

## **A Word About Today's Word: *Leviticus***

It's been two weeks since we read from *Exodus*, and if any of you decided to read all 40 chapters, you may have noticed that the last 15 chapters depict (in significant detail) the construction of the Tabernacle, the tent that houses the presence of the Lord. Well...once we have a Tabernacle, what exactly do we do with it? Enter *Leviticus*, the third book in the Pentateuch. The Israelites have escaped Pharaoh. They've now lived in Sinai for one year, and the Tabernacle has been completed. *Leviticus* begins with God pronouncing the law to Moses, and sometimes Moses and Aaron, and sometimes just Aaron. And pronounce God does. God reads aloud the law for an entire month!

I'm not going to say this about many of the texts in our canon, but *Leviticus* is not really one you need to read from start to finish, and frankly, it's not a text I think we need to engage on a regular basis. It's more important for you to know what it is, and the purpose it serves, and how its placement affects the reading of other texts in our canon, particularly in the Second Testament.

When we started our journey of biblical exploration, we mentioned that several sources comprise the final texts of the Pentateuch, among them, the Priestly writers. To this point, the First Creation Story of *Genesis* is their major contribution. There are genealogies and other comments here and there that connect or correct the other narratives, but nothing prolonged. *Leviticus* is the priestly solo.

Remember also that King Josiah reformed and centralized the Temple Cult in the Seventh Century before the Common Era. Before Josiah, there was a loose network of priests, several regional shrines, and a

more locally autonomous practice of faith. Josiah's reforms make Jerusalem and its temple central to religious life.

*Leviticus*, presented as a summary of law and polity, pronounced from God above, and inserted in the very center of the narrative of Israel's formation, lent credibility and authority to the Priestly order, especially those lucky enough to be living in Jerusalem.

This is a collection of rituals, rules, ordinances, and laws that were intended to be followed by a specific people, in a specific place, in a specific time. I think it's important to remember that none of us in this room occupy that place or time. We no longer live in a world of ritual sacrifice; male progeny is no longer a requirement for the inheritance of land and wealth; we don't have a Tabernacle that requires consecration. Most importantly, we no longer live in a construct where we believe these ordinances are necessary to ensure that we remain in God's presence or are the recipients of God's love. We needn't and we shouldn't read this work as a manual for righteous living in 2022.

But, but...when we read our scriptures, we need to do so with the understanding that *Leviticus* influenced many of their authors. For the Priestly writers, following the instructions given in *Leviticus* was the way to ensure stability. If the people obeyed the law, God would dwell in the Tabernacle, which meant God was present, and God's presence would protect Israel from distress.

The Priestly order wanted order for the universe. It's a fool's errand to seek satisfactory explanation for why cotton and salmon were considered clean and orderly, but shellfish and polyester were not. We will not find a comforting answer to this question any more easily than we'll resolve why violence and the subjugation of women and other

marginalized persons were so prevalent in these codes. I think the best we can do is to view these writings as an attempt, however flawed and imperfect, to live as a faithful community.

I would encourage you to glance at the section headings of *Leviticus* – there are ordinances for how to live, and how to interact with other people, and how to perform the ritual worship of a people who lived long ago. If you are curious or litigious, maybe you'll find something of value. Maybe there's something that's SO opposite and SO foreign to your way of faithful living that it will illumine a more positive path – Here's what not to do! Maybe you'll just wait till next week when we move on to *Numbers*.

We're all wandering through some sort of wilderness. In the weeks ahead, whatever path you choose, may you find sources, means, methods, or other expressions that help illumine God's presence and love more clearly in your lives.

### ***Homily: The Order of Things***

If you read any of *Leviticus* this week, I hope you won't skip Chapter 25. I didn't plan it this way, but its words are timely given current events.

Our Earth is tired. The Colorado River is dry; food shortages are preventing access to the produce we've grown accustomed to procuring with ease; elsewhere floods and fire are taking their toll.

Student loans are being forgiven, an unforgivable offense to some. Mortgage rates are rising in the hopes that they'll get high enough to deter home-buying in the short term so that people will want to buy again in the long term. At least I think that's what the analysts are saying. It's little consolation in an affordable housing crisis.

Pandemic has exacerbated exhaustion. Laborers used to quit out loud. They still do, but now there's also something called quiet quitting, which isn't so much quitting as it is living your life like George Constanza from *Seinfeld*, yet somehow reframing it in a positive way. But that's a generational debate, and I'm just a Gen-Xer living in the shadow of Baby Boomers, and Millennials, and Gen-Zers who will never fully understand the greatness of flannel shirts, alternative rock music, and dial-up Internet access. Exhaustion. Workers tired. Voters tired. Teachers tired. Parents tired. Church-goers tired. Humanity tired. Inside and outside, quiet, and out loud.

Humanity, from time to time, maybe all the time, gets to thinking that God's creation is ownable. We've called dibs on every resource. Everything's been parceled out, and the existing parcels keep being re-parceled. The result of all this parceling is that we no longer feel beholden or responsible to the order of the world God created. Instead, we are beholden to the disorder of artificial systems of power.

Jacqueline and I welcomed a daughter this summer. It took nine months for her to be created. It will take longer than that for us to get the accent mark of her middle name printed on her Social Security Card. God gave her breath and value. But that life of hers won't have much value in our world without proper documentation. And that seems out of order to me. In fact, it seems rather disorderly.

The ancient writers offer a theological protest to the disorder and chaos of systems. Deeds, and debts, and consumption, and marginalization are not the order of God. Regardless of the wilderness we occupy, we are resident aliens in God's world. We are not owners of the land, created to consume and deplete the resources around us. We are tenants of the land, created to steward, replenish, and preserve the resources around us.

The land must rest. Our appetite for consumption must rest. Our need to win, to own, to dominate, to be in power must also rest.

Can you imagine a land that rests, or a river that flows undammed or unclaimed every seventh year? Can you imagine a recalibration of our labors every seventh year? Can you imagine a fiftieth year, when lands are restored to their original inhabitants, and debts are wiped clean, and communities can reinvent and replenish themselves?

Jesus had a way of parsing through all the minutia and legalese of Torah, and providing his listeners with the key takeaways. Here's one example: In Luke's account, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth proclaiming:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
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.

Jesus read from the scroll of *Isaiah*, but his message was rooted in the Jubilee of *Leviticus*.

I believe, to proclaim the year of Jubilee is to proclaim, indeed demand, the inbreaking of God's kin-dom. It is to choose the order of God's good, just, creative, plentiful world over the disorder of selfish and corrupt systems.

In truth, there is no historical evidence that a Jubilee year, a re-ordering if you will, was ever implemented or enforced in Israel.

It seems to me, there's no time like the present, a time of disorder, to make some new history. Jesus wasn't just speaking to an audience in Nazareth all those years ago. (By the way, the hometown crowd refused to listen). He's speaking to you and me as well. It is the year of our Lord's favor, friends. Let's engage in some of God's disorderly conduct!

Amen.