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March 24th: Exodus 31 & Matthew 26:31-56

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Bezalel and Oholiab; the Sabbath as the sign of the covenant. Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.

Some passages referenced:

Genesis 1-2 (parallels with the creation accounts); Exodus 38:25-28 (use of the census tax for constructing the tabernacle structure); Genesis 41:38 (Joseph filled with the Spirit); Genesis 17:9-14 (circumcision as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant); Exodus 8:15 (previous reference to the finger of God).

Zechariah 9:9, 14:21, 9:14, 12:10, 10:8-9, 14:4-7, 9:11, 13:7, 11:11-13 (passages from Zechariah 9-14 alluded to or referenced at the end of Matthew); Matthew 4:12-16 (Jesus' ministry beginning in Galilee); 2 Samuel 20:9-10 (Joab betrays Amasa with a kiss); 2 Samuel 16:5-14 (David, Abishai, and Shimei); Isaiah 53:12 (numbered with the transgressors); 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (Paul's thorn in the flesh).

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

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Transcript

3. The Lord said to Moses, See, I have called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft. And behold, I have appointed with him Aholiab, the son of Ahissamach, of the tribe of Dan, and I have given to all able men ability that they may make all that I have commanded you, the tent of meeting, and the ark of the testimony, and the mercy seat that is on it, and all the furnishings of the tent, the table and its utensils, and the pure lampstand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand, and the finely worked garments, the holy garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons, for their services priests, and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense for the holy place, according to all that I have commanded you they shall do.

And the Lord said to Moses, You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, Above all you shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the sabbath because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death.

Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done. But the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord.

Whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel, that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.

And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. Exodus chapter 31 involves the appointment of artisans to build the tabernacle, followed by the appointment of the sabbath as the covenant sign. This might alert us to a way to read this alongside the previous chapter.

In Genesis chapter 1 to chapter 2 verse 3 there are seven days of the original creation. However in the rest of Genesis 2 we have a second creation pattern playing out, which follows a similar pattern on a smaller scale. And here I think we have something similar.

This is something that James Jordan has observed. Mapping it onto the seven days of the tabernacle's creation might also help here. So in the tabernacle's creation we have seven days.

First day, the golden items at the heart of the tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, the table of the Presence, and the lampstand. The second day is the tabernacle itself, this

firmament, the division between these new heavens, the heavens where God will dwell among his people and the rest of the realm outside. The third day is the bronze altar and the courtyard, the land that's taken up from the sea.

The fourth day is the oil for the lamps, the oil that keeps the light burning inside the tabernacle. The fifth day concerns the garments for the priests which enable them to operate within the heaven realm. They correspond with the tabernacle as the fifth day corresponds with the second day in the original creation.

The sixth is the consecration of the priests, a new humanity being set up for a particular purpose. And then the seventh day is the completion of the installation of the priests and the establishment of the daily pattern of worship. Now there seems to be some interesting parallel between this and chapters 30 and 31 and here's a suggested order.

So first off we have the golden altar of incense. This is another golden item at the heart of the tabernacle corresponding with the events created on the first day of the original tabernacle creation. So then it was the golden Ark of the Covenant, Table of the Presence and the lampstand and now there is the golden altar of incense.

Next in the order is the census tax. Now this might seem strange. How might the census tax fit into this pattern? Well I think it makes more sense when we go to chapter 38 verses 25 to 28 where we see that the census tax was used in the construction of the things that are involved on the second day of the tabernacle's construction.

On the third day, the next thing in the sequence is the bronze laver, the bronze basin. And this corresponds quite naturally with the bronze altar and courtyard, its land and sea. The bronze altar corresponds to the land and the bronze laver corresponds to the sea.

The fourth is anointing oil for the priests and this corresponds with the fourth of the previous one which is oil for the lamps, oil for the priests, oil for the lamps. The fifth is in the original one, it's garments for the priests and now it's incense. Now this might seem a weaker connection but perhaps it's associated with the clouds that fill the realm of the heavens that the garments of the high priest equip them to operate within.

The sixth day is the consecration of the priests and the sixth day in the next sequence is the calling and setting apart of the artisans. And so there is a correspondence between two sets of humanity set apart. One group involved with serving in the house and the other group involved with making the house.

And then finally we have the appointment of the Sabbath here as the concluding part of this entire section from chapters 25 to 31. In chapter 32 the narrative resumes. Now this is interesting and there's a curious pattern to be observed but can it tell us anything, does it actually help? I think it can help us and one of the things that it does help us to

see is first of all the completeness and the ordering of these things.

These are not just random elements, there is a logic to them and we can understand them better by associating them with each other. So the basin and the altar are connected together. They're connected together by being made of bronze in both cases but they're also connected by the fact that they belong to the third day.

