

Thank you to all who give so generously to the four quarter loose changes each year. From Operation Christmas money: We can only imagine what it is like for families to get two full boxes for food, including several meats, a whole pie from local restaurants and fudge from the candy store.

With the Heifer Project money: We can only imagine how it must feel when a water buffalo or a flock of ducks or chicks are delivered to a family to help them better their circumstances with milk and eggs. We can pull together when the need is great. We have so much to celebrate in the midst of our difficulties and the difficulties of others, when we come together to help each other.

Having something to celebrate is more than just having a joy or being happy. Having something to celebrate is huge. My good friend Jan always says that we should celebrate our birthday with more than one day. There is too much to be excited about each year and too many people to share the joy and happiness of another year with to try to fit it in one day. She has a birthday month.

It is a great idea. We can plan several lunches with different groups, we can then gift ourselves with outings and small joys appealing to all of the senses. A slow walk by the bakery, a shopping time to see all of the latest fashion, well you get the picture...It gives us time to discover in life and in ourselves what there is to celebrate.

Besides our birthdays we have much to celebrate, but we often get caught in the trap of focusing on the things of life that steal the celebration from our lives. The invitation to the celebration is presented to us moment by moment as written in the book of Leviticus: "*The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites and say to them: These are my appointed times, the LORD's appointed times, which you will declare to be holy occasions:*

Work can be done for six days, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of special rest, a holy occasion. You must not do any work on it; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the LORD. These are the LORD's appointed times, holy occasions, which you will celebrate at their appointed times." Then Leviticus goes on to list many celebrations for the year, including Passover and the Harvest. The invitation to the celebration is there for us and ready for us to accept, every week, every month every year.

The other scripture for this morning is from the good news of Luke. Jesus is beginning his ministry in Galilee. He is in his own neighborhood, beginning to teach. The people are praising his teaching and word is getting around that he is worth listening to. Then he comes to his hometown, Nazareth. He stands up in the synagogue.

In 2009, while I was the Associate Pastor in at Lake Street UMC Eau Claire, there was a young man named Christopher, age 14, in the youth program. He shared with me that he had known for a while that God was calling him to be a pastor. We spent time discussing it, but he had a-lot-of years to go before it could happen.

There was a youth service scheduled for January 2010 and I invited him to share the message. The whole service was well attended and went very well, including Christopher's message. Just after he finished, as the offering was taken, there was a buzz in the sanctuary. Everyone whispered 'Now whose son is that? Oh yes, my has he grown up. Where does the time go?' There was a general feeling of good will and patronization, ready to be given out. Everyone arrived with smiles the same patronizing smile they paste on for school concerts and little league baseball. And then, just like last that 2010 youth service, Jesus shares the scripture and speaks on it.

An amazing thing happened then, just as did in 2010. The local, 'I knew you when' crowd, were surprised at how God used the moment to send the Spirit into the scripture and into the youth they saw before them. I could spend the rest of this sermon sharing with you how some people at the 2010 service were moved to tears, some were awed and some were just impressed by the work of the Holy Spirit in the youth before them. But I wouldn't be able to convey the celebration created from the moment. I guess you had to be there.

And so also with Jesus; we can only imagine what it was like for the 'local people;' Jesus' church family, to not just see the carpenter's son, giving a meditation on the scripture, but to know that the Holy Spirit was working in him in that moment.

And then to hear him say "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Said with such authority, that others who heard, began to follow because they knew it truly was 'of God'. If these people of Nazareth had accepted the invitation to believe and act on the word, they too would have become the beginning of the good news that God had for the world.

Handed to Jesus that day was the Isaiah scroll. He didn't choose it, it was handed to him, but he knew where to go to find the scripture that needed to be read that day: Isaiah chapter 61, verses 1-4. He began: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Did they recognize in that moment that the words were being fulfilled as they were being read? People in the neighboring towns saw it in Jesus, but were his own people able to see it in him? "because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."

We know that many of Jesus hometown folks couldn't accept his words and later even ran him out of his home town when he came to share with them as an adult teacher. Yet there can be great celebration for us in the knowledge that others told the words that grew into Christianity as we have it today.

Let me share with you another long coming celebration. I am blessed to serve on the District Committee for Ministry, which gives certification for new candidates for pastoral ministry, as they begin the official process with the church. I have also been blessed to have voted in a unanimous vote for Christopher, who is now,9 years after that youth service, near completion of his Seminary work and currently awaiting his first appointment in a United Methodist Church in Wisconsin.

It is a lot easier for us to hear Jesus saying these words than it was for the people who knew his childhood and his family life as the son of a carpenter. We can believe that he said the words. Do we believe the words that he said? "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."

These words were an invitation to the people. They were an invitation when they were first proclaimed by Isaiah and again when they were read by Jesus. But they had been declared by God, from the beginning of time. In the book of Leviticus, God posts, in the middle of the books of law, an invitation for a celebration. A year of Jubilee.

In the creation story, God spoke from the beginning, to the people through the story of Adam and Eve, of the need of Sabbath rest every seven days. Work for six days and then rest the seventh. Taking time to celebrate the life around you... In the book of Leviticus, chapter 25, God declares the need to rest the land every seventh year. It is God's land after all and God will provide enough in the sixth year to carry the people until the land produces again.

