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April 29th: Numbers 25 & Luke 1:57-80

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The zeal of Phinehas. The Song of Zechariah.

Some passages referenced:

Exodus 32:6 (idolatry and sexual promiscuity); Exodus 34:12-16 (warning against idolatry and sexual promiscuity); Leviticus 20:2-5 (the necessity of judgment, lest one be destroyed with the offender); Numbers 18 (priests and Levites as guardians of Israel); Numbers 16:43-50 (Aaron intervening to stop the plague); Psalm 106:28-31 (Phinehas recalled); Genesis 15:6 (counted to Abraham for righteousness); Numbers 31:16 (Balaam's involvement); 2 Corinthians 11:2-3 (the Apostle Paul's divine jealousy).

Acts 2:4, 25-26 (loosing of tongues on Pentecost); Psalm 106:10 (language of redemption concerning the Exodus); Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 130:7-8, Malachi 3:1-2, Isaiah 60:1-3, Malachi 4:2, 5-6, Isaiah 40:3, Isaiah 9:2-7, Isaiah 42:6-7 (Old Testament prophecies in the background of the song of Zechariah); Judges 13:24, Genesis 21:20-21, 1 Samuel 2:26 (children growing).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Numbers chapter 25 Each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal of Peor. And behold, one of the people of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman to his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the people of Israel, while they were weeping in the entrance of the tent of meeting. When Phinehas the son of Eliezer, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them.

The man of Israel and the woman threw her belly. Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped. Nevertheless, those who died by the plague were twenty-four thousand.

And the Lord said to Moses, Phinehas the son of Eliezer, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. Therefore say, Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel. The name of the slain man of Israel, who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri the son of Salu, chief of a father's house belonging to the Simeonites.

And the name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cosbi, the daughter of Zer, who was the tribal head of a father's house in Midian. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Harass the Midianites and strike them down, for they have harassed you with their wives, with which they beguiled you in the matter of Peor, and in the matter of Cosbi, the daughter of the chief of Midian, their sister, who was killed on the day of the plague on the count of Peor. In Numbers chapter 25 the men of Israel are sexually tempted by the pagan Moabite women.

Pursuing these women they are invited to their idolatrous feasts and end up eating the sacrifices and bowing down to their gods. Through their pursuit of these Moabite women they end up serving their gods, and not just casually participating in sacrifices, but being yoked to Baal of Peor. All of this is reminiscent of Exodus chapter 32 and the incident with the golden calf.

In Exodus chapter 32 verse 6, And they rose up early the next day, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Many people have observed that the language of play has sexual connotations.

In the event with the golden calf then, they end up in sexual promiscuity on account of their idolatry. And at the end of the story of the golden calf in Exodus chapter 34 verse 12 to 16, there's a warning given. Emmanuel Shalev observes that on this first occasion idolatry led to promiscuity, and on the second occasion in the story of Baal of Peor,

promiscuity leads to idolatry.

Both promiscuity or idolatry are perversions of appropriate intimacy. Intimacy with a righteous spouse and intimacy in worship with the one true God. The most severe punishments in the law tend to be reserved for perversions of the covenant and perversions of sexual union.

These are the unions at the heart of society, and when these are perverted, everything is affected. The sexual promiscuity and the idolatry in this story are expressions of the same fundamental thing, which is why the plague upon Israel for their idolatry can be stopped by Phinehas' piercing a man and a woman in sexual congress through with a spear. As in the sin with the golden calf, this is a national scale apostasy.

Consequently, the Lord calls for the most severe penalty. To turn away the Lord's wrath against the people, the Lord declares that all the chiefs of the people would have to be killed, impaled, and their bodies left to rot in the sun. This is a judgment of the very greatest severity.

It reminds us of the Lord's intent to destroy Israel entirely after their sin with the golden calf. The chiefs are responsible for the people under them, and they will bear their people's sins if they do not prevent or punish those sins. If the holiness of the people is not maintained through decisive judgment of offences, then a sort of contagion of guilt will break out and afflict everyone connected with the offender.

The language of plague striking the people I think captures something of the nature of sin as it affects a people. It's not just individuals who sin, but it's all the people associated with them who are complicit or who fail to deal with their sin decisively. Moses speaks to the judges of Israel, but he seems to tone down the Lord's instruction, saying that they must kill all of those men who yoke themselves to bale of Peor.

