

Celebrating God's Work In Time

Bible Reading:
Leviticus 23: 1-44

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Anybody recognize this?

It's the Canadian war memorial at Vimy Ridge, France - commemorating one of the greatest, and one of the most difficult moments in our nation's war history.

How about this?

It's Province House in Charlottetown, PEI. The first meeting to discuss federal union was held here in 1864.

Both of these places are important monuments for our nation. They are places that generations can visit, see and experience – helping to anchor and recall important milestones in history;

crucial events, important people.

providing a chance to pause, to reflect,

and, when appropriate, to celebrate.

These sort of visual monuments and markers can be large.....

or small -

Like these (show picture of wedding rings).

recalling vows made and a life journey begun by two individuals who leave their separate paths to join with each other for better & worse, sickness & health, richer & poorer till death do we part.

That's why often you'll see a picture frame propped up on someone's desk, and in it a photo of their family. Or, somewhere in a family home, there will be a wall with a family photo collage: parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren.

Helping to remember significant people.

Go up on Parliament Hill and you see the same thing in statue form.

Like this one of Alexander Mackenzie, Prime Minister from 1873-78.

All designed to help us remember.

Memorials are not all made out of stone, steel or photographic paper.

They can happen through events and rituals -

So we celebrate anniversaries, birthdays, Remembrance Day, Canada Day.

This is how God made human beings. We have a need to remember. Reaching back helps us to anchor our todays and prepare for our tomorrows.

Monuments, markers, memorials

be they visual or participatory

help us to do that.

We have been created with a need for this in all of life, including our faith life.

I'd like you to reach way back to the very beginning of the service.

Remember the first words we spoke?

Grace to you and peace.....

....from Him who was, and who is, and who is to come.....

Grace, and peace -

blessed into our lives from the God of all time

past time

the moment of our present
the unknown future

The God of history
The God of today
The God of hope

Psalms 96 tells God's people to:

*2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name; **tell** of his salvation from day to day*

Over 200 times the gathered community of God's people are told to **remember**:

Remember what the Lord your God did.....
Remember that you were slaves....
Remember the words of Moses....
Remember the works God has done....
Remember His covenant.....

Deut 32:7 Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you.

Remember!

And so, when the infant nation of Israel is moving out of the desert, where they had wandered for 40 years, across the Jordan River, and into the land that would become their home -

when they cross the river in a miraculous way, God stopping the flow of the water, making it pile up, forcing the ground to dry out enough that the people could cross safely

when that was all done, Joshua, the leader of the people, instructs them to take 12 stones and build a monument

Joshua 4:6 so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?'

7 then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever."

Visual, participatory memorials and markers.

That's why the Lord had a tabernacle built for the wandering nation -

a huge tent to which they could look, and where they could go in order to participate in the act of faith remembrance and worship.

And, in later years, a temple.

That is also the spirit and framework in which the Lord designated certain festivals and feasts to be celebrated.

They became monuments in time, living memorials encountered through the cycle of the calendar, calling the people to active remembrance.

Every year, at various points throughout the year, the nation was to stop and engage in an elaborate system of rituals which forced them to take notice of their dependence on their Creator and Redeemer.

Please open your bibles to Leviticus 23:1-44, p. 109

We'll read together here a summary of those feast days.

Here's a diagram of these festivals:

SEVENTH DAY - The Sabbath

- Remembering Creation, rest from labor, rest from slavery

FIRST MONTH - Passover; Unleavened Bread; Firstfruits

- Spared from death, freed from sin, thanks for barley harvest

SEVEN X SEVEN DAYS LATER - Feast of Weeks (Pentecost)

- "Thanksgiving Day" for wheat harvest; later remembering giving of Law

SEVENTH MONTH - Feast of Trumpets

- Prayer service asking for God's favor

SEVENTH MONTH - *Yom Kippur* The Day Of Atonement

- Prayers for cleansing from sin, time of fasting & sacrifice

SEVENTH MONTH - Feast of Tabernacles (booths)

- Remembering journey in wilderness, dependence on God's providence

Week after week, and then at regular times throughout year after year, believers in the Lord would stop from their work, and take time to remember.

Active remembrance - animals butchered and blood sprinkled, produce waved, wine & oil poured, fasting, work stopped, shelters built, sacred assemblies held, prayers offered.

So it went, week after week, year after year.

Right into the time of Christ.

