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Lent 3 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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Jesu Juva

“The Torah Story”: Leviticus – Growing as Children

Learning the ABCs. Learning to read and write. Learning right from wrong. Learning what it means to be in a family, in a church, in the world. Learning how to tie your shoes. Learning how to eat and drink and play and work. From the moment we are born until the time that we die, we are learning. And we are growing. Growing from infants to toddlers to children.

So it was also with the people of God. If the book of **Genesis** is the story of beginnings and firsts, and the book of **Exodus** is about the birth of the people of God, then the book of **Leviticus** is about growing as children. Learning what it means to be the people of God. Learning the ABCs of life lived with a holy God in your very midst (!). And learning about life in relationship with God, and how that can be interfered with, interrupted, and broken in about a thousand different ways. And this is not easy. For this learning is not about learning *facts* – like reading, writing, and arithmetic – but about learning *truth*. And truth is harder to learn than facts because it is not as tangible. You can't look at a map, or learn phonetics, or use blocks to learn the truth. And yet truth is much more vital.

And so what we have in the book of Leviticus is God teaching His children truth using (if I may say it in this way) “divine audio-visual” tools. Instead of teaching with abstract discussions of sin and grace, everything is set before the eyes of the people in visible and tangible objects – for example, a bowl of cereal, a red heifer, or a scapegoat. There are sacrifices and rituals. And there is a definite way of doing things. And so it is through instruction connected with objects and actions that God teaches His people to understand the difference between the holy and the common, between the clean and the unclean, between sin and grace. And through it all, teaching His people about His mercy and His promises that would be fulfilled in the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Messiah. The Saviour who would be the Tabernacle, the Lamb, the sacrifice, the food, the priest, the scapegoat, the cleanser, the One who would – by the forgiveness of our sins – make us holy and clean. His children would learn by doing . . . and what a powerful impact all this doing would make.

And so as we read through the book of Leviticus, we read of what is being done in the Tabernacle and in all of Israel – to teach the people.

For example: how clean is clean? Words regarding cleanliness of every size and shape teach the children of God about the cleanness that God would provide through the forgiveness of sins. A real cleanness that we could *never* accomplish!

And then there are all those sacrifices! Burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings, fellowship offerings – there were always offerings going on in the Tabernacle! Always there was death, carcasses being cut apart, and blood being splashed about . . . a very vivid, visual reminder of the seriousness of sin and its consequences. That the wages of sin is death. And the continual sacrifices reminding of the constant need of forgiveness and life from our Father in Heaven. If we take sin too lightly in our day and age, *they couldn't!* They saw sin and death and its ugliness before their very eyes, each and every day.

Then we hear of the priesthood – those men specially chosen and anointed by God as the ones authorized by Him to offer these sacrifices and come before Him. Because it is no small thing to be the mediator between a holy God and His filthy, sinful people. The deaths of Nadab and Abihu, who did what they thought instead of what God instructed, shows the danger in self-made and self-appointed worship. And in this we see a picture of Jesus, the specially chosen One, anointed in His Baptism, to offer Himself as the sacrifice for the sin of the world. To be our once-and-for-all mediator. The only one who could.

God instructs His children about clean and unclean animals, and of purifications – especially after childbirth – teaching us that not just any sacrifice for sin would do, but only the One born perfect, without any blemish or defect. The One born from the womb of the virgin, holy and sinless. The One who needed no purifying Himself, and so would be the purification for us.

And then God appoints specific feasts and festivals for his people to celebrate throughout the year. So that they will remember the great and gracious acts of the Lord – especially His deliverance *out of Egypt*. But not just remember *as history*, but as the ongoing reality of the Lord's work for them. That by looking back to the *accomplished* work of God, they would also looking forward to the *promised* work of God, which He was going to fulfill in His Messiah. All this divine audio-visual! God

teaching His children, each and every day.

But if you had to isolate one thing in the book of Leviticus – one thing that would be the central and most important teaching of God for His children, it would be **the Day of Atonement**. We heard a portion of that chapter earlier. It was the ONE DAY whereon the High Priest would enter into the Holy of Holies, with blood, and make atonement for the sin of all the people. It is a picture of what would happen for us and for all people of all time on that day we call Good Friday. That was the real Day of Atonement, when our great High Priest offered Himself for the sin of the world. And with that, all sacrifice, all cleansing, all priesthood, all everything, was fulfilled. Nothing left undone.

And so the book of Leviticus is not just a bunch of laws from an obsessive-compulsive God – though it may sound that way. It is really TORAH – a word which is often translated as law, but in reality is a much bigger word than that. Better translated as instruction, practical direction, or **guidance**. And I like that last, for truly Leviticus is the book that **guides** us . . . **to Christ**. That **guides** us to understand and see His work in a new light. Leviticus is a book of creative, sanctifying, and life-giving instruction. The words of a Holy God, that He might dwell with His people. And not only dwell with them, but forgive them, and make them holy.

It is what He is still doing with us today. The Lamb of God here for us, teaching, forgiving, washing, purifying, and feeding. He dwells with us, that we might dwell with Him – pure and holy – forever.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.