Is he changing the Lord's command here, or is he misrepresenting it? No, I don't think he is. Rather, he's working within the fundamental logic of it. If a judge puts to death such offenders, he is freed from the contagion of their sin.

But if he doesn't, he will not be, and he will be subject to the judgment that the Lord declares. We see the same sort of logic in Leviticus 20, verses 2-5. I will set my face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, to make my sanctuary unclean and to profane my holy name.

And if the people of the land do at all close their eyes to that man when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, then I will set my face against that man and against his clan and will cut them off from among the people, him and all who follow him in whoring after Molech. Then, however, there is the most flagrant act of high-handed rebellion. In front of Moses and the entire people, a Simeonite chief comes with a

Midianite woman to have sexual relations with her.

The Midianites appear to be a mobile group and to be associated with the Moabites in this and the previous chapter. At this point, Phineas, Aaron's grandson, grabs a spear and runs it through the couple. This stops the plague that had broken out.

In Numbers 18, the Levites and the priests are presented as the guardians of Israel. They are the lightning rods for judgment. They were those who approached the holiness of the Lord for the people.

God is a consuming fire and those who come into his presence need to be prepared. And Israel felt that they would be destroyed if they came near to the Lord, but the Levites and the priests both guarded them and approached the Lord for them. The Levites and the priests were also those who would intervene to cover the iniquity of the people if a crisis occurred.

We saw Aaron himself doing this in chapter 16 verses 43-50 in a parallel event to this of Phineas. And Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting and the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Get away from the midst of this congregation that I may consume them in a moment. And they fell on their faces.

And Moses said to Aaron, Take your censer and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them. For wrath has gone out from the Lord, the plague has begun. So Aaron took it, as Moses said, and ran into the midst of the assembly.

And behold, the plague had already begun among the people. And he put on the incense and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped.

Now those who died in the plague were 14,700 besides those who died in the affair of Korah. And Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the tent of meeting when the plague was stopped. Note also how similar this is to the events of Exodus chapter 32 where the Levites kill 3,000 men after the golden calf and are set apart for a blessing afterwards.

The story of chapter 16 of Numbers is immediately followed by Aaron being set apart and the setting apart of the Levites and the priests more generally. And then in chapter 32 of Exodus it's the Levites being set apart. And in this chapter it's Phinehas being set apart.

All of these people marked out by their zeal for the Lord. After Phinehas' action, the Lord declares to Moses that he is going to give a covenant of peace to Phinehas, a perpetual priesthood. This was because Phinehas was jealous with the Lord's own jealousy for his people.

The Lord repeatedly describes himself as a jealous God, demanding the undivided loyalty and faithfulness of his people, to the point of even being called jealous. It seems strange that he is rewarded with a covenant of peace for such a violent act. However, Phinehas is performing the priestly duty here as the guardian of Israel.

He's protecting Israel from the wrath of the Lord. Israel is in extreme jeopardy of having all their leaders wiped out. But one priest's zealous action decisively rejects the spiritual adultery of Israel in a way that maintains its holiness.

Just as the anger of Moses and the zeal of the Levites after the golden calf saved Israel from being wiped out, so Phinehas delivers them here. Phinehas made atonement or covering for the people. By his act of zeal, the sins stood utterly and decisively condemned, and the holiness of the people could be maintained.

The priest represents the people to God, and God to the people. Like Moses, Phinehas faithfully represented the Lord's wrath to the people, so that the Lord didn't have to exercise his wrath in a far more devastating and final form himself. Phinehas also represented the people to the Lord, and his faithfulness was a reason for blessing.

On account of his action, the high priesthood would be given to Phinehas's line in time, and would remain in his line. This event is later recalled in Psalm 106 verses 28-31. Then they yoked themselves to Baal of Peor, and ate sacrifices offered to the dead.

They provoked the Lord to anger with their deeds, and a plague broke out among them. Then Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was stayed, and that was counted to him as righteousness from generation to generation forever. The expression counted to him as righteousness is much the same as we see used of Abraham in Genesis chapter 15 verse 6. It seems to be referring to something more than personal justification.

