

27 November 2022

Anatomy of a Festival: Preparation
Leviticus 23:4-8

This Advent season we are looking at the whole idea of having special celebrations, and so we start with a part of the Levitical law regarding the festivals of ancient Israel. We read Leviticus chapter 23, verses 4-8:

⁴These are the appointed festivals of the Lord, the holy convocations, which you shall celebrate at the time appointed for them. ⁵In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, there shall be a Passover-offering to the Lord, ⁶and on the fifteenth day of the same month is the festival of unleavened bread to the Lord; for seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. ⁷On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations. ⁸For seven days you shall present the Lord's offerings by fire; on the seventh day there shall be a holy convocation: you shall not work at your occupations.

Why do we have holidays? No, hear me out. I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't; I'm just asking why we do. I don't mean, why do we have days off work? That much should be clear: we need rest. I get that, and an extra day of rest is always welcome. No, I mean why do we have all the foofaraw around holidays: decorations, special food, designated music, special worship services, and all that? And we can't just say, "We do these things because they're fun," because then we can ask, if they're so fun, why do we only do them for a few days out of the year? Why not spread it out? Think about it. How many of you have favorite foods, special dishes, that you only eat once a year? Meanwhile, you probably have some other dishes that you don't like anywhere nearly as much that you eat two or three times a month? How does that make sense? Why do we reserve some good things for only designated days?

Now some of you might be saying, "Well, remember that the root of 'holiday' is 'Holy Day.' We celebrate these things as an expression of our faith." Well, yes. But can't we ask the same question about that? Why not hold every day holy? If it's good to celebrate Christ's birth, shouldn't we do that as often as possible? If we honor God especially on one day, does that mean we don't have to honor God as much the next day? Surely not. Paul seems to say something like that in Galatians. He's writing to some churches that he feels are in danger of slipping into a legalistic kind of faith, and he says: *Now . . . that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted* (Gal. 4:9-10). For Paul, apparently, observing special days is a sign of an immature faith.

There's some validity to that. Our faith does need to be part of our everyday lives. Prayer should be daily. Acts of mercy should be frequent. Spiritual growth should be constant. If the only time we pay attention to our faith is on designated holy days, that's inadequate. But no one's suggesting that. We can do both, can't we? Praying on a holy day doesn't prevent you from praying every other day, does it? My question is, "Why, on top of all the regular things we do – weekly worship, regular Bible study, daily prayer – do we *also* have these special religious festivals?"

Here's what I think: We have special days because, while our faith should be a part of our day-to-day life, we need to be reminded that it is also more. We need to remember that the daily routine of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeping in this petty pace is not all there is. We may have no choice but to live in the day-to-day most of the time, but we are also a part of a life that is beyond the dull, repetitive, barely-noticed habits of existence. Setting aside a separate time and making it special is a way to remind us of that. Think of it this way: we need holy days for the same reason that we need holy places. And we do need holy places, don't we? We learned that during the pandemic. During the first year of the shut-downs in the Spring of 2020, this building was basically empty. We didn't resume in-person worship until over a year later, so most of you left one Sunday in March and weren't back until June of the next year. But during that year, something began to happen. Some of you began stopping by the church during the week and asking through your masks if you could just go sit in the sanctuary for a while. You missed that sense of going apart to a place dedicated to God. Now understand what I'm saying: God is not more present in this room than in any other place. The pandemic taught us that, too. God is with those of you joining us on Facebook and YouTube every bit as much as with those of us gathered here. But sometimes our own limited minds need a physical reminder that God is not only *with* us in our daily life, but is with us *beyond* this life, too.

Holy days are like that, but with time instead of space. We set aside certain times and sanctify them as special holy days – not because those dates on the calendar are intrinsically more holy than any other dates, but because we need some prompting to break out of our semi-conscious routines and try, on those dates, to seek God beyond the ordinary. It's not that God is more present with us on a religious feast day; it's rather that on that day we seek to be more present with God.

So how do we do that? First, we take time to prepare. Think back to the reading we had from Leviticus. This is a part of the Old Testament law regarding the various Jewish festivals, the first of which is the Passover. That day is set aside as one of the holiest days of the year, and to make sure the people treat it as such, they are to set aside a full week of preparation. The week begins with an offering and a special assembly. Then, for the next seven days the people eat only unleavened bread, a specific change in routine that keeps before them the fact that the holy day is approaching, then they gather for worship again before the feast itself, and they put aside their daily work. This emphasis on preparation reappears throughout the Hebrew Bible. Whenever the people are summoned to meet with God, they are called first to prepare. Sometimes that involves fasting, or abstinence of some kind. Nearly always there is a time of putting aside the routine: taking a special Sabbath, as it were. Sometimes the people are specifically told to bathe and wash their clothes. Why? Again, I don't think it's because God is picky or prissy or offended by food or nifty armpits or manky socks. I think the message is that coming into the presence of God doesn't just happen. Change your routine, change your appearance, change your attitude, do whatever you have to do to physically remind yourself that this day is not to be like every day: this day is set aside to seek God.

And so we enter the season of Advent, a season of preparation for the great Christian festival of the Incarnation of God on earth, Christmas. How do we prepare? Well, we'll be talking more about that over the rest of the month, but today our plan is to remind ourselves that this time is not like any other time by making it look different. Today, after the service, we decorate; we put up physical reminders that we are approaching a holy day. Now obviously anything can be corrupted, and so some end up decorating for all the wrong reasons: out of pride

or even in competition with neighbors, for instance. We are able to make anything, even Christmas, all about us; we're gifted that way. But that's not really why we decorate: we want people who enter our church to look around and say, "Something special must be happening here." Because something is.