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March 28th: Exodus 35 & Matthew 27:27-56

March 27, 2020



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Gathering materials for the tabernacle. Mocked and crucified.

Some passages referenced:

Numbers 15:32-36 (death penalty for preparing to build up a fire on the Sabbath).

Psalms 69:21 (poison and sour wine); Lamentations 3:19, 2:15 (Jesus the ruined city); Jeremiah 18:16 (the fate of Jerusalem foretold); Psalm 22:18 (casting lots for the garments); Isaiah 53:12 (numbered with the transgressors); Psalm 22:7 (those passing by wagging their heads); Psalm 22:8 (he trusted in God); Zephaniah 1:15 (the darkness of the day of the Lord); Malachi 4 (Elijah and the day of the Lord); 2 Kings 13:20-21 (Elisha's bones reviving a dead man); Haggai 2:6 (God promising to shake the earth); Ezekiel 37 (the valley of dry bones); Matthew 8:5-13 (the faithful centurion); Luke 8:1-3 (the women who ministered to Jesus' needs).

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

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Transcript

Exodus chapter 35 Moses assembled all the congregation of the people of Israel and said

to them, These are the things that the Lord has commanded you to do. Six days' work shall be done, but on the seventh day ye shall have a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.

Ye shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day. Moses said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, This is the thing that the Lord has commanded. Take from among you a contribution to the Lord.

Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring the Lord's contribution, gold, silver, and bronze, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goat's hair, tanned ram skins and goat skins, acacia wood, oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, and onyx stones and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. Let every skilful craftsman among you come and make all that the Lord has commanded, the tabernacle, its tent and its covering, its hooks and its frames, its bars, its pillars and its bases, the ark with its poles, the mercy seat and the veil of the screen, the table with its poles and all its utensils and the bread of the presence, the lampstand also for the light with its utensils and its lamps and the oil for the light, and the altar of incense with its poles and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense and the screen for the door and the door of the tabernacle, the altar of burnt offering with its grating of bronze, its poles and all its utensils, the basin and its stand, the hangings of the court, its pillars and its bases, and the screen for the gate of the court, the pegs of the tabernacle and the pegs of the court and their cords, the finely worked garments for ministering in the holy place, the holy garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons for their service as priests. Then all the congregation of the people of Israel departed from the presence of Moses.

And there came every one whose heart stirred him and every one whose spirit moved him and brought the Lord's contribution to be used for the tent of meeting and for all its service and for the holy garments. So there came both men and women, all who were of a willing heart, brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and armlets, all sorts of gold objects, every man dedicating an offering of gold to the Lord. And every one who possessed blue or purple or scarlet yarns or fine linen or goat's hair or tanned ram's skin or goat's skins brought them.

Every one who could make a contribution of silver or bronze brought it as the Lord's contribution. And every one who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work brought it. And every skilled woman spun with her hands and they all brought what they had spun in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen.

All the women whose hearts stirred them to use their skill spun the goat's hair. And the leaders brought onyx stones and stones to be set for the ephod and for the breastpiece and spices and oil for the light and for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense. All the men and women, the people of Israel, whose heart moved them to bring anything for

the work that the Lord had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord.

Then Moses said to the people of Israel, See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the Spirit of God with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship to devise artistic designs to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood for work in every skilled craft. And he has inspired him to teach, both him and Aholiab the son of Ahissamak, of the tribe of Dan. He has filled them with skill to do every sort of work done by an engraver or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, or by a weaver, by any sort of workman or skilled designer.

In Exodus chapter 35-40 what is given in the form of instructions in chapters 25-31 is repeated in the form of reports upon work that has been executed. This section however begins with the Sabbath. This might be fitting for a section that is concerned with man's work under God.

God's pattern of working, his six days of labour and his Sabbath, present us with the pattern of our own labour. And the Sabbath is also the sign of the covenant and a central point of the entire narrative. It's the feast to the Lord that they were looking for at the very beginning.

It's rest from toil, liberation from slavery, a sign of all of these things. It's the centre of the Ten Commandments. It's the beginning of the case laws of the Book of the Covenant and the ending of them.

It ends the instructions for the tabernacle as the sign of the covenant. And this is just before the Golden Carp and now it resumes on the same theme. The theme of the Sabbath.

God has delivered his people from unending toil and now he wants to bring them into his rest and that principle of rest is at the very basis of everything that they must do. There is however an interesting addition in the law concerning the Sabbath here which concerns not kindling a fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day. This has been understood in various ways.

Some Jews understood it as not having any fire at all but the mainstream view was not building up your fire. Often this will be seen in terms of the work that is taken to build up a fire. Now I think there's probably something more going on here.

