

On this Independence Day weekend,

I begin with a Mystery Guest, who asks you, "Who Am I?" Ready? Here goes...

I was born in London in 1751.

I still live in Philadelphia – at Independence Hall.

I weigh 2000 pounds.

I haven't made a sound in 160 years!

WHO AM I?

You probably had no trouble guessing the Identity of our Mystery Guest.

It's the Liberty Bell!

Liberty is at the heart of our identity as nation.

"My country 'tis of thee, sweet Land of Liberty, of thee I sing...land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside let freedom ring!"

That's the tune the Liberty Bell rings.

But I've left out an important detail.

Did you know that the Liberty Bell got its name from the Bible?

When the bell was ordered, the Speaker of the Pennsylvania State Assembly made a special request.

He asked that a Bible verse be placed on it that would reflect the freedom William Penn had given Pennsylvania citizens to make their laws and choose their religion.

A special verse was chosen – Lev. 25:10.

"Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

That verse is still on that bell!

And that special kind of LIBERTY is the sermon for today.

So what's this old verse in the Bible about?

Leviticus 25 is part of a set of instructions given to Moses on Mt. Sinai that revolve around the Sabbath, the day of Rest – a freedom from daily toils and troubles that would yield a blessed time for resting and remembering God.

For humans, of course, that Sabbath came every week, every seventh day.

But God didn't want things to stop there!

He instructed Moses to look ahead.

“When you come into the land,” He said, let the land itself enjoy a Sabbath!
Not every seven DAYS, but every seven YEARS...
so that the land may “rest” from plowing and planting and reaping.

And after seven cycles of seven years, set aside a special year (the 50th year)
for everyone. Here is the instruction in verses 9-10:

**Then you shall send abroad the loud trumpet on the tenth day
of the seventh month; on the day of atonement you shall send abroad
the trumpet throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth
year, and (here's that Liberty Bell portion) proclaim liberty throughout the
land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a JUBILEE for you, when each of
you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his family.**

The year was called “JUBILEE”

because the Jewish word for “loud trumpet” which was blown to announce it
is YU-BAL... “Jubilee”

This “trumpet year,” this JUBILEE YEAR, was God's idea.

It was meant to BRING LIBERTY in two ways...

First, if because of hardship a family had to sell its ancestral property,
they got their land back in the 50th year.

Second, if for any reason a man or woman had lost freedom and become the
slave of another family during those 49 years,

in the JUBILEE YEAR, that person could go home free again
and celebrate his restoration with his own family

(just as, on this weekend, many of us have gathered with our families)

The JUBILEE year was a LIBERTY YEAR, a time for setting land and property free.

It said in unmistakable terms that PEOPLE were more important than MONEY!

Blow that trumpet! Proclaim LIBERTY!

It was a “Freedom Day” invented long before there was a United States of America.

But now I must tell you a very SAD truth...

That LIBERTY was NEVER PROCLAIMED!

Once the Israelites gained their place in Canaan, they ignored God's direction.
There is no record that the Year of Jubilee was ever observed!

It was like a majestic bell that never gets to ring.

The Liberty Bell, you know, has sat silent in Philadelphia for 160 years!
It developed a CRACK that finally could not be mended.
Its majestic voice was silenced.

It happened in Israel too.
There came a CRACK, a RUPTURE, a sinful division
between the Israelites and their freedom-loving God.

Some people simply forgot about God in their busyness.
Others chafed at the divine mandate that would interrupt their plans and
their business, so they deliberately ignored the Jubilee Year
and left it for the next generation to observe it if they chose.

Land once sold was never returned. Slave-holders held on to their
human property. The land mourned.

Liberty was desperately needed, but they refused to PROCLAIM IT.

In the end, the Israelites wound up losing their freedom and their very LAND
when they were taken off into Exile.

It's a cautionary tale of what CAN happen, and often DOES happen, here in our
so-called "Land of Liberty"...

We in the USA speak eloquently of liberty. But what we proclaim with our WORDS
we often withhold in our DEEDS.

"Free at last, thank God Almighty we're free at last!"

shouted a jubilant Martin Luther King at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial
in August of 1963.

But the sobering reality is "NO, NOT YET!" Even today, there are terrible
disparities in the freedoms and opportunities afforded to blacks and other
ethnic groups in our country.

In 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt spoke with similar eloquence:

"In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a

world founded upon four essential human freedoms....freedom of speech...freedom of every person to worship God in his own way... freedom from want... freedom from fear.”

But in truth, we are still far from such freedoms. Freedom to speak and to exercise our faith have been blunted in our increasingly secular society. Recession and terrorism have chained many in prisons of want and fear.

I'm sorry to say it, but say it I shall,
there is no shortage of SIN in our day, and for that reason no shortage of SLAVERY of every sort:

the degenerate traffic of white slave prostitution
addictions to alcohol, nicotine, and countless other substances,
the imprisonment of many in mental illness and hopelessness,
and the subjugation of whole nations to crazed despots such as we see
in North Korea and Iran

We are slaves too, you know... in more subtle ways!
We are slaves to our very riches,
We are slaves to our technology,
We are slaves to our selfish understanding of what we “deserve”,
and we are slaves to our prejudice against others.

