

“Ring Those Bells!”
Leviticus 25:8-24; Luke 4:16-21
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While studying for my sermon, I was surprised to learn how other than a couple of references to the gold bells attached to the hem of Aaron’s robe to alert people whenever he was entering or leaving the Holy of Holies, or to small bells being affixed to the harness of horses for mere ornamentation, bells are rarely mentioned in the Bible. Rather, the church bell is a peculiarly Christian institution- it is said to have been introduced by Bishop Paulinus of Nola in Campania who lived about the end of the 4th century. Nowadays, the purpose of church bells are commonly used to toll the beginning of worship, celebrate weddings, or to announce the death of one of its members. They tend to be a relic of an earlier age, at a time when the church was the central gathering place of a community’s social and religious life, but for the most part, modern churches rarely employ them anymore.

But communities also used to say goodbye to the old year and welcome the new one by ringing bells, often in churches. Alfred, Lord Tennyson referenced the custom in his famous poem “In Memoriam,” an elegy written after the sudden death of his dear friend Arthur Hallam in 1833. The second stanza from the section known as “Ring out, wild bells” goes:

*Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow;
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.*

Decades before revelers started flocking to Times Square to watch the ball drop, a tradition I participated in on New Year’s Eve of 1971, they congregated farther downtown at Wall Street’s Trinity Church. There they rang in the New Year with a concert put on by the church’s official bell ringer, James Ayliffe. As the *New York Herald* reported in 1860, “there floated from the high church tower the stirring music of eight bells chiming in changes and making the air redolent with harmony. This was followed by ‘Hail Columbia,’ ‘Yankee Doodle’ and some sweet selections from ‘La Fille du Regiment.’” According to Trinity Church’s archives, the earliest mention of the tradition is from the minutes of an 1801 meeting where parishioners allotted eight pounds “to the Persons who rang the Bells in New Years day.”

Similarly, when I served as minister in Waterloo, Iowa, our church had a carillon that contained fourteen large bells, and every Friday at noon, our music director would put on a concert for the entire community with people coming from all over to hear them. More than an advertisement promoting the presence of Old First in Downtown Waterloo, their peal would extend throughout the whole region proclaiming the “good news” of Jesus Christ. And when there WASN’T a concert scheduled, people would inevitably call the church wondering “WHY? WHERE IS THE MUSIC?”

Here in Pennsylvania, we find ourselves privileged to have the MOST FAMOUS BELL IN AMERICA if not THE WORLD, one which for the past two hundred and fifty years has been tied to our struggle for independence- the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. This bell has an interesting history. The Pennsylvania Assembly ordered it made in 1751 to commemorate the

50-year anniversary of William Penn's 1701 Charter of Privileges- Pennsylvania's original constitution, a charter that speaks of the rights and freedoms valued by people the world over. Penn's ideas were particularly progressive on matters of religious freedom, on Native American rights, and his inclusion of citizens in enacting laws. Thus, the very idea of the bell was conceived to herald the significance of human rights and increased justice for one another.

The bell was cast in London and arrived in Philadelphia the following year. However, upon being hung in the steeple of what we've come to regard as "Independence Hall," it cracked on its first toll. It was subsequently melted down and recast, but then nobody liked the sound of the new bell. Therefore, it was melted down and recast a THIRD time. Upon reinstallation, it was rung to call the Assembly together and to summon people for special announcements and events such as when Benjamin Franklin was sent to England to address Colonial grievances, to announce the ascension of King George III to the throne in 1761, and to call together the people of Philadelphia to discuss the Sugar Act in 1764 and the Stamp Act in 1765. However, it didn't achieve its ICONIC status until July 8, 1776 when it rang out to summon Philadelphians to hear the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence by Colonel John Nixon. After the city fell to the British in 1777, the bell—all two thousand pounds of it—was removed from the steeple and hidden under the floorboards of the Zion Reformed Church in Allentown for fear that it would be melted down and used by them to make cannons.

The bell, which was simply called the "State House bell," was given the new name the "Liberty Bell" by abolitionists in the 19th century who adopted the bell as a symbol for their movement. And how appropriate as the bell's huge crack, which appeared on Washington's birthday in 1846, represented the fissure or divide that existed in this country over the issue of slavery. The motto on the bell, "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof," was a direct quote from our Old Testament lesson, Leviticus 25:10: "And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and *proclaim liberty throughout all the Land unto all the inhabitants thereof*" with the following line reading, "It shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family." The abolitionists understood this passage to mean that the Bible demanded all slaves and prisoners be freed every fifty years. After the Civil War ended, Americans needed a symbol of unity- the flag was certainly one such symbol and the Liberty Bell was another. To help heal the wounds of the war, the bell would travel all across the country, "proclaiming liberty" literally "throughout the land" and inspiring the cause of freedom.