There is only one occasion in Scripture where there is a death penalty applied for breaking the Sabbath and that's in Numbers chapter 15 verses 32 to 36. On that occasion it's someone gathering wood in preparation for a fire or for building up a fire

and it's a strange connection with this particular command here. In Nehemiah people are rebuked for trading on the Sabbath but no one is subject to a serious penalty.

So why is the fire so important? There are many dimensions of the significance of a fire that may help us to understand the rationale here. So the fire is the sign of all domestic labour perhaps. God started the first week by making a fire, by creating light.

Until the modern day every sort of light was formed by a sort of fire and so God's creating light on the first day is the forming of a fire and maybe that's part of what's in view. That that work that God started by making a fire is a work that we should not do on the Sabbath. Maybe that's part of it.

The hearth is also the heart of the home. It symbolises the entire life of that realm. It's the centre of gathering and fellowship.

It's the most basic and fundamental of all technologies. Fire is used to transform one thing into another. As something passes through the fire, whether we're cooking a meal or whether we're engaged in metallurgy, all of these things involve transformation through fire.

It's the most basic technology. Just a few chapters earlier Aaron said that he threw the gold into the fire and out came the calf. Beyond this the fire was the centre of domestic labour.

It was the place where meals were prepared and other things like that. It's often symbolically connected with the wife and the mother at the very heart of the home and these elements of its symbolic importance might help us to understand why there is a law concerning the Sabbath and fire. It's also connected with God's own presence.

God is a consuming fire. God displays himself in the form of fire. A pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire.

The ceremonial fire of God's presence is at the heart of the people and that is to be kept burning. Maybe the point is that we dim our fires and don't build them up while God's fire is built up on the Sabbath day. So God's presence is prominent on the Sabbath day and we reduce our presence for the sake of emphasising God's presence.

The hearth of God's house rises up and the hearths of our houses are reduced so that God's light, God's fire would be most prominent on that day. The Sabbath ends God's week but it could be seen as beginning ours. Man's first day in the creation is a Sabbath and the first day anticipates the last day.

Man is now functioning as a creator under God's direction. Man has been placed in the task of building this particular edifice, this tabernacle. And so God is equipping man to engage in a creative work of a realm for his dwelling.

Moses gives a commission to the people. First of all a commission to gather materials together to contribute to the building effort and then also a calling to participate in that building effort. The materials to be gathered are to be given from people's hearts.

These are a free will offering. This is a popular building with a large number of contributors and a large number of creators. And in the construction people return with a host of contributions and skilled abilities and it's a building formed of people's hearts and skills and lives.

Men and women freely contributing. We might reflect upon the contrast between the way that Pharaoh's heart was hardened but the people here are stirred in their hearts to give. It's a very positive sign also after the events of the golden calf where they also contributed elements.

They contributed the gold from their earrings. One of the effects of all of this, the fact that people are contributing, it's a popular building effort, is that it's an externalization of the people. The people are represented as they give to this building.

They exercise their skills in constructing it and it can symbolize them. It's an externalization of their life and their skills and their abilities and their persons. And God can dwell in their midst in that building in a way that symbolizes him dwelling in them as a people.

Bezalel and Holiab are skilled and divinely empowered for their task. They're also divinely gifted to teach others. The Holy Spirit is overshadowing their work just as the Spirit overshadowed the work of the first creation.

A question to consider. How could we contrast the construction of the golden calf and the construction of the tabernacle? Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters and they gathered the whole battalion before him and they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him and twisting together a crown of thorns they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand and kneeling before him they mocked him saying Hail King of the Jews! And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. When they had mocked him they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.

As they went out they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross and when they came to a place called Golgotha which means place of skull they offered him wine to drink mixed with gall but when he tasted it he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him they divided his garments among them by casting lots.

Then they sat down and kept watch over him there and over his head they put the charge against him which read This is Jesus, the King of the Jews. Then two robbers were

crucified with him one on the right and one on the left And those who passed by derided him wagging their heads and saying You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days save yourself. If you are the son of God come down from the cross.

So also the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him saying He saved others. He cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel.

Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God deliver him now if he desires him.

For he said I am the son of God. And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way. Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour.

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying Eli, Eli, lemme subachthani That is my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And some of the bystanders hearing it said This man is calling Elijah. And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the other said Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom and the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.

And coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him keeping watch over Jesus saw the earthquake and what took place they were filled with awe and said truly this was the son of God. There were also many women there looking on from a distance who had followed Jesus from Galilee ministering to him.

Among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Towards the end of Matthew chapter 27 we reach the point that the entire gospel has been working towards especially since chapter 16 the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And it begins with a parodic coronation and enthronement.

