. He was announcing a time of restoration and debt forgiveness and renewal. Right then and there.

Interesting, isn't it, that the version of the Lord's Prayer in Luke says simply “Forgive us our sins as we have forgiven the *indebtedness* of others. Matthew puts it more bluntly—“Forgive us our *debts* as *we forgive our debtors*.” In Jesus' time people were losing their homes, their livelihoods and their liberty because of debts. So when he called for forgiveness Jesus wasn't just telling people to be nice. It had some hard cash edge to it. It had Jubilee in it.

Our nation could use some of that Jubilee tradition about now—as could the world. We read of huge stockpiles of money for bonuses for bankers—enough easily to more than fund debt forgiveness or at least alleviation for all the small homeowners in danger of being buried in hard times by a cash shortage.

Some years ago, just about the time of the new millenium, church leaders around the world asked that governments and lenders consider Jubilee—why not start a new era with real and generous debt forgiveness on the international level as a serious tool for bringing the world together on more level ground? Their pleas, in retrospect, were drowned out and effectively sidelined by the grief, anger and economic uncertainty around the bombing of the World Trade Center, and by the subsequent rush to war. Suddenly we didn't hear so much about Jubilee any more. And yet nine years later, in these very different times, wouldn't it be appropriate for us to ask at least a little closer to home that banks be only as well treated as they treat their own debtors?

The banks messed up—and the governments of many lands rightly took steps over the last two years to help them recover. But now as soaring profits in banks stand in sad tension with the jobless rate, the state of small businesses and the personal bankruptcy rate, we have good reasons for asking for a taste of that Jubilee right here and right now. Forgive them their debts as they forgive the debts of those they hold by the throat. Hold them to a reasonable rate of interest. Regulate their outrageous fees back into reality.

### III.

How do you picture God? What is the story you remember? What do you hold most holy? Long long ago, in the time of Nehemiah, after a prolonged terrible exile, a people came home to their native land, to their capital city, to rebuild and proclaim. Their sacred Law was read aloud to them. When they heard the ancient words, the Torah they had almost forgotten, the story of their ancestors set free from Pharaoh and from their bondage in Egypt, they wept. When they heard about justice and mercy, they wept. But their leaders said in effect, “Do not weep. Go have a feast, and share what you have with those who haven't got. Make sure everybody can join the party. You have plenty. This is a joyful day of celebrating, of remembering the One

from whom you came and to whom we all return. Rejoice, and celebrate, you and your neighbors—all of you rich and poor alike!

In such a time as this, it is time for the Church to start remembering, with deepest memory, who we are and whose we are. It is time to come home, with a mix of tears and jubilation. It is time to remember, in our souls, the compassionate and liberating spirit of Jesus. It is time to go back to the old old stories, of a Being who set a people free: a fiery pillar, a gentle wind who has brought people home, not once but again and again. It is time to come home to the best of what we are, and not the worst. It is time to get creative about these things, recognizing that when we come home after a long time away, things can never be the same, and we are making a fresh beginning, a new beginning in the middle of the story.

What will it take for us to remember sufficiently to proclaim Jubilee once more? What will it take to convince us to confront the powers that be and insist on decent wages for all, decent jobs, affordable health care and decent hours and working conditions? And what will it take to insist, like Jesus, that the promise is not limited to citizens of one nation, nor the privileged of any nation, but belongs to all?

At some point it gets off the high plain of abstraction and generality, and it comes down to you and me. Sometime in the course of each our lives comes a moment when the story needs to be told, when the scroll needs to be read, as Ezra and Nehemiah read it in Jerusalem, and as Jesus read it in the synagogue in Nazareth. Over and over again we will find ourselves in situations in which the story of liberation, of Jubilee, has been all but forgotten, the story that is, of sacred mercy and redeeming love, the story of return from exile. And in that moment, with some neighbor or neighbors, we will find it is our time to tell it, our time to remember out loud who God has been to the dispossessed and to us, and what it means to come back home. In such a moment it takes courage to speak. It takes courage to act.

*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,  
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;  
Thou Who hast by thy might, led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path we pray....\*\**

Right here, and right now. Proclaim Jubilee.

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*\*Robert Coles has a great book entitled *The Spiritual Life of Children* (1990) on this subject with lots of interviews of young children from a variety of faith traditions about their imaginings of the holy. Frankly the children's pictures he includes are for me what make it the best.*

*\*\* Quoted from *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, by James Weldon Johnson*