The Abolitionists were certainly correct in their interpretation of Leviticus 25- the Old Testament DID demand freedom of the slaves and MORE. In it, God demanded that every fifty years, all land was to return to the original owners without compensation. As you know, Israel was an agricultural society and land was the most valuable capital one could own. When they first came into Canaan, in the interests of fairness, it had been divided more or less equally among all the tribes and families. This was to be God's inheritance to them forever. However, over time, some landowners would die or become handicapped or due to poor harvests have to surrender their property and go work for someone else. In order to CORRECT such disadvantages for fear they would eventually lead to INCREASINGLY GREATER disparities in wealth among them, God declared that the land would once again be equalized. What they had lost would be restored to them, and this was to be done every fifty years. As verse 23 reads, "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me." In other words, God, NOT THE JEWS THEMSELVES owns the land!

God permits his people to sojourn on his good earth, to cultivate it, to eat its produce, and to enjoy its beauty, but STILL it is never the ultimate possession of the farmer but of GOD ALONE. The Israelites are MERE STEWARDS over it and nothing more.

You see, in Old Testament times, land could be bought or sold, but the buyer actually purchased a specific number of harvests and NOT THE LAND ITSELF. And woe to anyone who would try to make a huge profit at the other's expense rather than settling for a just price. As it says, "If the years are many you shall increase the price, and if the years are few you shall diminish the price, for it is the number of the crops that he is selling to you. You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the LORD your God.(vv.16-17) Here God was prescribing for his people a system of institutionalized justice where the poor were to receive back what was originally due them. This was not charity but their RIGHT. Thus, we see how God requires radically transformed economic relationships among his people. Sin has not only alienated us from God but from each other and our relationships to each other and this includes all our economic and social relations AS WELL. God is showing them that his NEW community rests on entirely different principles. The life they would live under him would point to and reflect his COMING kingdom- a kingdom characterized by loving and peaceful relations within an environment of real social and economic justice. THAT, for God, was what REAL freedom was all about.

However, this peace and reconciliation with our brothers and sisters could not occur without there being PEACE AND RECONCILIATION WITH GOD, FIRST. Verse nine of our text says that the blowing of the trumpet announcing the beginning of the year of Jubilee would take place on the Day of Atonement, that is, on the holiest day on the Jewish calendar- the day the Israelites would gather at their Holy Temple to offer up their sacrifices and confess their sins to God. Thus, before there could occur a transformation in all other relationships, "atonement" or "reconciliation with God" had to be made PRIOR.

This notion of social and economic fairness and justice was carried into the New Testament and JESUS' concept of the coming kingdom where he borrows extensively from this notion of the jubilee year. This is clearly evidenced in our New Testament lesson from Luke 4- Jesus' very first sermon, one in which he lays out the broad themes of his emerging ministry. Visiting the synagogue he was raised in, he is accorded the high honor of being the preacher of the day. For his text, he chooses to read the first two verses of Isaiah, chapter 61:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

After concluding his reading, he rolls up the scroll and then sits down to provide the Midrash (or commentary) on it as was the tradition of the rabbis. In his message, the first thing he says is that he has come to preach good news to the poor. However, the "poor" to whom he refers is more than just the "poor in spirit," that is, those who remain humble and contrite before God. It ALSO refers to those who have NOTHING, to persons who are ECONOMICALLY AND MATERIALLY NEEDY AND DOWNTRODDEN. Jesus' message of good news to the

poor was a reference to the Old Testament practice of jubilee in which all the debts of God's people and all those who had become slaves due to their debts were forgiven every fifty years so that they could begin life over with a clean slate. This is the meaning of "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" which we recite every week in the Lord's Prayer- a plea for God to wipe away our indebtedness to him, even as we forgive those who owe US.

Continuing, Jesus says that he has also come to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. You see, Jesus is first and foremost a "liberator," the "new Moses" who has taken his people from out of the land of bondage and is NOW on his way to the PROMISED LAND. From the very beginning, he had been anointed by God to set persons "FREE"- FREE from themselves and their habits, FREE from the sin that bound them, and FREE from societal structures and institutions that oppressed them. But this liberation goes well beyond PERSONAL freedom to the tearing down of those STRUCTURES and INSTITUTIONS which REINFORCE social injustice and CONTINUE to imprison them. His ministry is an event that calls for the restructuring of both our INNER being and our OUTER relations.