Rather, the counting of righteousness seems to be the same sort of thing as the giving of a perpetual covenant of peace to Phinehas and his descendants. Those things are paralleled in the original statement in Numbers 25, and then in the statement as it's represented in Psalm 106. The point, I would suggest, is that Phinehas, on account of his zeal, is exalted as a faithful covenant partner.

His righteousness having ramifications for his descendants after him. In the same way, Abraham's righteousness is not just about his own personal status relative to God, but on account of his faith, his descendants are blessed with him. It should probably be noted at this point that we have now had key rebellions in the book of Numbers, in which Reuben, Dathan and Abiram, Simeon, Zimri, and Levi, Korah, were all involved.

First, these are the three sons that were judged in Genesis chapter 49. It might also be worth reflecting upon the way in which this event and the aftermath might harken back

to the events of Genesis chapter 34, where again we see Levi and Simeon involved. Here, Levi judges Simeon for his unfaithfulness, and Levi is blessed.

At the end of this event, Moses instructs the Israelites to judge the Midianites for their part in the affair. Numbers 25 comes after the story of Balaam and Balak, and it seems to be a different story. Yet, we later discover that the actions of the women here were instigated by Balaam.

In Numbers chapter 31, verse 16, we read, Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came upon the congregation of the Lord. This suggests that, since Balaam couldn't curse Israel directly, he cunningly contrived to get Israel to bring a curse upon itself. In much the same way in our struggles with sin, we can be so concerned about the work of Satan external to ourselves that we fail to appreciate the way in which the fifth column within our own flesh and its susceptibility to temptation and sin is that which really gives him his greatest power.

A question to consider. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, verses 2-3, the apostle Paul declares, For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

The notion of a divine jealousy reminds us strongly of the Lord's statement that Phinehas was jealous with his jealousy among Israel. What can Phinehas teach us about faithful Christian leadership? How might this challenge some of our preconceptions in this area? Luke chapter 1, verses 57-80 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father. But his mother answered, No, he shall be called John.

And they said to her, None of your relatives is called by this name. And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, His name is John.

And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, Blessing God! And fear came upon all their neighbours. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea.

And all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What then will this child be? For the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel! For he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us. In the house of his

servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High. For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

The end of Luke chapter 1 concerns the birth and naming of John the Baptist and the celebration of his birth. The prominence given to John the Baptist at the beginning of Luke is remarkable. In the first chapter, if we were judging by blocks of text alone, we might initially think that he received more attention than Jesus himself.

Luke underlines the relationship between Jesus and John, not just in their public ministry, but through prophecy, through songs, through signs, through family relations and shared patterns of events. In the prophetic songs or speeches, Luke also interprets the ministries of John and Jesus in advance. The more that we look at the parts seemingly devoted to John, however, it becomes clear that they are really primarily about Jesus.

John's ministry is clearly subordinate to, and also pointing to, Christ. By describing the conceptions and the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, Luke is also able to heighten the sense of expectation and of divinely appointed destiny in the two. In addition to the Old Testament prophecies that are highlighted in the other Gospels, Luke also has prophetic testimony concerning Jesus from Elizabeth, Mary, Zachariah and Simeon, and presents several faithful Israelites awaiting what the Lord would do with these two miraculous children who are surrounded by so many anticipatory manifestations of the work of the Spirit, promising a much greater outpouring of the Spirit's work in the future.

By the time that this section is over, everyone is wondering what will happen next. The angel Gabriel had predicted rejoicing at the birth of John the Baptist, and that is what we see. Rejoicing and praising God are constant throughout these opening chapters.

People and angels bursting forth in praise and singing with joy at what God is doing. When Elizabeth gives birth to John, her neighbours join her to rejoice. And when it comes to the time of the circumcision, which would have been the time of naming, as with baptism in some Christian traditions, the general opinion seems to be that he will receive the name of his father, Zachariah.

However, Elizabeth insists that the child shall be called John, and then Zachariah

confirms it. Perhaps we are to see Elizabeth as arriving at this name independently, perhaps not. He is not to be named after the father, but he is to be named for the graciousness of God.

And once again, it's important to recognize the presence of a wider audience here. There are not just Elizabeth and Zachariah. There's all their neighbours, all these other people that have joined to celebrate with them.

