

Sermon for 16th Sunday after Pentecost

Date: September 29, 2019

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Leviticus 23:23-25

Epistle Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Gospel Reading: Matthew 24:15-31



Sermon Text: Leviticus 23:23-25

Sermon Title: Rosh Hashanah – ראש השנה – Head of the Year

Introit: Psalm 81:1-3; Antiphon Psalm 81:4

Hymns:

LSB 903 – This is the Day the Lord Has Made

LSB 892 – Come, Ye Thankful People, Come

LSB 955 – Let the Vineyards Be Fruitful

LSB 814 – O Bless the Lord, My Soul

Liturgy:

Divine Service: Special (with excerpts from DS4)



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Text: Leviticus 23:23-25

The Lord spoke to Moses, “Tell the Israelites, on the first day of the seventh month hold a day of solemn rest. It will be a memorial day, a holy assembly announced by the blowing of rams’ horns. Don’t do any regular work. Bring a sacrifice by fire to the Lord.”

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Know in peace and joy that your sins are forgiven, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Happy New Year!

Now I know what some of you are thinking, "There goes pastor proving he's not perfect again. You silly goose it's September!" Well I know it's September. Beyond that I know something you may not know. Monday is the first of Tishrei.¹ God commanded:

On the first day, of the seventh month, you should hold a worship festival. It will be a memorial day, a holy assembly announced by the blowing of rams' horns. No regular work is to be done on this day.²

Now you need to know that the calendar the people were using, when God gave that instruction, was the ancient Jewish calendar. A calendar based not on the Sun, as our calendar is based, but rather a lunar calendar based on the Moon. On that calendar the seventh month is called the month of Tishrei, and that month starts this coming Monday. For that reason today our liturgy and hymns are all a bit more cheerful. Because we're having a little celebration.

Now before we get too involved in this you might think it strange that the first day of the seventh month would be a "new year" celebration. Well the truth is there are four new year celebrations commanded by God in the Old Testament. They all served different functions and purposes. This one is the one used to calculate what year it is and to mark the beginning of the Fall harvest. So on the Jewish calendar this year, on Monday, the first day of the seventh month, the year number for their calendar will change from the year 5779 to the year 5780. (Just one additional note. Some ancient oral traditions suggest that the Jewish calendar begins at creation. We cannot verify that through Scripture or science, but I'll throw it out there just so you can say you've heard it and impress all your friends and neighbors.)

Now, the real question is, "What does any of this have to do with us?" This was an Old Testament holiday so observing it is not necessarily required by the New Testament Church. We are taught in Acts chapter 15 that we are not required to uphold or follow all of the ceremonies and practices required in the Old Testament, or old contract. There it states only that we should avoid doing things that would cause people to think we were something other than followers of Jesus.

1 Pronounced: tish-REE. It is the seventh month on the Jewish calendar.

2 Paraphrased from Leviticus 23:24-25

So why do we care? Well as with most things “Old Testament” there are always New Testament lessons in them for us, and we have missed something in our Christians faith by not knowing the deep roots of that faith and the ancient traditions those roots contain. The true faith goes back farther than when Jesus walked the earth. The true faith goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. These holidays were instituted by God for good reasons, and although ridged adherence is not required, there are still good lessons in them from which we can learn. Lessons God put there on purpose.

We lose something when we forget, or put aside, all of the Old Testament. Too many think the Old Testament has nothing to say to us. They might say, “We are New Testament Christians. We don’t need the Old Testament.” That is most certainly not true.

All of Scripture is God breathed. All of it is useful for teaching, pointing out errors, correcting people, and training them for a life that has God’s approval. All of the Scriptures equip God’s people so that they are completely prepared to do good things.³

So what can we learn from the Festival of Trumpets on the First of Tishrei? This was a New Year celebration. It was a joyful time. All work ended. In fact it is the kick off to a whole month of feasts and festivals. Furthermore it is all tied to the Fall harvest. There are parties, celebrations, great meals, trumpets and shofars are blown in jubilation.

When God does something, He does it for a reason. God instructed them to celebrate this day as day of harvest celebration, and to do so with trumpets. Why? Everything our heavenly Father does in the Old Testament has a singular purpose. Each time He gives a command, makes a promise, performs an awesome miracle, or talks to His people, He does so with the singular purpose of showing them who the Messiah would be.

There are hundreds and hundreds of examples and lessons that point to who the Messiah would be, how He would come, and what He would do. We now know that Messiah has come, and His name is Jesus! We have seen the truths and promises of the Old Testament fulfilled. We have seen Jesus come and fulfill all of the Law’s requirements. Everything in the old Law that condemned us has been taken on by Jesus, carried to the cross, and hung up there for all the world to see. Then, there in that place, Jesus destroyed the burden of sin on us. There He frees

3 Paraphrased from 2 Timothy 3:16-17

us, and makes us His own. For all who believe in Jesus forgiveness is true, trustworthy and complete.

With Christmas time not all that far off we remember how He came into this world the first time. He was meek, mild, almost shy. He did not arrive with great fanfare, but for one exception. Those shepherds in the field. They got to see Heaven open up before them. They got to see the joy that the angels and arch-angels felt now that Jesus had finally come to Earth, to walk among us the children of God! ...but that was about it for the celebration of His birth.

Later we will come to the time before Easter. There again we will watch our Brother and Savior, meekly, timidly, weakly, walk to place of torture, and there die in our place purely, wholly and completely because of His rich love for each of us. Again, not too much fanfare, not much celebration. We go home on Good Friday in silence. Things change a little bit on Easter Sunday though. Don't they?

