

Shadows

Last Weekend after the Epiphany – February 25/26, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Leviticus 1:1-9 (NRSV)

The LORD summoned Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying: ²Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When any of you bring an offering of livestock to the LORD, you shall bring your offering from the herd or from the flock.

³If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you shall offer a male without blemish; you shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, for acceptance in your behalf before the LORD. ⁴You shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you. ⁵The bull shall be slaughtered before the LORD; and Aaron's sons the priests shall offer the blood, dashing the blood against all sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁶The burnt offering shall be flayed and cut up into its parts. ⁷The sons of the priest Aaron shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire.

⁸Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the parts, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; ⁹but its entrails and its legs shall be washed with water. Then the priest shall turn the whole into smoke on the altar as a burnt offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the LORD.

There is a lot in the Old Testament that seems bizarre to us. Yet, as we'll see this week and next, even the sacrifices described in Leviticus point us toward the cross, Jesus' sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

I bet you never thought you'd hear Leviticus chapter 1 read from the pulpit. Chances are you never have before and never will again. The only reading from Leviticus in the Revised Common Lectionary is from chapter 19, regarding loving one's neighbor.¹ In contrast, what we are reading today is just . . . well . . . gross. There is nothing in our lives that prepares us for this, no point of reference. In fact, like the preparers of the Lectionary, we'd probably prefer to skip it, seeing nothing here of value for our own day, our own lives. But when we commit to reading through the Bible, we don't get to skip parts. This is all Scripture, inspired by God and given to us so that we might come to know God. Granted, though all Scripture is equally inspired, it is not all equally useful. But, surprisingly, even in passages like today's, we can find important insights into God's nature and our own.

God calls to Moses ~ again

As we read in Exodus, God has decided to dwell among his people and given them instructions to build a suitable place, a tabernacle. The divine presence of God, the *Shekinah*, rests above the ark of the covenant inside the "tent of meeting," where God's will is revealed to the people through Moses.

The Message//Re-mix

I and many other Christians have tried reading through the Bible before. We usually began with Genesis and planned on reading straight through to Revelation. Many of us would sail right on through Genesis and Exodus, though we might bog down a bit in all the details about the tabernacle and the priests' garments.

But then we'd hit Leviticus . . . and then Numbers . . . and then Deuteronomy. There is a lot here that would test our resolve – look at today's Scripture passage! And if we persisted, Chronicles and the prophets lay not far down the road.

The reading plan we are using this year is a help. But I am also supplementing my reading from the NRSV in the *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible* with Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, a paraphrase of the Bible in contemporary language. I'm finding that Peterson helps me to make better sense of some of the more difficult (dare I say boring) passages. The "Remix" is an inexpensive edition of *The Message* with verse-numbered paragraphs.

I am particularly enjoying Peterson's rendering of the psalms. I'll confess that I've always had trouble connecting with the psalms. They never spoke to my heart or, to put it better, my heart was tone-deaf to many of the psalms. I've found that Peterson's paraphrases help me to connect with the feelings of the psalmists as I never have before.

The Message//Remix is my March book recommendation and is available in *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore. You shouldn't replace your NRSV/NIV/TNIV translations with Peterson's paraphrase, but I do think that you will be blessed if you use *The Message* to supplement your Bible reading this year.

¹The Revised Common Lectionary is a calendar and table of suggested Scripture readings for a three-year cycle. The lectionary is a tool used by many UMC churches as well as other Christians around the globe. The idea is that by following the readings for three years, the congregation will hear the whole message of Scripture.

As Leviticus opens, God summons² Moses to the tent.³ This is only the third occasion that God has “called to” Moses: first, at the burning bush (Exodus 3:4); then at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:3); and now from the tent. Notice that God does not command that the offering ritual be performed. God simply says that when the people do make an offering,⁴ it is to be done in a certain way. The covenant relationship entered into by God and the people at Mt. Sinai is two-way. It is a matter of the heart, of desire, not of requirement or demand.

There is another general instruction here that is revealing. The animal to be sacrificed must come from the herd or flock (verse 2). Why? Walter Kaiser, Jr.,⁵ notes several reasons why wild animals were not to be used in the offerings of the Israelites. Wild animals are not taken from one’s own possessions. Only what costs the offerer something can be given. King David said, “I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing” (2 Samuel 24:24, NIV). Further, only perfect animals can be given. If the Israelites make an offering, it is to be the very best from their herds and flocks.

But more about God is revealed in this burnt offering. The explicit purpose of the sacrifice is to make atonement for the offerer (verse 4). God’s acceptance of the sacrifice means that God and the offerer are

again “at one.” The offerer’s sin has been cleansed and God’s wrath averted. How? By substitution. The purpose of the laying on of hands (verse 4) is to transfer the sin and impurities of the offerer to the animal. As Kaiser notes, there is more to this than a simple transfer, “it is just as if the person who brings the offering dies.”

Shadows and signs

Even these brief observations about the burnt offerings in Leviticus ought to help us understand why the New Testament writers used so much of the OT imagery to make sense of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Despite their usefulness and importance in shaping the Israelites as God’s people, the blood sacrifices were mere shadows or types,⁶ pointing us toward Jesus. The sacrifices were not reality, they only pointed us to reality. An offering freely made. An animal without blemish. An offering that costs. An offering of life itself. A substitute in our place. Without Leviticus, what sense would we make of John the Baptist when he refers to Jesus as the lamb that takes away the sin of the world? Would we appreciate Isaiah’s depiction of a suffering servant like a lamb being led to slaughter (see Isaiah 53)? Without Leviticus, what image would be at the center of our rose window? The slaughter of the Passover Lamb (Exodus 12) prepared the Israelites for the burnt offerings of Leviticus. And the sacrifices in Leviticus prepare us for the cross.