Hence, Jesus' first sermon is nothing less than a call for a MORAL and SPIRITUAL and SOCIAL and ECONOMIC and POLITICAL reordering of their and our lives, a restructuring or reordering that was not intended to begin once we were safely in heaven but to begin NOW. This is what it means when he says that he has been sent to proclaim "the acceptable year of the Lord," that it had ALREADY arrived in and through his person and his ministry. Thus, the world is introduced here to the most basic, most fundamental principles of his kingdom- call it "the Magna Carta of the Church" if you will! It is a vision of a new order for God's people, one that the religious and political leaders of his day would find to be SO radical, SO threatening to their OWN privileged position, that these two great enemies, who had nothing but contempt FOR EACH OTHER, would for a period of time forget their deep enmities and join forces in putting him TO DEATH for it.

THIS was the original meaning of the verse inscribed upon the Liberty Bell- to "proclaim liberty throughout the land." You could say it served as our country's first new creed. It essentially said that for America to become a great nation, she needed to always observe that which was best summed up in the words of the prophet Micah, "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."(6:8) The tolling of the Liberty Bell was intended to be so much more than an instrument for summoning people to assemble or announcing important events, it was intended to be a reminder that this young nation could only be blessed insofar as it lived up to the ideals represented by that verse, as it embodied the principles inscribed upon that bell.

Similarly, whenever you hear the tolling of a church bell—such as the bell that tolls at the Deer Creek church each week just prior to our Sunday service--let it remind you that it is much more than just a summons for everyone to gather for worship. Like the Liberty Bell, may you think of it first and foremost as a SUMMONS, a clarion call, to CHRISTIAN LIBERTY. May it remind us that like Christ, WE TOO bear the commission to declare the love of God in a loveless world- EVERYONE of us; that like him it is OUR responsibility TOO to offer comfort to those crushed and broken by life's hardship; that like our Lord, WE TOO are to help open people's eyes to those who grope around in doubt and darkness, unaware of their own true situation; that like Jesus, WE TOO are to help restore the fortunes and dignity of poor and oppressed persons

everywhere; and that like him, WE ARE ALSO to announce that this act of liberation is taking place NOW and in our OWN midst. The church can only be strong to the extent that she TOO lives up to the ideals and principles embedded in those verses. Ultimately, the church isn't going to grow its numbers by simply resorting to aggressive advertising campaigns or creating new and more entertaining programs and worship services, but when WE begin to embrace the same love and concerns for his world that GOD has- a love and concern that extends to ALL PERSONS who feel MARGINALIZED or VICTIMIZED by society and whose DIGNITY and WORTH have been robbed from them. I am convinced that ONLY THEN will we begin to see people return to these pews and the church become the vital force it once was!

At my seminary graduation forty years ago, the commencement speaker was our own Dean and Professor of Preaching, Dr. Browne Barr. A great minister and preacher, he had taught a whole generation of students to preach at Yale before coming to teach homiletics at my own school. During the commencement service, he gave us a charge he hoped we would carry with us throughout our years of future ministry. He pointed up to the great white carillon of Stewart Chapel whose chimes rang loud and long over the hills that surrounded San Anselmo and said:

You hear those bells? Well over so much of the earth, bells that once rang so loud and clear in announcing the Good News of Jesus Christ--of his love and the need for justice--have begun to grow strangely quiet. There is an eerie silence descending upon many of the churches in this world. Well when you get out into your parishes, I challenge you to faithfully preach the whole of his Word. Declare unto them that their redemption has drawn nigh in the person of God's Son. Tell them that he has once and for all set them free from the bondage of sin and death. Let them know that they are to make his kingdom of peace and love and truth and justice a reality here on earth even as it is in heaven, that they are to fearlessly combat lies and violence and various forms of oppression wherever they may exist. YOU can make those chimes come alive again, graduates, so go on out there and RING THOSE BELLS!

My friends, I have reminded myself of that charge every day for the past forty years—in fact, every time I step foot in a church pulpit--with a directive I believe MUST NOT be limited to JUST MYSELF or to those in CHURCH MINISTRY. Rather, it must become the conviction, the rallying cry of ALL of us, of EVERYONE who has ever dared to call him or herself a Christian, a Child of God. May we become more like my church in Waterloo and serve as a “HUMAN carillon,” tolling far and wide the good news of what Jesus Christ is doing in OUR LIVES and in THE WORLD, to the extent that WERE people to NO LONGER hear or see it anymore, they TOO would miss it and ask “WHY? Where has the music GONE?” So, I say wherever YOU ARE, wherever YOU GO, and whatever YOU ARE DOING, YOU TOO are commissioned to FAITHFULLY and FEARLESSLY “RING THOSE BELLS!” Let us pray...