

SCRIPTURAL THEMES OF JUBILEE

Rita Yeasted, sfcc*

When I received a call from one of the Assembly Program Committee members a few months ago to ask if I would discuss the Scriptural background of Jubilee, I agreed to do so with the caveat that I'm not a Scripture scholar, so if you happen to be one, please forgive in advance my lack of expertise.

Not being an expert on this subject, however, gave me a chance to research it with fresh vision and enthusiasm, and I'd like to share with you this morning a few thoughts on jubilee years and the 25-year history of SFCC, which we celebrate this week.

The Israelite institution of jubilee year is treated in the Old Testament only in Lv. 25.8-55, with secondary references in Lv. 27.17-21 and Nm. 36.4. The year of jubilee is a natural outgrowth of the Jewish Sabbath year, the seventh year, a jubilee year being seven Sabbath years. The jubilee is to be kept on every 7th Sabbath year by the restoring of alienated lands, the freeing of Hebrew slaves, and the abstaining from sowing and harvesting. As the writer of Leviticus assures us in the 21st verse, God will ordain a "blessing on the crops of the sixth year and the land shall produce a crop to carry over three years." The promise of unmerited blessing lies at the heart of jubilee. God brings freedom from bondage, freedom from debt, freedom even from toil.

If you ever decide to research this topic for yourselves, you'll discover that whole chapters have been written as to whether the jubilee year was the 49th or 50th, but no one today save religious communities (and the Roman Church over the centuries) celebrates a jubilee at 25 years, so we are clearly in a Church tradition if not necessarily a Scriptural one.

The history of jubilee years in the Roman Church is akin to the Israelite tradition. The first recorded jubilee year was instituted by Boniface VIII in 1300 to celebrate the victory of the Crusaders in restoring the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to the Christians. Boniface promised forgiveness of sins, and remission of the temporal punishment due them, in exchange for a pilgrimage to Rome, the visiting of certain churches there, and almsgiving. Originally Jubilee Years were to occur every 100 years, then it was reduced to 33, then 25, and finally a later Pope decreed that one could call an extraordinary council at any time and the whole church could celebrate a year of jubilee. Some of you may recall the Jubilee Year of 1950 in honor of Our Lady when the doctrine of the Assumption was promulgated; there was one 25 years later in 1975, a special Year of Redemption in 1983, and the present pontiff is eagerly planning Jubilee 2000, which he has every intention of celebrating to bring in the new millenium.

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The etymology of the word jubilee is unclear. In Hebrew $y\hat{o}b\bar{e}l$ is usually translated ram's horn. According to the common explanation, therefore, the jubilee year was called $\check{s} nat hayy\hat{o}b\bar{e}l$ (year of the ram's horn) because it was inaugurated by the blowing of a ram's horn trumpet on the Day of Atonement. However, other scholars think that originally the term $y\hat{o}b\bar{e}l$ had no connection with the ram's horn trumpet, but was a synonym for $d r\hat{o}r$ (meaning release or liberty), as in Is. 61.1, which speaks of $\check{s} nat d r\hat{o}r$, year of release. In either event, the word has come into English by a mistaken etymology from the Greek into the Latin jubilaeus, joyful shouting, and has always been associated with freedom and renewal.

The jubilee passage from Isaiah 61 is one of the most comforting in all of Scripture. In the New English Bible it reads:

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me: God has sent me to bring good news to the humble, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and release to those in prison; to proclaim a year of the Lord's favor and a day of the vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to give them garlands instead of ashes, oil of gladness instead of mourners' tears, a garment of splendor for the heavy heart. They shall be called Trees of Righteousness, planted by the Lord for his glory. Ancient ruins shall be rebuilt and sites long desolate restored; they shall repair the ruined cities and restore what has long lain desolate.”

I've chosen to read this passage over Leviticus not only because it is much shorter, but the emphasis is already on all people, not just the Israelites at the heart of the Leviticus passage. I don't think it is insignificant that Luke's Gospel has Jesus reading the scroll of Isaiah, not Leviticus, in the synagogue. The message is clearly that “all be one.” Yet even in Leviticus 25.10 we read, “Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof,” a liberty not only for slaves, but freedom from depressing toil, and liberty to return to the land of which any one had been dispossessed.