Further, the burnt offerings of Leviticus enable us to understand Paul when he urges believers to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God (Romans 12:1). This is a call to total commitment. Just as the burnt offering was totally consumed on the altar, our whole selves, every last bit, are to be at God’s disposal.

The Theology of Leviticus¹

The theme of Leviticus is expressed in 20:26, “You are to be holy to me because, I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.” To speak of God as holy is to refer to (1) God’s *separation* from his creation and (2) God’s *moral* character.

The first part of Leviticus (chapters 1-16) speaks to the gulf, the separation, between God and humanity. How can an unholy people approach a holy God? As Kaiser writes, “A holy God graciously provides these rituals to make it possible for mere mortals, who are also sinners, to walk in fellowship with one who is pure.” The rituals are foreign to us. They seem distasteful and even bizarre. But it is important to appreciate that such rituals were commonplace among the religions of the ancient Near East. God taught them about holiness using words and rituals that they could understand.

The second half of Leviticus (chapters 17-26) focuses on moral character. Our character is to reflect God’s character. Every thought, word, and deed that makes up our lives are to be grounded in mercy, kindness, and grace. It surprises people to discover that when Jesus says “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (see Matthew 22:34-40), he is quoting from Leviticus 19:18.

²“called to” in the NIV/TNIV

³This “tent of meeting” is commonly referred to as the tabernacle. “Tabernacle” is from the Latin for “tent” or “wooden hut.” “Meeting” is derived from the Hebrew verb meaning “gather” or “come together.” The tabernacle is the place where the people, through a mediator, would meet with God.

⁴The Hebrew for “offering” is related to the verb, “to draw near.” When the person brings a sacrifice or gift to God, the offering, they are enjoying God’s nearness. In other words, the offering narrows the gap, the separation, between creator and creature.

⁵Much of today’s study is drawn from Kaiser’s commentary on Leviticus in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*. This excellent 12-volume commentary is in our library. If you would like to understand OT sacrifice better, this is a good place to start.

⁶The first meaning of “type” in the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* is “a person or thing (as in the Old Testament) believed to foreshadow another (as in the New Testament).”

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

February 26 - March 4 (Hebrews outline is from Fred Craddock's commentary)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Leviticus 19-21; Proverbs 16:17-33 Loving one's neighbors; the Holiness Code</p>	<p>Day 2 Leviticus 22-24; Proverbs 17:1-14 The Israelite festivals and the Day of Atonement; blasphemy</p>
<p>Day 3 Leviticus 25-27; Proverbs 17:15-28 The sabbatical year and year of Jubilee; rewards for obedience and penalties for disobedience</p>	<p>Day 4 Hebrews 1-3; Psalm 24 The Son and the angels; Christ the faithful</p>
<p>Day 5 Hebrews 4-6; Psalm 25 Christ the merciful; a call for maturity; stern warning with hope; the ground for hope</p>	<p>Day 6 Hebrews 7-10; Psalm 26 Christ and Melchizedek; The high priestly ministry of Christ</p>
<p>Day 7 Hebrews 11-13; Psalm 27 Learning from our forebears in faith; a call to continue in faith; Zion, the unshakeable kingdom; life in the faith community</p>	

Sermon Notes

Reading *Thru the Bible* with us? Got Questions? Want to go deeper?

When we begin to read the Bible regularly, questions pile up. A good study Bible can help. And our library has some excellent commentaries. But it is very helpful, even essential, to explore these questions with other Christians. In Scott Engle's Sunday morning class we'll be talking each week about the Bible readings from the week before. We'll seek to get a better understanding of the readings and what they mean for us.

We hope you'll join us as we journey through the entire Bible this year.

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

March Book Recommendation

The Message – Remix

A Bible paraphrase by Eugene Peterson

See more on this in the page one textbox of this background study.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Walter Kaiser, Jr. is Professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Seminary. Rather than Leviticus irrelevant for our contemporary lives, he holds that the book is a schoolyard primer on the concept of redemption – with big letters and big pictures. Here are a few of his reflections on the burnt offering described in today's Scripture passage. What do you get out of these observations? Are they applicable in your own life? Do they help you to see these rituals as foreshadows of Jesus?

- The Israelites do not devise these rituals, they are God-given. Worship is not left to human invention. Worship is about doing God's will, not our own. How do we present ourselves to God each day? How about each week, in our own services of worship? What guidance has God given us about worship? Are we inclined to make it too much about ourselves, our own experiences, our own perceived needs?
- The offerings made in Leviticus are to be of the best that the Israelites have to offer and they must cost something. What do we offer to God? Is it really our best . . . or is it the left-overs? Do we read the Bible with whatever time we have left over in the day? Do we give financially out of whatever we have left over after all our bills are paid and our wants met? What does our faith cost us?
- We come to worship each week underneath a huge cross suspended from the ceiling. What does the burnt offering of Leviticus reveal to us about Jesus' death on the cross? Why do you think that life itself underlies the burnt offerings? How is that the offering of life to God can put us "at one" with God?