Gentile soldiers ridiculing the king of the Jews gathering as an audience before him dressing him up with a crown and a scarlet robe giving him a reed of authority and kneeling before him expressing a sort of feigned homage to him as the king of the Jews. He has the crown of thorns which is a mark of the curse upon his brow. The soldiers then reverse this ironic pattern.

They spit instead of kneeling. They take the reed that they had given him and they strike him on the head with it where they had earlier placed the crown. Then they strip him of the scarlet robe that they had dressed him in and they lead him away to be crucified.

But there is truth even in the mockery. Jesus is the king of the Jews. Indeed he's the ruler of all and those Gentile soldiers are included in that.

And for all the pride of the soldiers of the Romans they have suffered a humiliation. Pilate has bowed to the Jews in surrendering Jesus to the Jewish mob. He's not expressing Roman authority.

Rather he's submitted to the Jews in this matter. There's a contrast between Simon of Cyrene who bears the cross for Christ and his namesake Simon Peter. Simon Peter is the one who said that he would follow Jesus all the way to the end and that he would never forsake him or deny him.

And yet he's nowhere to be found. Whereas Simon of Cyrene, a Gentile who carries his cross, is showing the very mark of discipleship that Simon Peter, the chief of the disciples that Jesus called, has failed to show. Throughout this passage the voice of scripture is whispering in the background.

Matthew expects his readers to know scripture fairly thoroughly and to recognise its voice throughout his gospel and most particularly here. There are a number of references to the Psalms which were the songs of the people of God. And by evoking this biblical background Matthew conveys a deeper account of what is happening at the cross too.

For instance in being given gall to drink Jesus is being given a narcotic that will relieve some of the pain. But it's also an allusion to Psalm 69 verse 21. They gave me poison for food and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.

We might also hear the words of Lamentations in the background. Lamentations chapter 3 verse 19. Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall.

And then in chapter 2 verse 15 of the same book. All who pass along the way clap their hands at you, they hiss and wag their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem. Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth? The people are treating Christ in the same way as they treat the fallen Jerusalem after its destruction by the Babylonians.

And there is a theology here. Jesus is presented as the embodiment of the fallen city of Jerusalem in Lamentations. Jesus is suffering the judgment of Jerusalem's exile himself.

The predicted fate of Jerusalem in Jeremiah 18 verse 16. And then they cast lots for his garments. Again there's Old Testament scripture in the background here.

Psalm 22 verse 18. They divide my garments among them and for my clothing they cast lots. And the charge against him is that he is the king of the Jews.

To the Romans this would be maybe a sign of insurrection, a sign of claiming an authority that he did not have. And for the Jews they would have a sense of the more messianic connotations. That this is one who claims that he's going to destroy the temple and rebuild the temple in three days.

He's the one who's taking on the mantle and the task of the Messiah. He has robbers placed on either side of him, like people on either side of an enthroned king. And again we need to recognize that this is a parodic coronation and enthronement.

There are many rituals and rites and other things like that that are being performed here in either mockery or unwittingly in these chapters that help us to understand what is really taking place. This is truly a coronation. This is truly an enthronement.

But the people involved do not realize what's taking place. They do not know what they are doing. And the fact that he has robbers on either side of him is a fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12 that he's numbered with the transgressors.

And people passing by wag their heads. We've already seen the way that this alludes back to lamentations and the fate of Jerusalem and the way that people respond to its miserable condition. But it also relates to, again, Psalm 22 verse 7. Jesus is ridiculed as the one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days by passers-by.

He's also ridiculed by the chief priests, the scribes and the elders as the one who, though he saved others, cannot save himself. He's the supposed king of Israel and claims to trust in God. But where's God now? He's not coming to his aid.

And the questions at the cross, the challenges and the mockery followed by the centurion's confirmation, truly this was the son of God, might remind us of the testing of Jesus in the wilderness where the question of whether he was the son of God was also central. Maybe we could think back to the trial before the Sanhedrin. Tell us if you're the Christ, the son of God, in verse 63 of chapter 26.

The choice there, is he going to live by the word of God? Is he going to accept the cup or is he going to take the easy route out? And again, there's the temple reference in verse 40 of chapter 27. If you are the son of God, come down from the cross. And he is the one who said that he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days.

And then after that, there's the reference to his kingship. If you are the king of the Jews, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders mocking him here, again telling him to come down from the cross. Perhaps we're supposed to see that Jesus is being tested once more.

Once more, he's proving faithful through testing. He's not giving up, he's not surrendering, he's not being unfaithful to his calling. Jesus was accused of blasphemy, but this whole scene is one of extended blasphemy.

And the chief priests and scribes and elders ironically quote Psalm 22 verse 8, seemingly completely unwitting of its significance. Psalm 22 verse 8, There is then darkness over the entire land from the sixth to the ninth hour, from about noon to about three o'clock. The final of the cycle of the plagues before the death of the firstborn, which also occurred in the darkness of midnight, involved the darkness over all the land.