The New Testament records Jesus and his disciples going to the temple at various times to participate in these great memorials and living monuments of faith. After Jesus ascended to heaven, the apostles and early Church continued to celebrate the feasts. Acts 20 records how Paul hurried up his journey in order to be in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost -

Remember? The Jewish equivalent to Thanksgiving Day.

However, things also began to *change* for Christians in their celebration of the feasts.

Celebration was still needed.

Memorials and markers were still important.

Ritual could not be abandoned.

But things **had** radically been altered.

Christ's work on the cross was completed.

The tomb was empty; death was defeated.

All the promises of the prophets had come true in Christ.

Everything in Old Testament history had pointed forward to Him.

And from then on, everything in New Testament history,

including our present age right now in 2003

everything moves forward grounded firmly in Him.

Colossians 1 puts it this way about Jesus - please say it with me:

17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

All the feasts of the Old Testament began, then, to take on a new shape and character.

Of the feasts I mentioned, do any of you know which was **THE** dominant, **THE** defining feast for Old Testament believers?

Passover, Pentecost, Atonement, Trumpets, Booths..... which one?

It was the feast of Passover.

Actually - the feast of Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread and Firstfruits all became rolled into one grand faith observation and time of grand religious ritual. It was the spiritual time of national identity for Israel.

The early Church was primarily Jewish in makeup, and so Passover remained as their great event..... but with a huge shift.

There was no longer a Lamb.

No more sacrifice

Because, says the Bible, 1 Cor 5:7 –

Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.

The accounts of Jesus' life in Scripture show that he suffered and died during which great feast time?

Passover!

The gospel of John narrates the death of Jesus as taking place on 14 Nissan, the precise date in the Jewish calendar when the Passover lamb would have been sacrificed.

Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.

The resurrection occurring, then, on 16 Nissan.

The central event in Christian remembrance and celebration was the death, and tied closely to it, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It was celebrated each week as they gathered in sacred assembly - no longer on the last day of the week, but now on the first day, the day of the Resurrection.

And it was celebrated each year.

In time the Church settled for celebrating on the Friday and the Sunday that immediately followed 14 Nissan. Which is where we now place our sacred memorial events of Good Friday and Easter.

Interesting note - you may have heard of Sundays referred to as "Little Easters" - each week a celebration of the Resurrection.

It is this great Easter celebration of our Lord's death and resurrection that anchors all memorial actions and festivals of Christians today.

It is the centre of our gathering in this building - notice the largest and most prominent symbol in the largest and most prominent room.....

the empty cross.

In fact, some churches are actually built in the shape of a cross.

It forms the centre of our weekly sacred assembly in worship.

We proclaim and celebrate in liturgy the great mystery -

"Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."

It is what we share in holy ways when we break bread and share a cup at Holy Communion.

And it is the anchor out of which has developed a year-long cycle of festivals in the God-mandated, biblically obedient manner of observing monuments & markers by observation and participation: memorials that ground our faith in history, and restore our hope in the culmination of history on the day when Christ will return.

You may have heard of something called "*The Church Year.*"

And many of you have asked questions about titles listed in the bulletin under the date - like Advent, Epiphany, Lent.

What do they mean?

Where do they come from?

They come from ancient Hebrew festivals, given by God.

Some 3000 years old.

We follow in this pattern, which is far older and far bigger than ourselves.

Now - as a Christian Reformed community in Canada, we've perhaps not paid the attention to it that we should have. Maybe because we didn't understand it too well.

So, let me quickly sketch where it all comes from.

I've already mentioned the foundation - Easter, built on the Old Testament feast of Passover.

Move seven weeks forward from Passover in the Old Testament Jewish calendar and you arrive at the feast of Passover - the festival of the Harvest, and the remembrance of God giving the Law.

Acts 2 records this to be the day when the Holy Spirit came on the Church,

the Spirit who would gather the harvest of souls into the Kingdom of Christ;

the Spirit who, said prophet Jeremiah, would write the Law of God right onto the hearts of believers.

And so, today, seven weeks after the Christian Passover, after Easter, we CONTINUE to celebrate Pentecost.

Between Easter and Pentecost, the Bible records the Ascension of Jesus to heaven - on the 40th day after Easter. Which is when we gather for a special service of worship on that Thursday evening. We celebrate that Christ is reigning in Heaven with the Father. He is King!

In addition to moving forward, Christians also move **back** from the great Christian Passover/Easter time.

