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Exodus 23:14-19
Fifty-first Message
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ARE YOU ON TIME?

SERIES: CREATING COMMUNITIES OF SHALOM IN DAILY LIFE

My question for you this morning is: Are you on time? Before you quiver in fear that I'm going to rebuke your ability to arrive at church services on time, let me assure you our subject is much larger than that. In the Western world, time is perhaps our most sought after commodity. On certain occasions, like the end of a school year, we feel like we have nothing left over to give. Fierce competition from many different quarters vies to shape our calendars by their agendas. Perhaps the most prominent is the world of sports. Seasons of the year are defined more by their respective sports than the change in the earth's relative position to the sun. Terms like Spring Training, Fall Football, March Madness, Mr. October and Winter Classic take our focus off the natural rhythms within the creation, to the intense drama of warring egos competing for the ultimate prize of "World Champion." Fueled by greed and passion for glory, each season gets longer, running into the next, so that all time becomes the same, a non-stop sports frenzy 24/7.

The political world too punctuates our year with national holidays commemorating veterans, national heroes, the labor force, mothers and fathers, and our nation's birth. Added to these are school calendars that shape the lives of our children from fall to the end of spring. Schools demand varying degrees of parental involvement throughout the year – and rightly so – but some can be excessive in their expectations. Finally, there is the world of business that operates on an entirely different calendar, the fiscal year. Here time is managed for one end only: profit. In today's highly competitive global economy, the pressure to survive is so great that all natural boundaries of time have simply eroded away, leaving no distinction between night and day or seasons and years. All time becomes the same: a non-stop working frenzy 24/7. Having our lives shaped by these competing calendars is enough to drive the most stable person insane. What time are you on?

Since the beginning of time, God's people were to be distinguished from the idolatrous world around them by how they related to time, for "time" was the first component of the creation that God made holy. So rather than being slaves of time or to time, God's people were to be marked out by their freedom to rest and celebrate the Creator, who actually worked on their behalf in his great acts of creation and redemption. In Exodus 23:10-13, we saw that Israel was commanded to imitate the divine dance of the Creator by working six units of time and resting one. For one complete day out of six, and one year out of seven, there was to be no work done. Now God instructs Israel how her yearly calendar was to be punctuated with three celebratory feasts to the Lord (23:14-17); this is followed with four commands to guard the worship of the Lord from anything that would diminish God's glory (23:18-19).

I. Time To Celebrate the Creator In the Present

Exod 23:14-17

Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me. Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in that month you came out of Egypt. No one is to appear before me empty-handed. Celebrate the Feast of Harvest with the firstfruits of the crops you sow in your field. Celebrate the

Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in your crops from the field. Three times a year all the men are to appear before the Sovereign LORD. (Exod 23:14-17 NIV)

The operative word of the text is *chag*, meaning "feast," "festival," or "procession," along with its verbal counterpart *chagag*, "to celebrate." Israel's year was to be shaped by three pilgrimage festivals, when every adult male was required to leave his village and appear before God at the national sanctuary. Each year at three appointed times, every male in Israel renewed his covenant to God and to his people with a joyous celebration of God's bountiful gifts.

A. Feasts Were Mandatory

Note first that these feasts were not optional but mandatory for every male in the land. Participation in them required time, travel and expense. If Israel objected that such a massive exodus of men would leave the country defenseless, God promised that he himself would see to it that no one would covet their land during these three occasions (Exod 34:24). Within God's promised protection Israel could worship the Lord without inhibition or fear. If people objected that their work prohibited them from attending, God timed each of these feasts to occur during the natural breaks in the agricultural season: "the quiet days right after spring planting, the relaxed time after the early grain harvest, and the time following the fall harvest."¹ In this way each worshipper could celebrate with an undivided heart of joy.

B. Feasts Were "In Sync" With the Seasons

The second thing to note is that each of these festivals was uniquely tied to the agricultural cycle in the land. The first feast mentioned, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, took place for one week after Passover, from the 14th to the 21st day of the month of *Abib* (our March/April), when the stalks had hardened in the ripening process of the grain. This coincided with the earliest grain harvest of barley, which was planted in winter. From this new crop unleavened cakes were made and eaten in celebration to the Lord as the One who provided the first bounty of crops for another year.