This verse from Leviticus is as urgent and contemporary as any in the Scriptures:
“PROCLAIM LIBERTY” must be our job description
as citizens of a better country, with loyalty to a better Master!

The Liberty Bell is silent, so WE MUST MAKE THE NOISE.

The liberty we are to CLAIM and then to PROCLAIM
is the liberty Jesus came to bring...
the liberty we read about in the Gospel this morning:
**“Every one who commits sin is a slave to sin... if the son makes you
free, you will be free indeed.”**

What does that freedom look like?

First, it is a FREEDOM FROM something. Specifically, from SIN.

Liberation from unfair taxation, or liberation from ethnic prejudice
doesn't go far enough...

We need rescue from our greater slaveries.

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul plays the part of President Roosevelt and lists the Four Great Freedoms of the believer:

FREEDOM FROM GOD'S WRATH
FROM SIN
FROM THE LAW'S DEMANDS
and FROM DEATH.

Those are the liberties Jesus won for us at the price of His lifeblood.

He provided what God's justice demanded, and freed us from the burden of living, as one person has put it,
"in obedience to the never-ending 'gotta' of the Law"

He gives us the Holy Spirit to live inside us, and that Spirit is the antidote to the addictive power of sin and its habits.

That LIBERTY WE ARE TO PROCLAIM!

That liberty I heard in a very strange and wonderful way a few months ago, right here in our narthex.

Most of you are not aware of this, for it took place during Bible class hour. I was at the back of the sanctuary and someone summoned me out.

"There's a strange man out here asking for prayer," I was told. I went out to meet him. I didn't recognize him at first.

"I want you to pray a prayer," he said to me. "OKAY," I replied. "You see, after years of being an alcoholic, I'm finally sober! Today marks one full year of sobriety."

It was then I recognized him as one of our own members - a man long absent from church, a man I had prayed for repeatedly that his addiction might be broken. And now it was!

The LIBERTY WE PROCLAIM is, as he had experienced, a freedom FROM.

But there must be more. Having been freed FROM our old captivity, we must discover that we have been freed FOR something as well.

A prisoner is let out of jail. But NOW WHAT? Where will he live?

What work will he do?

After the Revolutionary War, the colonies were free from British rule.
But NOW how would they come together as a single nation?

What would this new country contribute to the world?

The LIBERTY WE PROCLAIM must also be a freedom FOR.

If a people do not know what to do with Freedom, liberty will turn into LICENSE,
and the old slavery will be replaced with a new one.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of college students demonstrate
that they do not yet know what to do with the freedoms that have
come with moving out from under mom and dad's thumb into a
life, as my son called it, "without fences."

Not all, of course! But far too many indulge in an orgy of
binge drinking, experimentation with drugs, and promiscuity
that ruins many a young life almost before it can get started.

Jesus came, not only to set us free FROM something, but FOR something.

**You were called to freedom, brethren, says Galatians 5, only do not use
your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants
of one another.**

We proclaim A NEW LIBERTY in Christ,
a FREEDOM TO SERVE THE NEIGHBOR IN LOVE.

That service is no slavery, but the purest joy.

Imagine a boy who grows up in a home where there is little love, but lots of rules.
And the rules say he MUST do the dishes, sweep the floors, take out the garbage,
and cut the grass, daily... on pain of punishment!

Imagine how he chafes at the tasks! At the daily list of "gotta's"

But some years later, he marries the girl of his dreams.
Children come, and she is tired with her responsibilities. She doesn't
nag at him, nor complain, but simply says the truth:

"I'm very tired. Could you help me?"

Now he finds himself doing, for love's sake, the very things he once did because of the rules...

He does the dishes, sweeps the floor, takes out the garbage, and cuts the grass.

But all feels different now, for he loves her, and she loves him.

We are a people dearly LOVED by God.

Ours is a LIBERTY bought with blood that sets us free FROM sin and FOR service to our neighbor.

He has patched the cracks in our lives and set us in the midst of people who need a new song to sing. We are bells repaired to RING!

This very morning, while we gather here at church 14 of our people from Trinity have arrived in Trinidad for two weeks of witness and service.

This very day we will break ground for a facility expansion that will bless many in our neighborhood.

This very week will come opportunities to hear and respond to our co-workers, and to the people around us.

So lift up your voice and SING it out!

Roll up those sleeves and RING it out!

Proclaim liberty throughout all the land, to all its inhabitants!

Find a way to say it and to share it, not just on the 4th of July...

**God's son has set me free from Satan's tyranny,
from sin and shame, from earthly blame,
to serve His name, His love proclaim!
I'm free, I'm free, yes, free, free, free!
God's Son has set me free!**