The Jewish *Mishnah* required a period of fasting and preparation for Passover. The Church gathered in and continued this spiritual practice. And from that developed a forty day period of solemn preparation.

In many languages this is known as "*The Forty Days*."

English is the exception, where it's given the odd name of "*Lent*."

Why forty days?

Forty is a biblical number of preparation.

The rains fell on the earth in the flood of Noah for 40 days, cleansing and preparing the earth for a new beginning.

Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the law for 40 days, preparing the people for obedience to God.

Israel was in the wilderness 40 years being prepared as a nation.

The spies prepared Israel for the invasion of Canaan by doing their work 40 days

Prophet Elijah prepared for his greatest service by fasting and praying in the wilderness for 40 days.

Jonah preached to Ninevah and announced a time before they would be judged - it was 40 days.

Jesus prepared for His ministry by fasting and praying in the desert for 40 days.

Get the picture?

Forty days to prepare for the Great celebration of Christ, our Passover Lamb, sacrificed for us.

ONLY

Remember what I said about Sundays?
That they were known as..... what?
Little Easters.

Can't mourn or fast on those days, said the Church Fathers.

So.....

Do a bit of math:
Six weeks, subtract 6 Sundays, leaves 36 days.
Need to add four more.
Brings you to a Wednesday.

Know what that is called?

Ash Wednesday.
Beginning the period of fasting and spiritual preparation.

Ashes are applied to either the hand or the forehead of believers who gather.

Why ashes?

Ashes are the biblical symbol for repentance. Jesus alludes to it when he condemns the cities of Bethsaida and Chorazin for not doing penance.

"If the miracles performed in you had taken place in Trye and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes".(Matthew 11:21)

Ashes are also a solemn reminder of our fallen human state. In Genesis 3:19 God says to our first parents:

19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Why the forehead or hand? That is where God commanded Israel to apply the Law in Deuteronomy 6.

For some reason, this is one day that is not spoken of much in Reformed Churches in Canada. This year, though, we will celebrate an Ash Wednesday service here at Calvin Church. March 5 at 7:30pm we'll gather here in the Sanctuary to begin a 40 day period of solemn preparation. And we'll be handing out a devotional booklet to use in your family devotions between then and Easter weekend.

You'll hear more about this in coming weeks.

Easter weekend also is the anchor from which is measured the other great festival of the Christian calendar - the feast of Christ's birth. St. Augustine, and others with him in the fourth and fifth centuries, observed the conception of our Lord at the same time as His death and resurrection.

They believed that occurred, at least on the calendar in use at their time, on March 25. Roll forward nine months, and guess where you find yourself?

December 25.

When we today celebrate..... Christmas.

Before Christmas a period of preparation - of getting ready to celebrate Christ's coming; both His first coming and His return.

We know that as Advent.

And following Christmas, a ritual remembering of Jesus being revealed to Israel and to the world in highlights of His life and ministry. We use the ancient Greek word meaning "*to display, to show*" to describe that time.

It is ***Epiphany***.

Today we are coming close to the end of the season of Epiphany, the time of Christ being revealed to the world in his ministry.

Two more Little Easters, Sundays, and we'll be entering the season of preparation called "*The Forty Days*" - Lent.

All of it part of a cycle.

A living monument.

Active involvement by believers in rituals, actions, fasts, prayers, sacred assemblies, offerings ----- all focused on the One from whom all blessings flow,

the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

from whom all things come

and to whom all things will return.

the One who is our light and our salvation

the One who is our hope and strength.

We act and remember in obedience to the command of God, first given thousands of years ago.

We act and remember as holy people, gathered in holy space.

Remembering.

Celebrating the One who was, and is and is to come.

Reaching back,

and so being empowered in this present moment

to move forward.

In our culture today, with our extreme pressures and busyness, it's very easy to put these sorts of practices to the side.

It's easy to say, "*I don't have time.*"

It's easy to opt out.

But we aren't doing ourselves any favors by doing so.

For, as with all people,

we need memorials; we require monuments.

God made us so that sights and sounds and activities help to anchor our past, give meaning to our present, and shape our future.

Also in faith.

In celebration and sacred assembly and special ritual,

our faith is deepened.

our hope is strengthened.

our love for the Saviour is secured.

So join me - as we continue to live the cycle handed down to us for thousands of years.

The cycle of faith.

The celebration of the salvation that comes from our God.