Zachariah is a figure of note within the community, and so people come around to celebrate this event with them. And when they see the sign of his mouth being opened, they realize that this is something auspicious. There's a sign, an omen of what's going to come to pass in the future.

As soon as Zachariah confirms the name of his son John, his mouth is opened, his tongue is loosed, and he blesses God. And we can probably see parallels to Pentecost here. In Acts 2 verse 4, And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

And in verses 25 to 26, For David says concerning him, I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. Therefore my heart was glad and my tongue rejoiced. My flesh also will dwell in hope.

Zachariah then bursts forth in prophecy as he is filled with the Holy Spirit. His bound tongue is loosed, and not just the voice of Zachariah, but the silenced voice of prophecy from the Old Testament bursts forth onto the scene of the new. He's filled with the Holy Spirit.

Once again, the opening chapters of Luke are full of anticipatory foreshocks of the great earthquake that will occur at Pentecost. Lots of people being filled with the Spirit, the Spirit coming upon people, overshadowing people. The Spirit is active here, and the Spirit is foreshadowing what will later happen at Pentecost when he will be poured out on all flesh.

Zachariah's prophecy is packed with allusions to Scripture. Verses 68 to 75 concern what the Lord is doing in Jesus and his benediction. Verses 76 to 79 speak of John's part in God's great work, and functions more as a direct prophecy, telling not what God will do, but how he will do it.

These opening prophecies and songs again are programmatic for Luke. They present readers and hearers with a framework to understand everything that will follow. Joel Green observes the subtle connections that the song of Zachariah exhibits.

So for instance, in verse 68 you have the language of visitation, God visiting his people, as he did at the Exodus. And then in verse 78 you have the language of the sunrise visiting from on high. The language of visitation attracts different connotations in these

different contexts, but those different connotations are brought into relationship with each other.

Likewise, the language of salvation is used in verse 69 to refer to Davidic kingship and deliverance from enemies. But later on in verse 77 is the context of forgiveness of sins. Those two things belong together, and we're supposed to think about how they fit.

We also have a connection between John the Baptist as the prophet of the most high, and the prophets of old who foretold these things. The first half seems to present a far more politically focused vision, while the latter half is more spiritual in the narrow sense that that term is often used. However, for Zachariah, these two things very much belong together.

When considering the sort of salvation being declared in the first part, we are in danger of jumping to one of two conclusions. Either we associate it primarily with the Romans as the occupying force, or we relate it wholly to spiritualised things that are detached from more concrete forms of deliverance. Deliverance from political enemies, or deliverance perhaps from poverty.

Yet in the Gospels, the oppressors are often primarily false teachers, or those mistreating the poor, demonic powers, and behind these things Satan himself as the strongman holding people in captivity. While Luke's concept of salvation most definitely includes the political, the social, and the material world, it is not necessarily focused upon the Romans. God redeeming his people might make us think of Jubilee themes.

It's also Exodus language. We find this sort of language in places like Psalm 106 verse 10. The song of Zachariah is saturated in the prophetic language and imagery of expectation.

Here are several voices from the prophets that you can hear in the background. From Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34. In Psalm 130 verse 7 to 8. In Malachi chapter 3 verses 1 to 2. In Isaiah chapter 60 verses 1 to 3. In Malachi chapter 4 verse 2. Just a few verses later in verses 5 to 6 of that chapter.

Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3. Isaiah chapter 9 verses 2 to 7. Isaiah chapter 42 verses 6 to 7. What we hear in the song of Zachariah is a glorious combination of the language of Jubilee, of Exodus, of new covenant, of divine visitation, and of a new dawn. This rich assembly of language and imagery gives us a sense of just how charged with anticipation and hope the Old Testament is for the prospect of this coming one. The chapter ends with a description of John the Baptist growing up and once again this language recalls stories from the Old Testament.

Stories of sons whose births were announced and who were divinely destined for great things in the future. Judges chapter 13 verse 24. Genesis chapter 21 verses 20 to 21.

In 1st Samuel chapter 2 verse 26. Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and also with man. The fact that John grows up in the wilderness prepares us for the physical and the symbolically important location of his future ministry.

A question to consider. What other biblical characters were particularly associated with the wilderness?