The second feast, called here the Feast of Harvest or the Feast of Weeks (Exod 34:22), celebrated the first fruits of the wheat harvest, seven weeks following Passover. We know it by the name Pentecost, the Greek name for fifty, or the fiftieth day after Passover. "This 'early crop-harvest' was a further harbinger of the fuller harvest to follow at the end of the agricultural year."² As explained in Deuteronomy, this was to be an occasion of supreme joy as it gave concrete evidence that more life was to come:

Count off seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. Then celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you. And rejoice before the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, the Levites in your towns, and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows living among you. (Deut 16:9-11)

The third and final feast, the Feast of Ingathering or Feast of Tabernacles, coincided with the final fall harvest at the end of the agricultural year. It came in the seventh month, *Tishri* (September/October). This was a celebration of all the Lord's bounty, not only from various grains but also from the orchards and vineyards. It began with a blowing of trumpets on the first day of the month, followed by the Day of Atonement on the tenth day of the month. The festive season concluded with the week long Feast of Ingathering, beginning on the fifteenth day. During this time the Israelites were to construct temporary field huts, or "booths" (*succhoth*) to live in. These "booths," Janzen explains, "may have originally referred to simple shelters of branches and leaves built in orchards and vineyards. The booths would shade peasants protecting the ripening fruit from robbers and animals. Eventually the booths were associated with Israel's life in tents during the wilderness wanderings after the exodus from Egypt (Lev 23:42-43; Neh 8:15-17)."³

As every male made these pilgrimages from spring through fall to appear before God he was *keeping time* with the Creator, who had been working from heaven to grant rain and fertility to the earth as a gift to his people. Therefore each celebration consisted of offerings from those good gifts, not only to establish the fact that God was the ultimate owner of the land but, contrary to all the idols of the world, this God was generous and worked abundantly for his people:

So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul— then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and oil. (Deut 11:13-14)

Because there was always more than enough bounty to go around, God's people could take significant time off from work to celebrate with unadulterated joy and enthusiasm. Therefore it says, "No one is to appear before me empty-handed." To stand before the Lord with no gift would be an insult to his faithful work and gracious generosity.

It is difficult for us city dwellers to imagine the complete integration one must have felt with God and nature during these festivals. After the land had received the gift of heavenly rain, and given forth its first or final fruits, it paused to breathe. As it did so, all of Israel stopped their labor and celebrated, giving the best of those gifts back to God.

In 1994 I took my sabbatical in Israel with Bernard Bell. At his suggestion we visited Neot Kedumim, the Biblical Landscape Preserve in Israel. Located about halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, it was designed to recreate the Biblical landscape with all the varieties of plant life within their natural terrain. In that place I learned that this divine dance was not as simple as we might think. Achieving a plentiful harvest from the seven different varieties of crops required just the right amount of early and late rains, as well as a divinely orchestrated balance between the northern and southern winds. Nogah Hareveni describes the intricate, delicate balance needed to result in a successful harvest for the seven varieties of crops on Shavuot:

"The northern wind" – the northwesterly and northern winds which blow over Israel between Passover and Shavuot – frequently bring rain. The northern wind is most beneficial to wheat if it blows during the wheat's early stages of ripening, while it is still young. But the same wind can wreak havoc on the olive crop if the buds have already opened into flowers. Olive blossoms, like the flowers of Israel's native grapes and male date flowers, need successive days of dry heat ("southern wind"). Under such ideal conditions these flowers open, allowing the pollen to reach the pistils for pollination. But if the heat wave is too brief and pollination has not been completed before the cold northern wind comes, the olive flowers may be blown away by the wind or the pollen washed off by rain. The same danger threatens the grape, pomegranate and date flowers. Therefore, this northern

wind can, at one and the same time, be a **blessing to wheat** "when it has reached a third of its ripening" and a **curse to the olives** if it comes after they have blossomed but before they have pollinated.