Moses did not abolish slavery, but he did establish laws which vastly improved the condition of slaves, and he taught principles in accordance with which slavery, in time, was forbidden. According to Mosaic law, a slave was no mere chattel. Not the person but the work belonged to the master. In Verse 39 we read, for example, “You shall not use any to work for you as a slave. Their status shall be that of a hired person or a stranger lodging with you; they shall work for you until the year of jubilee.” In that year, all slaves should “go out free.”

When an Israelite was in bondage to a non-Israelite, he or she could claim the sacred right of redemption. Either by money of their own or that of a near relative, slaves could purchase freedom, the price being decided by the number of years left until the year of jubilee.

It must be admitted that the law of Jubilee, with such provisions as the reversion of landed property, did not insure social justice or absolute equality of privilege and opportunity. When in operation, though, it did limit the acquisition of vast amounts of wealth and also the suffering of extreme poverty. None could become very rich, none need to be pitifully poor. The primary theological value of his concept is inculcated in Lv. 25.23: only God is the true owner of all the land,

which God decrees may be held as private property, yet is to be permanently broken up in holdings sufficiently small so that all the world's population may have reasonable access to its resources. The year of jubilee for the Israelites was a type, a foretaste of the true Year of Jubilee promised by Scripture, when all will be restored, and we shall be delivered by our Kinsman-Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

The teacher in me can almost hear you asking yourselves this morning, "Yes, but what does this have to do with the Sisters For Christian Community? How does this affect me in this last half decade of the 20th century?" Trust me--it does!

Those of you who were at the Assembly in Jacksonville last summer probably recall Anthony Padovano's suggestion that we share stories, share food, and share Scripture at all our gatherings. Our area took that suggestion seriously, and so (while I didn't bring food) I would like to share a story with Scripture this morning.

Some of you may know that I'm not one of the senior members of this community--silver hair notwithstanding. I attended the San Diego Assembly in '87 and made my commitment that November. While I have been fortunate enough to have been able to attend every Assembly since, my memories of observing the San Diego consensus process as an outsider are vivid.

Having spent a quarter century with the Sisters of Divine Providence, I came to that Assembly with few preconceptions. Hearing of the community through a lifelong friend, I wrote to Lillanna, read Sudden Spring, met and liked the Sisters in the Pittsburgh area, and decided to attend an Assembly to see the community beyond our Region. I still believe that there is no way to truly understand this community unless you experience an Assembly--and each one is unique, as this our 25th will be. Despite all the controversy and tension of that week in San Diego, I was made to feel welcome, many sisters believing that I had been a member for years. I probably had been at one level. To paraphrase the Mazda ad, I though SFCC "just feels right."

What I have learned over the years is that this community contains a wealth of stories of wonderful women whose personal journeys to arrive at membership in SFCC are filled with struggle, pain, sacrifice, and redemption. Arriving at the decision to cast one's lot with this "wholly new-style sisterhood" is a kind of jubilee for each of us, a new beginning, a chance "to explore a wholly new pattern of consecrated life--one embodying the visions of Vatican II," as Lillanna so aptly described for us in Sudden Spring. But we haven't arrived. The journey goes on. We need to remind ourselves of the Scriptural call to freedom again and again. For many of us, Vatican II is ancient history. For some of us, it's a memory passed down from our elders the way World War I or the Civil War might have been. For a few of us, we already look forward to Vatican III, when walls between religions and nations will crumble and the mutual dream of oneness for all may become a shared reality.

Perhaps because a quarter century of my adult life was spent honoring the Providence of God, I attributed the next part of this story to God's Providence. When Pat Conrad called me in January and asked if I'd consent to give an address on the scriptural background of jubilee, I had just

purchased the Grammy Award winning tape, Stones in the Road, by Mary Chapin Carpenter. As I half listened to the lyrics while reading that evening, I suddenly heard the word "Jubilee," and I sat straight up in the chair. Maybe it's because I believe Scripture extends to the last page of the evening paper that I saw her lyrics as "sacred text," but I'd like to talk about her song "Jubilee," for I think it captures Leviticus and Isaiah for modern listeners and speaks to the heart of what this Assembly can be. Parenthetically, many of you may have been lucky enough to have heard this song on the Mary Carpenter PBS special last Wednesday. I have also been reminded that she calls D.C. home, and the WEB region claims her as "one of theirs," so the Providence extended even beyond my original thought.