What do we do on Easter Sunday? We sing of the joy and the freedom won in the resurrection of Jesus Christ the Lamb of God. We shouted, "Alleluia! Christ is arisen! He is risen in deed! Alleluia!!" We blow the trumpet on that day for the same reason the trumpet is blown on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Because it signals an end to work, an end to burdens, to a time of freedom and joy.

On Easter Sunday Jesus' work to save all people from their sins was completed. We were at that moment, along with all who believe on His name, saved. The work was done. What is left for you to do to receive the salvation God has promised you? Simply believe. He asks for nothing more. The work has been done. Only the final gathering to Heaven, the redemption of our bodies, remains.

On Rosh Hashanah the trumpets are blown because the work of running the farm, cultivating, weeding, fertilizing, and protecting the crops is done. Only the harvest remains. There are banquets galore. All of the food was fresh and full of flavor. If you like to garden, it is the flavor you get when you eat that first ripe tomato from the garden. It just tastes different, better, so much better. You can't buy that flavor. That is what Rosh Hashanah is about.

For us Rosh Hashanah is a celebration of another harvest. A harvest to come. A harvest of souls. It will be another time when the heavens will be opened and angels and arch-angels will again descend to Earth, just like they did on that first Christmas day. They will again come with their own celebration, excitement and joy. This time however it will not be only the meek and lowly that see them. The whole world will see them. All the living will see them. All the dead will see them.

Every human being alive, or who has ever lived, will rise and look up to see the wonder.

Those angels will be led by Jesus Christ Himself in triumphal array. As they sing out in voices that rock the heavens and shake the Earth, they will gather all we who believe in the great harvest of the Last Day. We will join them in their songs of celebration and praise, and the harvest will be gathered home. Leaving only the chaff behind.

Rosh Hashanah is a celebration of the New Year. It is for us a foreshadowing of the Last Day. A day that, for all believers, will be full of joy and happiness. The Festival of Trumpets, Rush Hashanah, can remind us each and every year that the troubles, hard work and burdens of this life will come to an end. Someday Christ will return. On that day we will know perfect peace.

We will have celebrations and festivals in Heaven too. No doubt one of those may be an annual celebration of the day when Jesus returned to gather His people home. Perhaps that is what Rush Hashanah will become after Judgment Day. The Festival of Trumpets would remind us each year of that day when the final trumpet was blown, and Christ called the Children of God home.

These ancient holidays, given by God in the Old Testament, are more than just old holidays. They are not just things of the past. They remain important parts of God's Word that can, and should, still be used to teach us of the wonder that God has done for us, and the wonder He has yet to bring. Do not think of the Old Testament as something old and un-useful. The Old Testament is, like the New Testament, fully and wholly God's Holy Word. Read all of Scripture with the wisdom that all of it has been given to us by God for our instruction and learning. It has all been given to us to guide us safely home.

To mark this new year celebration I'd like to give you a challenge. A challenge to make this year a year of Scripture and Prayer. I have planned three challenges that will take us all the way to Thanksgiving Day next year, when we will give thanks to God for all that He has done for us, our church, and all those who come here to proclaim Jesus Christ and Him crucified and risen for our salvation.

Those three challenges starts with praying the Psalms. The Psalms are wonderful messages from God that can be used, when spoken back to God, as prayers pre-written by the Holy Spirit's guidance, to mold and shape our prayer life. That time of prayer starts tomorrow, on Monday.

Do God-things still happen? I would suggest they do. In planning this year of Scripture and Prayer I was not looking at a Jewish calendar. I was looking at key

dates including Ash Wednesday, Easter Sunday, and Thanksgiving Day. I planned the start date for all of this by doing some calendar math and determined that we'd need to start praying the Psalms on September 30 to make it all work out the way I had planned. Do God-things still happen? Tomorrow, Monday, September 30, just happens to be First of Tishrei, Rosh Hashanah, the first of the new year as prescribed by God our heavenly Father in Holy Writ. In Words He handed down to Moses. Words that have been carried forward through the millennia and generations to your hearing. Do God-things still happen? I would suggest they do.

As part of the new years' efforts you will see two new cards in the pew racks. One is titled "One Word Prayer" the other is "One Word Sin." You may also notice a cross up here in the front on the East side.

The "One Word Prayer" cards are there for you to fill in with one word that describes something you would like to have brought before the Throne of God in prayer. I would like to encourage everyone to take one of those cards and fill it out today during the offering, fold it in half, and place them in the offering plate. Our prayer warriors will take those cards and pray each of them right after Sunday worship.

The cross is there for the "One Word Sin" cards. You're welcome to start using them today, but we'll have a special service, in two weeks, to focus on their purpose. They are there to write one word to describe a sin you confess and place on the cross. Fold it in half, and pin it there, and leave it there, on the cross where all sin belongs.

You should not, and do not need to, write your name. Just one word. We're going to continue these things throughout our year of Scripture and Prayer as reminders that it is only through repentance and faith that we are saved. Sin, all sin, is an anchor dragging us down and we should take the time to deal with it as God has instructed us.

May God our heavenly Father grant you the joy and peace that comes with knowing that when the trumpets of judgment sound the verdict declared over you, repentant faithful Christian, is "innocent" and the words you will hear are, "Welcome home."

In Jesus' name.

Amen.