On the other hand, a prolonged southern wind (the dry wind coming during this period from the south or southeast) is good for the olive as well as for the grape, date and pomegranate crops. However, this same southern wind can devastate the wheat and barley crops it is comes before the kernels have filled with starch, for then the grain will be scorched...

The Talmudic Sages explained how these phenomena were symbolized by placing "the table in the north and the menorah in the south." The shewbread which was placed on the table, representing wheat and barley, faced the direction of the northern wind. The menorah, lit with olive oil, faced the direction of the southern wind. Placed together in the Temple, they symbolized, according to the Sages, **the plea to the One Creator that each wind come at the right time:** let the northern wind come during the first weeks after Passover...Let the southern wind come only after the grain kernels have filled and the stalks hardened, but let it prevail until the flowers of the olive, grape, date and pomegranate have been pollinated.⁴

With such a delicate balance needed in nature's complex eco systems, one can imagine the joy experienced on Shavuot when the Creator granted a bountiful harvest from all seven varieties of crops. Celebrating these feasts not only reinforced Israel's relationship with her Creator, it also brought her closer to the Lord as her Redeemer as each of these feasts became memorials of God's gracious acts of salvation.

II. Time to Celebrate Redemption in the Past

Israel is told to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the month *Abib* because that is when God delivered them from Egypt. As Israel in obedience paused to celebrate the beginning of the agricultural year, she was also keenly reminded of her supernatural birth as the people of God. Thus living "in sync" with the Creator also caused Israel to be "in sync" with God's calendar of redemption throughout the year. Eating unleavened bread from the first fruits of the barley harvest would serve as a continual reminder of how she left Egypt in haste after that most holy night of Passover.

With regard to the Feast of Weeks, there is no historical act of salvation associated with it in this text or in the rest of the Old Testament. However, later Jewish tradition associated this feast with the giving of the law on Sinai. This seems reasonable in view of the fact that the Israelites arrived at Sinai on the fiftieth day after their departure from Egypt (Exod 19:1). The Law was indeed the great gift of God that followed Israel's liberation from slavery and marked her out as a kingdom of priests among the nations. The Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year was associated with Israel's living in tents during the wilderness wanderings after the exodus from Egypt:

"Live in booths for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in booths so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt" (Lev 23:42-43).

This was how Israel was designed to be "in sync": they were to keep holy time, one day in seven each week, and to make three pilgrimage festivals each year. As they did this creation itself became a visual choir of harmonic voices, giving witness to their salvation history from their deliverance out of Egypt to Sinai, right to the borders of the Promised Land. How many nations can boast that the Creation itself stays in tune with their salvation history? Because Israel's worship marked her out as distinct from all the nations, God gives strict warnings that she protect the sanctity of these unique times.

III. A Time to be Vigilant About Exod 23:18-19

Do not offer the blood of a sacrifice to me along with anything containing yeast. The fat of my festival offerings must not be kept until morning. Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the LORD your God. Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk. (23:18-19)

These four laws were designed to preserve the sanctity of Israel's celebrations and prevent certain Canaanite practices from infiltrating into their worship. The first command prohibited the common practice in the ancient world of attempting to prolong life through magic by ingesting the blood of an animal, for "the life every creature is its blood" (Lev 17:14). Because drinking blood is not very appealing, mixing it within bread products ("anything containing yeast") made its consumption palatable.⁵ But all magic is an abomination to a Holy God who alone grants life, and does so as a gift of his grace.

The second and third commands guard against less than honorable sacrifices to God. The command to not keep the "fat portions" of the sacrifice overnight addresses the temptation of failing to give God the "best" of the animal sacrifice. "All the fat is the LORD's" (Lev 3:16). Therefore, after the priest had drained the blood of the animal, he was to separate the fat portions from the muscled meat and burn them on the altar as a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Keeping the fat until morning would be "making God wait for his portion of the sacrifice"⁶ – an act of supreme contempt for the One who provided the entire year's bounty! The third command concerning firstfruits addresses the same issue regarding the gift of grain offerings. Instead of giving God the "first" and the "best," some might be tempted to merely give God "some" of the crop, keeping the first and best for themselves. This was Cain's sin. Instead of giving God the firstfruits, Cain merely gave "some" of his crops. In essence, this was like giving a "tip" after the fact. Such an offering was a stench in God's nostrils and was immediately rejected. The apostles maintained the same principle in the New Testament. Paul instructs setting aside a sum of money on the "first day of every week" (1 Cor 16:2), and giving our whole selves as a sacrificial offering to God (Rom 12:1).