What has intrigued me from the beginning of my sojourn with SFCC has been the freedom extended to each of us--to be prayerful, independent, communal, mature, prophetic, isolationist, complaining, or obnoxious. We represent the best and worst of humanity's foibles--and, by and large, we allow each other space to grow; so when I first heard Mary Chapin Carpenter's lyrics, I saw them as a musical story of the community's hopes and dreams, it hurts and incredible woundedness.

I've told some of you that last year was the first year since 1988 that I didn't leave an Assembly in tears--some have been for me, some for my friends, some for our region, some for the community or Church as a whole. One of the reasons I left my former community was that I couldn't give my energy any longer to the trivial concerns that used up our community meeting time. We argued about who used all the Kleenex or ate the last Toll House cookie. This community has struggled over the past 25 years with questions of defining Church, religious life, celibacy, Eucharist, ecumenism, feminism, commitment to social justice. No wonder we sometimes step on each other's toes and egos! We care about all the important things--and we still try to love each other and the world. We cast our lot with one another, use the same four initials, and try in our own stumbling way to strive to realize Lillanna's vision of "the Church Radiant, a Church of community, simplicity, and love." As the theme of this year's Assembly reminds us, "The Journey Makes Us One."

Sudden Spring has a poetic metaphor at its heart, that of emergence from seed to tender seedling. At 25 years, we celebrate a coming of age, our jubilee, a time to look back and forward. The lyrics of Mary Chapin Carpenter, for me, speak of that growth from seed, to tender seedling, to the wise wishing tree of her song, or in the words of Isaiah, the Tree of Righteousness. After distributing the lyrics of "Jubilee," I'd like to read them reflectively, then play them, then have each of you reflect on what your dreams are for this assembly and community. When the song is over, I'd ask each of you to gather into random groups and share your wishes or briefly recount your story of the journey that brought you here today. Then I'd ask each of you to write your wishes on the papers we'll distribute, and tie them with silver jubilee ribbon to our own version of Carpenter's "wise wishing tree" to remain throughout the week as a symbol of our journey from seed to seedling to young tree.

"Jubilee"

*I can tell by the way you're walking, you don't want company/
I'll let you alone and I'll let you walk on and in your own good time you'll be/
Back where the sun can find you, under the wise wishing tree/
And with all of them made we'll lie under the shade and call it a jubilee.*

*And I can tell by the way you're talking, that the past isn't letting you go/
There's only so long you can take it all on, and then the wrong's gotta be on its own/
And when you're ready to leave it behind you, you'll look back and all that you'll see/
Is the wreckage and rust that you left in the dust on your way to the jubilee.*

*And I can tell by the way you're listening, that you're still expecting to hear/
Your name being called like a summons to all who have failed to account/
For their doubts and their fears, they can't add up to such without you/
And so if it were just up to me I'd take hold of your hand/
Saying come hear the bank play your song at the jubilee.*

*And I can tell by the way you're standing with your eyes filling with tears/
That it's habit alone that keeps you turning for home, even though your home is right here/
Where the people who love you are gathered, under the wise wishing tree/
May we all be considered then straight on delivered down to the jubilee.*

*Because the people who love you are waiting, and they'll wait just as long as need be/
When we look back and say those were halcyon days/
We're talking about jubilee . . .*

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1911

I have had the honor to receive your letter of the 12th inst. and in reply to inform you that the same has been forwarded to the proper authorities for their consideration.

I am sorry to hear that you are not well and hope that you will soon be able to resume your duties. I am sure that you will find the treatment you are receiving most beneficial.

I am sure that you will find the treatment you are receiving most beneficial. I am sure that you will find the treatment you are receiving most beneficial.

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Yours truly,
J. H. [Name]
[Address]