

“Sound the trumpets”

Numbers 10:1-10

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Seventy-two. That’s a pretty good way to begin a sermon about trumpets. Seventy-two, as in the number of steps leading up to the entrance of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Those seventy-two steps are now more familiarly known as the “Rocky steps” because of the ascent made on those steps by the Italian Stallion, none other than Rocky Balboa. Draped in his old gray sweatsuit, sporting those old black high top sneakers, the theme song seems to lift the aspiring champion up, step by step, fulfilling the words that say, “Gonna fly now.” Dan danta dan danta dan danta dan, Dan danta dan danta dan danta dan, Danta danta dan, danta danta dan. ...The trumpet sounds and Rocky climbs! Seventy-two steps up, and for some forty years a wake of hopeful and undaunted heroes have raced up to the museum following in Rocky’s footsteps.

Much like the inspiration that leads many to follow in Rocky’s footsteps and climb the museum steps, the sounding of the trumpet in the bible often rouses the people of God to action. Our passage in Numbers 10 spells out some of the ways the people were called to respond to the sounding of the trumpet, or more specifically as it relates to Numbers 10, to the two silver trumpets.

- When both trumpets are sounded the community was to assemble before the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.
- The sound of only one was the signal just for the leaders to assemble.
- At the trumpet sound the tribes would set out on their journey, the first trumpet calling the tribes to the east to spring into action, the second for the tribes on the south.

- When it was time to gather the assembly, a different signal would serve that purpose.
- The sons of Aaron were to blow the trumpets.
- It was the trumpet sound that alerted them it was time to battle their enemies.
- And yet the trumpet did more than call the Israelites to battle. The trumpet also heralded times of rejoicing. The trumpet announced feasts and festival. At the sounding of the trumpet the faithful people of God brought their burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. In a real way the trumpets were to be a memorial for the people before their God.

In preaching a sermon about trumpets, I am holding out the hope that maybe you and I will be able to hear the trumpets calling us in this time of great struggle, great sadness, great illness, great economic crisis, great racial division, and that in hearing God's trumpet we will respond with faithful obedience as we seek to be the people of God at this time and in this place.

- It was the trumpet that called the people to gather with Moses at Mount Sinai for the giving of the Ten Commandments, the commandments that sealed and spelled out what it means to be in a covenant relationship with our God.
- It was the trumpet, actually 300 trumpets, that were blown in unison leading Gideon and his troops to victory in battle.
- It was the trumpet that signaled the return of the Ark of the Covenant to Israel, a return that sparked such unadulterated joy that David danced before the Lord in nothing but a loincloth.
- It was the trumpet that sought to call Israel to rebel against King David, a rebellion led by a man named Sheba who is described as a troublemaker. That troublemaker named Sheba met an undignified death as his head was cut off and thrown

over a city wall. His death was cause for yet another trumpet blast.

- When David's rightful heir Solomon ascended the throne, his coronation was greeted with the blast of the trumpet.
- At times a trumpet is inappropriate. Jesus tells us not to blow a trumpet when we are offering help to someone who is poor and in need. At that point the sound of a trumpet would be selfish and would call attention to our good works. Sometimes we do not blow the trumpet.
- But by and large, the sound of the trumpet is good news for the people of God. It is the sound of a trumpet that will herald the time for the dead in Christ to rise...it is the sound of the trumpet that invited John in the book of Revelation to step through the open door and see the wonders of heaven...and when the trumpet of resurrection sounds we will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. We will claim our resurrection bodies. At that glorious and triumphant moment, we will join the chorus that shouts out at our vanquished opponent death to say, "Where, O death, is thy victory? Where, O death, is thy sting?"

The sound of the trumpet led Rocky up seventy-two steps. How will the trumpet lead us? When we hear the trumpet sound, how will we respond? Will it be with the unbounded enthusiasm that bolts obstacles and climbs stairs and pours itself into struggle with our whole being? I am holding out the hope that maybe you and I will hear the trumpet calling us even today, and that in hearing the call to action, we will respond with every fiber of our being.