It could be also seen as decreation, return to the original darkness of the unformed creation. The darkness at Jesus' death contrasts with the light of the dawn upon his rising. And it also might recall the darkness of the day of the Lord, described by Zephaniah in Zephaniah chapter 1 verse 15.

We should consider the similarities between the description of Jesus' trial, mockery, crucifixion and death, and the events involved in and leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Jesus is suffering a similar fate to Jerusalem's fate, but presenting an alternative for all who trust in him. He is suffering the fate that he describes in those earlier chapters.

Here there is a fourth allusion to Psalm 22, which arguably serves as the most foundational text that Matthew wants his readers to hear his crucifixion account in terms of. At the ninth hour, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And these are the first words of Psalm 22. It's a psalm of the suffering Davidic king.

And the bystanders don't recognise that Jesus is quoting scripture. Like Eli in the temple in 1 Samuel, who couldn't recognise the prayer of Hannah, they can't recognise the voice of scripture and the words of the Psalms. Hearing they do not understand.

And perhaps there's a further irony here in that they think that he's calling for Elijah. The coming of Elijah was associated with the arrival of the great and terrible day of the Lord in Malachi 4. And here we're seeing that day take place in miniature in the death of Jesus Christ. Jesus is then given sour wine again.

And this is in fulfilment of Psalm 69 verse 21. Once more, the scriptures and the Psalms, the suffering of the Davidic king, the fate of the city that's been destroyed and broken down, all of these lie behind the events of Christ's death. And as we hear such allusions, we're getting an insight into Matthew's theology of the cross.

Jesus is the suffering Messiah. He's the suffering servant. He's the one that takes the fate of the unfaithful city upon himself.

Jesus cries out again with a loud voice and gives up his spirit. And some have seen this as perhaps an initial giving up of the spirit, delivering over of the spirit. And there's a dramatic response to Jesus' death, a response that manifests its character as an event that shakes the whole world order.

The curtain of the temple, the realm of God's dwelling, at the very heart of the religious order is torn from top to bottom, a sign of God's action. Now we don't know which curtain this was, whether it was the inner curtain between the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place, or whether it was the outer curtain. But one way or another, access into God's presence is being made open.

There's also an anticipation of the judgment upon Jerusalem's temple, an initial fulfillment of the destruction of the temple that Jesus speaks about, and the way in which he is the alternative temple, the place in which people meet with God and whose body will be the place of God's residence as he forms his bride around himself. The realm of the creation is shaken by an earthquake and rocks are split. The realm of death is shaken and graves are opened.

The appearance of the raised dead in the holy city to many after Jesus' resurrection is proof of Christ as the first fruits of the dead, and perhaps reminiscent of places like 2 Kings 13 20-21, where Elisha's bones revive a dead man. God promises to shake the earth in Haggai 2-6, and the earthquake is evidence that the shaking of the earth is beginning. We see a similar thing in Ezekiel 37, where there's an earthquake, a rushing wind of the spirit, graves are opened and bodies come to life and Israel is restored.

This is something that Christ is doing through his death, and a new world is coming into existence. The darkness of the original creation, before light has come, and now there's a new creation bursting into existence. A new creation that will be seen most particularly with the light of resurrection morning, as that dawns.

The centurion and those who are with him confess that Jesus must be the Son of God. Gentiles responding in faith. It's another faithful centurion like the one in chapter 8 verses 5-13.

And along with the centurion, Matthew draws our attention to the many women of Jesus' disciples who were present at a distance. While the male disciples had almost all forsaken him at the end, the women remained faithfully present. They had ministered to him, providing for his needs.

We see this in Luke chapter 8 verses 1-3. And we can see, I think, within the women, the importance of loving devotion to Christ's body. It's something that you see in the actions of the women throughout the gospels, just as Jesus draws attention to the importance of children as models of the kingdom.

I think we should also see women as models of the kingdom. Their commitment to Christ's body, and their loving devotion to it, is an example to follow. The male disciples are committed to Christ's mission and his teaching, and when those seem to fail, they are nowhere to be found.

While it is the women who are able to see the importance of Christ's presence himself, and provide a model for our devotion to Christ's body in terms of service of one another, tending for each other's needs, and being present to one another. That is a form of faithfulness to Christ that can so often be neglected when we focus merely upon the mission and the teaching of Christ, and fail to be devoted in love to his body. A question to consider.

There are several allusions to Psalm 22 within this passage. Go back and read Psalm 22. How can we see the story of Christ within that Psalm? How does that Psalm help us to read the events of the gospel? How does Psalm 22 shed light upon Jesus' use of its opening statement as his great expression of dereliction on the cross?