Sounds like a faith and trust issue. If you will let me be in charge of your life, if you will trust me, I have an invitation to a celebration for you. Take that year of land rest and labor, not to worry about what will be provided, but to celebrate that you can trust me to provide. Now here is the big invitation multiply the seven years of trust by seven and for the 50th year have a year of Jubilee.

A real "God is in charge, so I can relax" celebration. During that year, go back to your ancestral home, forgive family debt and celebrate. It will be an opportunity to get those parts of your life that have fallen apart, back together. To pull the loose strings of life, the frazzled pieces of the family, back in order and in line for another fifty years of whatever is ahead.

This would be a great story, if I could share that every seven days the people rested and every seven years they rested the land and on the fiftieth year there were family reunions where everyone came together.

Brothers and sisters forgive their debts to each other, sharing everything they had. They all turned to God accepting the celebration of their freedom and God smiled at the created order moving closer and closer back to the original plan of the garden of Eden. Heaven on earth.

We are still playing out the rest of this story, but we aren't there yet...Remember the story of the quail and manna that was provided during the exodus from Egypt into the wilderness? The people were invited to gather all they would need to eat, but all that they gathered more than was needed just spoiled.

How much do you think they gathered? How many times did they ignore the instructions, just in case they might need more than the measured supply. Well, let's just say it took them forty years of wandering in the desert to get to the promised land...

For those of you who are skeptical about letting the land sit empty every seventh year, a solution has been created: hydroponics – growing vegetables in water rather than in the land. No, this isn't the solution God would have you use. Because you aren't accepting the invitation to trust God, if you find ways around the specific words or plans that were put into the invitation to help you enjoy the celebration.

I know we all like to find 'a better way' to 'do life.' But this invitation is from the Creator of life, might God have a better solution; wouldn't God know how to invite you into it?

For all of you counters out there figuring fifty year segments since the beginning of time, here are some speculations: According to one theory of Jewish history the birth of Abraham was the 40th Jubilee, year 2000 from the beginning of time;

The exodus is the 50th Jubilee, year 2500; the dedication of Solomon's temple was the 60th jubilee, year 3000; after the exile, the decree to rebuild the temple was the 70th jubilee, year 3500; and the death and resurrection of Jesus would then be the 80th jubilee, year 4000 from the beginning of time.

The problem is that no jubilee celebrations have ever been recorded in history. Did the people ever trust God enough to accept God's invitation to one of the celebrations?

In another place I found that someone had figured the last Jubilee year as 2001 and the last Sabbath year as 2015. So accordingly, if you are following all of this, in 2019 you can buy your seeds to plant, because it is a year to work the land and there are about 32 more years until a year of jubilee. But what will it take for us to be called back to God. To be reminded that it is God's land not ours. We are just the caretakers, not the owners?

What does it take for us to forgive our family for their short falls, their wrong doings? How willing are we to share what we have so that others can have? The invitation is still out there. We don't need to wait for a seventh year, some of us need to let go now of some of our struggles for a while, trusting God to give us release, recovery and freedom.

Have you ever heard someone say "The answer was right there in front of me, and I didn't see it." Jesus says: "I have good news. Do you want it?" And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It is one thing to hear the words; it is another to believe they have been sent by the Holy Spirit, and to trust they are true and of God; but it is then important to accept that those words are for you and to live into them. It is one thing to receive the invitation, many never get close enough to hear.

Even so, you have. You are here and have heard the Word of God. It is the second thing to let go of the distractions, the doubts, the worries, all of the things that would keep you from accepting the invitation.

Is your calendar too full? Do you think that there is anyone or anything that couldn't get along without you? Can you only lean on yourself or can you lean on God? It is nice to be needed, but this time it is God who is inviting...are you willing to accept? Can you live into depending on God? If you can, then you will become a part of the celebration.

In the movie "Up in the Air" George Clooney plays a motivational speaker. In front of a room of company employees he puts a backpack on the table, unzips the large back compartment, the middle smaller compartment and the front small compartment. Then he says to his audience: "I want you to think of all of the things in your life and put them in your backpack.

Start with the big things: Your house, your car, your furniture. Then add all of the nick-knacks, the books and all of the small things. Think how heavy your back pack has become. You don't need all of that. Get rid of it and make your load lighter."

I would invite you to do the same today, but with your responsibilities. Start with the big ones, work down to those needling worries. But I won't tell you to get rid of them. Instead, I will extend God's invitation to let Christ carry them for you for a while. Maybe just for a short break, but long enough to celebrate without them and to find yourself trusting in God and ready to pick up what you have to in order to go forward.

A few years ago, you may have seen one of the Disney commercials where the mother is at the checkout line and opens her purse to pay, to find an envelope addressed to her. When she opens it, balloons slip out and float upward, confetti flies around and fireworks go off. This invitation to celebrate life is for you.

I could leave it there, but I think some of you would just smile and nod, "good sermon pastor", and leave the invitation at the door when you exit. So I will put a tangible goal attached to it. Lent will begin in less than a month. Start to process for yourself a way to accept God's invitation this Lent; An invitation to set aside some of the stress and strain of life. Whatever drags you down – exchange it for the invitation of release, recovery and freedom. Think of this as the beginning of a year of the Lords Favor. You deserve it!