What is the trumpet sound we will hear? For the next seven weeks we are going to focus on the trumpet sound described in Leviticus chapter 25. The sound of the trumpet in Leviticus 25 called the people to celebrate the Year of Jubilee, a celebration held once every fifty years, and a celebration that lasted all of one

entire year. To faithfully respond to the trumpet's call as described in Leviticus 25 would result in people who had lost their land receiving that land back, being able to return to their land. To faithfully respond to the trumpet's call as described in Leviticus 25 would result in debts begin forgiven. To faithfully respond to the trumpet's call as described in Leviticus 25 would result in slaves and servants being set free. To faithfully respond to the trumpet's call as described in Leviticus 25 would see a time of restoration and renewal, a time of healing and wholeness, a time of goodness and blessing, a time of what the bible calls Shalom, a deep and abiding peace.

Together we will hear the trumpet sound through a series of seven sermons. Accompanying the sermons will be a 50-day bible study spanning those seven weeks. You can join the bible study in classes offered Tuesday morning and Wednesday evening. You can join a Zoom edition of the bible study. You can simply use the bible study guide and read and reflect on your own. In one or more, or in all of these ways, I hope we will hear the trumpet call, because the call of this trumpet is important for us as human beings and it is important for us as the people of God. In my studies of Jubilee one theme emerged that is profound, and that theme is that every person has the inalienable right of belonging. Every person has the inalienable right of belonging. Every single person, of every single color, from every single country, from every single economic background and education level and every single neighborhood on every single block of every single city or town on this entire earth, every single person has the inalienable right of belonging.

Even as I invite you to participate with us in this study of Jubilee, I am afraid I am going to shoot this very worthy project in the foot by telling you there is literally no way we can get things right as they relate to the Jubilee described in the bible. We are destined to fail simply because we do not live in the society

described in Leviticus, a society where land had been given and assigned by God so that everyone would have a place of their own. That is the context of the biblical Jubilee. The people were going to enter the Promised Land and every person from every tribe would receive the God-given gift of land. Jubilee was established so that if in the passing of 50 years, someone fell on hard times or failed to manage their resources properly, if someone lost their property and became in need of help, they would receive all of that back in the 50th year. They would be restored. That is not our world. That is not our setting. We really have no way of getting Jubilee right as it relates to its original context.

But because the Jubilee described in the bible is so different from the world we live in, I think I can safely say there is really no way we can get it wrong, if we take the themes that come out of Jubilee and explore how we can apply them to this broken world in which we live. To work toward a world where every person has the inalienable right of belonging will lead us to ask what it means to practice hospitality in our world. What does it mean to truly welcome others? To welcome others is to accept others. That is a product in short supply in these divided times. Every idea we take to heart is a step in the right direction. Jubilee is founded on the Sabbath. Sabbath is founded on creation. Creation culminates with the creation of men and women in the very image of God. We cannot go wrong if we spend ourselves asking how we might strive to see the image of God in other people, in every other person and people group, perhaps especially those people who look and act and think differently than ourselves. And I want to add that in times like, times that are so fraught with the struggles surrounding us, we can lose sight that we are created in God's image. We can lose sight that each one of our lives is valuable, immensely valuable. If you are struggling with deep discouragement and even despair, I hope this Jubilee journey will remind you that your life has value.

Jubilee displays God's intention for justice. Too often societies are divided into haves and have nots. Jubilee proposes a great big shuffling of the deck. Through thoughtful practices of sharing and concern for others there is a massive readjustment and reallocation of resources, so that as it was on the journey through the wilderness and the giving of daily bread, everyone has enough. We might not be able to get Jubilee right according to what is described in Leviticus 25, but we will not go wrong in seeking to build a world where all people experience the inalienable right of belonging.

The Rocky Steps are in Philadelphia. Philadelphia is also home to the Liberty Bell. The connection between the Liberty Bell and a sermon on trumpets is not readily apparent until we realize there is an inscription on the Liberty Bell that is directly related to the sounding of the trumpet as described in the bible. "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." That inscription comes directly from the King James Version of the Bible. The passage is Leviticus 25:10, a passage found in the chapter on Jubilee. Jubilee begins with the trumpet sound. Is liberty intended for a select few? With a nation founded on the principle that all men (and women) are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, do you think liberty is intended for a select few? There are injustices and inequalities in our society. As we sound the ancient trumpet of Jubilee, we join ourselves to the ongoing cause of working for a world where every single person experiences the inalienable right of belonging. The fact that it has become necessary to identify one group that has not experienced the full scope of liberty and to specifically say, "Black Lives Matter" is a sign that we have fallen short. To study Jubilee does not guarantee we will get it right. But we will not be wrong if we dedicate ourselves to taking positive and practical steps toward that day when all people truly do

experience the inalienable right of belonging. The trumpet of Jubilee calls us to be part of that work and that witness.

