

It's Harvest Time

**A Sermon Preached for Pentecost by
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When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. {39} For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." {40} And he

testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." {41} So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

Acts 2:1-6, 12-18, 38-41 NRSV

The second lesson today consists of selected verses from a rather obscure passage in the 23rd Chapter of the book of Leviticus. Hopefully, by the end of today's sermon, the passage won't seem so obscure:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ... {4} These are the appointed festivals of the LORD, the holy convocations, which you shall celebrate at the time appointed for them.

{5} In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, there shall be a passover offering to the LORD,

{6} and on the fifteenth day of the same month is the festival of unleavened bread to the LORD; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. ...{10} Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest.

{15} And from the day after the sabbath, from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the elevation offering, you shall count off seven weeks; they shall be complete. {16} You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the LORD.

From Leviticus 23:1-21 NRSV

The reason that we're looking at this part of Leviticus on Pentecost Sunday is that if we want to understand the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection for our lives *today*, then we need to learn something about the three Jewish holidays described in this lesson.

Here's why. Let's say you once had an uncle. We'll call him 'Sam.' Sam was born on the Fourth of July, chose to get married on Veteran's Day, and died on Memorial Day. You'd probably say that Sam was practically destined to be a patriot and the rest of us wouldn't be surprised to find out that he served in the Army before running for congress. It turns out that Jesus' story is a little bit like your Uncle Sam's.

What day was Jesus born on? Christmas Eve? December 25th? The truth is, we don't know exactly what day it was, do we? The Bible doesn't tell us. The actual date of Jesus' birth must not have been particularly symbolic or meaningful. But Jesus' death and resurrection are different stories. The Bible *does* give us those dates.

What day did Jesus die on? Good Friday. The Gospels differ slightly in their accounts, but the first Good Friday was almost certainly during the Passover holidays and quite probably on the second day of Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

And what day did Jesus rise on? Easter Sunday. The date of Easter now floats around from year to year, but back then, that first Easter fell on the Sabbath in the middle of Passover week, the day known to the Jewish people as the Feast of First Fruits.

One more question: on what day after Jesus' death and resurrection were the first people baptized? Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks.

These are the three holidays described in Leviticus. Jesus died on the Feast of Unleavened Bread and arose on the Feast of First Fruits. Then, on the Feast of Weeks, his Spirit gave birth to the church. This isn't mere coincidence; God is telling us something here. Let's find out what it might be.

First, we have to remember what Passover is about. Any ideas? How about:

- Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt.
- God sparing the Jews from death.
- Death of the first born? Sacrifice of lambs to mark doorposts.
- It's known as the Feast of Freedom.

By Jesus' day Passover week was essentially a collection of loosely related holidays with days of preparation at the beginning and days of celebration at the end with days of sacrifice in the middle.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was the day when Jews remembered how they had to rush out of slavery in Egypt and didn't have enough time to let the bread rise; so they ate unleavened bread, matzah. In ancient times Jews prepared for this day by scrupulously removing any and all yeast from their homes. This wasn't an empty ritual. It was an exercise in spiritual cleansing because they had come to see yeast as a symbol for sin. To prepare one's home -- and oneself -- for Passover, they symbolically put away, hidden, or buried their sin. This buried sin was out of sight, but it was not yet atoned for. This was achieved, symbolically at least, through the sacrificial death of a lamb in the temple.

If the Feast of Unleavened Bread was about cleansing and sacrifice, the Feast of First Fruits was all about harvest and celebration. On this day the High Priest would take two sheaves of barley from the first harvest in Israel, which came from a hillside on the Sea of Galilee, where the conditions for an early harvest were just right. The priest would offer special prayers in the Temple and present the sheaves as an offering to God. The people saw these first fruits of the barley crop as kind of an advance that God was making to them, an advance on the full harvest to come. In response, the people offered a small portion of this first crop back to God as their way of expressing gratitude for what they had already received and for what they would receive in the months ahead.

The date of the third holiday in our passage, Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, was tied into the date of the second one, the Feast of First Fruits. Pentecost fell seven weeks (plus a day) after First Fruits. It was fifty days later, hence the Greek name for the holiday, *Pente-cost*. If First Fruits was a foretaste of the feast to come; Pentecost was seen as the fulfillment of the promise. It was the day when the *full* harvest was celebrated. It wasn't the final harvest of the year, but it was the largest and most important harvest festival in terms of the volume and variety of foods that were celebrated.

In an agricultural country you can imagine that a day like Pentecost was a huge deal. Think of it as Thanksgiving, Oktoberfest, and the Farm Show all rolled into one big day. Jews from every corner of the world came

to Jerusalem for what amounted to the biggest party of the year. They sang thanksgiving songs and feasted on the seven Biblical fruits of the land. Each species was vitally important to the people of Israel: grapes, figs, dates, pomegranate, olives, barley, and wheat. Each one represented a precious gift from God.

On the Feast of First Fruits people trusted in God's promise that he would provide for them. On the Feast of Weeks people celebrated exactly how wonderfully God had provided for them. There would be no famine; they would not starve. They could see that God was fulfilling his promise before their eyes. It was as obvious as the fruit in their baskets.

Are you beginning to see why God might have arranged for three key events in salvation history to fall on these three holidays?

Jesus died on or about the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Just as a woman might prepare her house for that holiday by putting away all her yeast, in Jesus God was preparing his family, for the harvest. In Jesus' death, the death of God's first born, we see God putting away sin, destroying its power. And in Jesus' burial we see a righteous and fertile seed being planted in the ground. Jesus explained his own upcoming death using this kind of language, saying, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24 NRSV)

The seed planted on the Feast of Unleavened Bread emerged from the ground on the Feast of First Fruits. Saint Paul saw this, perhaps before anyone else did. He said, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died." (1 Corinthians 15: 26 NRSV) Just like the sheaves of barley from Galilee were a sign to the world on the Feast of First Fruits that the whole crop was surely coming, so too, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the man from Galilee, on that same Feast day, was God's unmistakable sign to Jesus' followers that the resurrection of Jesus' whole family was coming at the end of time.

Just 50 days later the reaping began when not one or two, but *3000* people were baptized at one time, right outside the Temple. Is that a bumper crop or what? Fruit from every tribe and tongue, people from every corner of the world, came forward to be symbolically raised from the dead and be spiritually born again. On Pentecost the disciples could see that God was

fulfilling what had been promised on the Feast of First Fruits (that is, Easter): His Holy Spirit was being poured out not just on a few, but on *all* people.

So what does all this have to do with us today?

Jesus' death on the Feast of Unleavened Bread means that death is the ultimate defeat of sin and the final cleansing before the beginning of new life. Death isn't the end; in death divine seeds of new life take root.

Jesus' resurrection on the Feast of First Fruits means that Jesus' resurrection wasn't just about *him*; it was a promise to all who call him Lord and Savior that we, too, will be resurrected at the end of time.

And Jesus' pouring out of his spirit on Pentecost means that God is fulfilling his promise in our midst even now. Through baptism we can receive new life even before the final harvest.

Jesus could have died and been raised at anytime and God could have given birth to the church anytime, but God chose these three holidays to tell us something we need to know right now:

- Death is a beginning.
- Resurrection is coming.
- God is at work in our lives everyday. Amen.

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