The final command to "not cook a young goat in its mother's milk" was of such importance it is repeated in two other texts in the Pentateuch (Exod 34:26; Deut 14:21). Through the centuries the Jewish tradition has interpreted this law as a sanction against commingling meat and dairy products. Kosher laws today still maintain strict observance of this law. Two different sets of silverware, dishes, pots and pans are required. One set is used strictly for meat products, while the other is reserved for dairy products. But perhaps a better interpretation would be to understand this as a prohibition of a common Canaanite practice. Boiling a kid in its mother's milk was another magical attempt to transfer the life force and fertility of the mother's milk into the sacrificial animal. Though this was an acceptable magical practice to other cultures, God viewed it as an abomination. It was the most detestable commingling of life and death.

A modern counterpart would be the Nazi practice of carrying out their vile executions on Jews to the accompaniment of Bach. John Felstiner writes, "The abomination staggers belief – mass murder orchestrated, music gracing death." Lacking words to give voice to the unspeakable horror, the poet Paul Celan was forced to invent the metaphor "black milk" in his poem *Deathfugue*:

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink

"The metaphor is extreme, bittersweet, nullifying the nourishment vital to human kind."⁷

Each of these final laws affirms that when it comes to worship, God is not neutral. Because he alone is the Creator and source of all life, he therefore deserves the first and best of our worship, and as our supreme Sovereign, he will never be manipulated by magic or ritual. These laws continue to function as a severe warning to guard against any commingling of life and death under the guise of religion. Sins that disregard or abuse innocent life in the name of religion are the most heinous to God and destructive to mankind, and therefore will reap the most severe judgment.

In conclusion, let us examine the spiritual benefits derived from keeping these yearly pilgrimages, and the apostles' application of this theme in the New Covenant.

IV. The Benefits of Pilgrimage Feasts

A. They Enlarged the Scope of Their Horizons

On these three special occasions each year, worship took on a dimension of national proportions as each pilgrim had the sense of being part of something much larger than himself. God was demonstrating to his people that true biblical worship is corporate. As Stuart explains: "Individuals can carry out a form of worship by themselves, using some of the elements of corporate worship, but they cannot alone worship in the normal manner enjoined in Scripture. From the point of view of comprehensive theology, this is because all proper worship on earth is a proleptic imitation of and preparation for eventual worship in heaven, which is consistently portrayed as corporate."⁸

This is an important counterpoint to our American spirit of rugged independence that resists submitting any of our individual freedoms for the larger good of community life. As Christians, such individualism can cause us to miss out on identifying with a covenant people that is now international in scope and everlasting in its influence. Left to ourselves to create our own universe of personal accomplishments, we easily fall prey to purposelessness and loneliness. By contrast, these celebrations integrated every Israelite into a nation that was serving the most sacred purposes on the planet. Once the pilgrims returned to the isolation of their homes and villages, the memory of these national celebrations bolstered their faith in stressful times of persecution or abandonment. As the Psalmist expresses in Psalm 42:

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"
These things I remember as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go with the multitude,
leading the procession to the house of God,
with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng. (Ps
42:1-4)

As Andy Drake moves out of high school ministry after fourteen years, I imagine there will be little debate as to the most significant experience he made possible for his students. For one week out of every year, Andy would lead a "small city" into the dust bowl of Mexicali and set up camp there with thousands of other students and leaders. As the psalmist testifies, it will probably be these memories more than anything else that will leave a lasting impression on these students. As they made their pilgrimage with thousands of other students each year, they knew they were privileged to have a significant role in something much larger than themselves. And as they did so, their horizons for the gospel were enlarged way beyond the borders of family, church and school. This is something that cannot be imparted in the classroom; it takes the pilgrimage.