I led this study of Jubilee with our church in Houston more than ten years ago. I am proud to say it was a success. In saying the study of Jubilee was a success, I am not saying it was a roaring success or a massive success or an unqualified success, but it was a success. It was a success for at least one person. Ten years ago, as a result of a study of Jubilee, and as a result of a community of faith working to help others experience the inalienable right of belonging, at least one person found a place in our church family. His name was Alan.

Alan started showing up at worship services at our church in Houston. At first, he hung out in the back. Alan would give me a quick hello and leave. But one day while attending a worship service our church orchestra played. When Alan saw people, normal people using their gifts for music, Alan was hooked. Alan approached our choir and orchestra director, they talked, and the next time the orchestra played, Alan was sitting there with his musical instrument. His instrument was the trumpet. Alan played the trumpet.

The year Alan showed up and started playing his trumpet was the year of the 50th anniversary of our congregation. It was during that 50th year that I led our congregation through a study of Jubilee. The timing of Alan joining our orchestra and blowing his horn could not have been more perfect. During that year we would read from Leviticus 25 the words that announced the Jubilee, “Count off seven Sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the seven Sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land.” (Leviticus 25:8, 9) Every time

there would be the call for the trumpet Alan would beam with a smile that lit up the room.

The more we got to know Alan, the more we realized what his trumpet meant to him. Alan was an accomplished musician. He had played in many bands all over the country. Now his favorite gig was at Pines Presbyterian Church. That was our church. And that was Alan's church. Alan belonged to our church. As he found his place in the orchestra and as he shared his gifts, Alan experienced the inalienable right of belonging. That is what Jubilee is all about, people experiencing the inalienable right of belonging, people finding their place in the community. Alan found that gift. Our Jubilee was a success, at least for one person.

Alan started playing in the orchestra. In October of that year of Jubilee, we had a big celebration at a special events center near our church. We rented the place out, decorated it, served a wonderful brunch, and then had our Sunday worship right there in the events center. Alan showed up early that Sunday morning for that special event. Alan played his trumpet on some inspirational songs. Alan was so happy to have a church family where he truly felt he belonged that he invited his own family to come and be part of our celebration. When December rolled around during that year of Jubilee our choir and orchestra presented a cantata at Christmas. Alan was front and center as the choir and orchestra shared with our congregation the wonder and awe of Christmas.

Early the next year, Alan heard that the church was going to read through the Bible in 90 Days, Alan signed up. Alan bought the special Bible that was divided into 90 days of reading. Alan joined one of the small groups that met to discuss the readings for the week. We started reading the Bible in 90 Days on Monday, January 25th. The first week we read Genesis and Exodus. When you read the bible in 90 days you are moving at almost breakneck speed. At least the stories in Genesis and Exodus were familiar.

The second week we got into Leviticus and Numbers, and just like Moses, I started hearing some grumblings from the group as we wandered with the Israelites for forty years in the desert.

By the eleventh day of our reading we came to Numbers chapter 10, the chapter about the trumpets. The day we came to that chapter in Numbers was our eleventh day of reading. The date we came to that chapter about the trumpets was February 4th. It was a Thursday. That Thursday morning, on the eleventh day of reading through the bible in 90-days, Alan had a massive stroke. When I got to the hospital, Alan's sister Julie was there. Alan and Julie shared an apartment. As his sister Julie was describing what happened that morning, she said Alan was in the shower when he suffered the stroke. And then her eyes filled with tears. She said before he took his shower, he had been reading his Bible. The page the Bible was opened to was 121. That is the page that has Numbers 10. The headline for the chapter is, "The Silver Trumpets." The trumpet of Jubilee had called Alan into our church family. The trumpet of Jubilee had called Alan to find a church home where he belonged, a church family where he experienced the inalienable right of belonging. And then one day the trumpet sounded, and God called Alan home. That Alan died with his bible open to the chapter about trumpets has always struck me as being an amazing coincidence...or more accurately...an amazing miracle.

One day we will all hear the trumpet that calls us home. Living in the hope of that glorious day, may we hear God's trumpet calling us to live every day before that glorious day working with every fiber in our being to create a community where every single person experiences the inalienable right of belonging. Alan found his place. We work and we witness because we long for the day when every person finds their place, when every person is welcomed, and when every life is valued.