B. They Prepared Her for the Future

The second benefit of these feasts was that they were ultimately designed by God as gateways into the future time of the Messianic age when salvation would be offered to the whole world through the work of Christ. Pilgrimage feasts become important settings for Jesus' teaching in the gospel of John (7:2-37; 12:12-20; 13:1-29). In each case he took their significance to new heights by applying them to his work as Savior of the world. On his final Passover, Christ became our Passover lamb. His resurrection is the firstfruits of all who have fallen asleep (1 Cor 15:20). Fifty days later, when all Israel made pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the giving of the law at Sinai, a great wind filled the temple and God poured out his Spirit, writing the law on the hearts of the disciples. The final Feast of Ingathering will be fulfilled at the end of the age, after he has called out a people for his name among all the nations. Then a great trumpet blast will announce the end of history and he will gather his elect from the four corners of the earth: "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thess 4:16).

C. Being "On Time" In the New Testament

In essence, the church has been grafted into the reality of Israel's yearly feasts. To commemorate this, most denominations adopt a church calendar that corresponds to the key events in the life of Christ, from his birth to his final passion. Times like Advent and Holy Week are special seasons that take us to a higher spiritual plane. For many, making pilgrimage to Bethlehem or Jerusalem becomes the experience of a lifetime. At these seasons we, like Israel, get a better understanding of the international scope of Christ's ministry and the magnitude of his glory. To keep us further "in sync," some denominations regulate the entire year into set patterns of readings and teachings found in lectionaries, so that no matter where they worship, God's people come under the same teaching, which is designed to be "in sync" with the life of Christ and the apostles.

These are all helpful tools, but there is something still more radical we might consider if we want to be "on time" in the age of the New Covenant. Pilgrimage for Israel meant preserving holy time by journeying to a holy space. But with the advent of Christ, all that changed. In Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, she questioned him about holy "space," since her people had established Mount Gerizim as a rival worship center to Jerusalem. His answer was absolutely profound:

"Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks." (John 4:21-23)

For the time being, Jerusalem was still the designated "holy place," but in the Messianic age, worship will occur in "spirit and truth." In other words, no longer does authentic worship need to take place in the designated holy space (i.e. the temple in Jerusalem, which was a symbolic shadow of a greater heavenly reality to come), but with the coming of Christ, true worship occurs in any place whenever we enter into those realities by his Spirit. As the writer to the Hebrews makes clear:

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. (Heb 12:22)

Just imagine, when you got in your car and made your pilgrimage to Blaney Avenue this morning, you may have thought you were just entering a building. But the reality is that by God's word and Spirit, the heavenly Jerusalem has invaded this ordinary space, along with the King, his countless angels and the assembly of saints who have preceded us. This is mind blowing to comprehend.

Just as the concept of holy space has been transcended by the work of Christ, so also has the concept of holy time (Col 2:16-17). A little later in the story of the Samaritan woman, Jesus' disciples return and urge him to eat. In typical fashion, he astounds them by taking the topic of food to a higher level:

"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest." (John 4:35)

Under the old dispensation, the disciples would have had to wait four months for the full harvest; only then would they make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer thanks. But in the new dispensation, God's Spirit transcends the normal seasons of time, and a spiritual harvest is happening right before their eyes, just hours after Jesus had planted a few seeds. Such a reality makes the question, Are we on time? much more difficult to answer, but on the other hand, much more thrilling and exciting. That is the time I long to be on!

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Col 2:16-17)

1 Douglas L. Stuart, *Exodus* (TNAC; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman: 2006), 534.

2 John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987), 333.

3 Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus*, (BCBC; Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 316.

4 Nogah Hareuveni, *Nature in Our Biblical Heritage* (Kiryat Ono, Israel: Neot Kedumim Ltd., 1980), 36-37.

5 Stuart, *Exodus*, 537-538.

6 Stuart, *Exodus*, 538.

7 John Felstiner, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 28-33.

8 Stuart, *Exodus*, 534.