They're connected to land and sea then and on the first day we can see the connection between the altar of incense, the golden altar of incense, and the other items created on the first day, the things that are light at the very heart of the tabernacle. And then we can see things like the connection between the oil for the lamps and the way that that corresponds with the anointing oil for the priests. Maybe we're supposed to see that the priests themselves are supposed to be a sort of human lampstand corresponding to the physical lampstand.

This chapter concerns the artisans appointed to construct the tabernacle. So Bezalel, the son of Uri, son of Hur of the tribe of Judah. This is presumably the grandson of Hur, the Judahite who led the people alongside Aaron, the one who held up the arms of Moses along with Aaron.

He's one of the leaders of the people, he's a sort of princely character. He's not a king but he seems to be a lead civil ruler and his grandson is the one that's helping to build this. This might help us to understand the importance of the king or the ruler as the one who tends to build or be responsible for building the temple.

The Messiah is the one who, as the great Davidic king, will lead the construction of the temple. Solomon, as that great king in the Davidic dynasty, is the one who builds the temple. And this task of the king is here borne by a descendant, a direct descendant of Hur, who is the lead Judahite.

Bezalel is filled with the spirit of God, similar to the way Joseph is described in Genesis chapter 41 verse 38. Maybe we should also see this as reminiscent of God's breathing into man the breath of life in the original creation. He's someone who's equipped to build according to God's pattern.

If we go back to the original creation, God creates with no man being there to see. He declares what he has done and reveals it to man. And then he also performs an act of creation in the second chapter of Genesis, which is witnessed by Adam.

And Adam is presumably to take that pattern and learn it and exercise it himself. By contrast, both with God doing something without man being present and God doing something in front of man for man to see and learn from, here we have God giving a plan and patterns for the tabernacle and then equipping man to build according to that plan and pattern. Here Bezalel is someone who's a new Adam, someone who's raised up to a

higher level than the original Adam as a co-creator or someone who creates under God.

He is given a helper, a holy ab, someone who serves alongside him and equips him and helps him in his particular task. Now a holy ab might remind us of the way that Eve is given to Adam in Genesis chapter 2 and it seems to me that that is something we're supposed to see as a connection. From the appointment and establishment of the artisans we move into a discussion of God's Sabbaths.

God's Sabbaths are a sign throughout the generations of Israel that they have been sanctified and redeemed. In being delivered from Egypt they were set apart for the Lord as his own. And there is a death penalty for profaning the Sabbath and they're also cut off from the people.

There's two aspects here. So there's the profanation of the Sabbath which relates to an offence and trespass against God and then there's being cut off from the people. This is a violation of the people.

And within the Sabbath we can see both of those dimensions. The Sabbath is oriented Godward, it's something that we remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, it's something that belongs to God, it should be kept holy, but it's also something that involves right treatment of neighbour, that you do not make your neighbour work on that day. And that twofold aspect is reflected in the punishment here, both death in punishment for a religious crime but also being cut off from the people in the fact of having wronged your neighbour.

Violation against God and neighbour then are both seen in the violation of the Sabbath. The fact that all of this material is summed up and concluded with the Sabbath commandment is something that maybe should get us to go back to the earlier commandments and think about why that is so important. First of all the Sabbath is the end of the creation sequence so it's a very natural place to end in that respect.

But also even within the Ten Commandments themselves where it's not the final commandment it would seem to have a particular importance there. It is the central commandment along with honouring your father and mother that is expressed in a positive form. All the other commandments are do not, yet remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy is a positive command, an expression of how things ought to be.

Taking rest yourself, giving rest to your neighbour and remembering God's great works in creation and redemption, that is at the very heart of what it means to live as the people of God. And in the book of the covenant in Exodus chapter 21-23 we see a similar thing. It begins with the theme of Sabbath and it ends with the theme of Sabbath.

God has brought his people into rest, he has delivered them from slavery, from this non-stop work and now he wants them to give their neighbours rest. He wants them to keep

this cycle of Sabbaths and feasts as a memorial to his work in creation and in the redemption. The bringing together of redemption and creation, the bringing together of the agricultural feasts which concern creation and then the great redemptive historical feasts which concern God's work in history, these hold these two elements together.

We should probably note the many similarities that there are here between the description of the Sabbath and the description of circumcision as the sign of the covenant in Genesis 17. Circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant and the Sabbath is the sign of the Mosaic covenant. It relates also to the sign of the Noahic covenant, the covenant with Noah, which is the rainbow.

In Genesis chapter 17 verses 9-14 we read, Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring.

Both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people.

He has broken my covenant. The similarities between this and the sign of the Sabbath should be noted. The Sabbath is a sign of Israel's release and the continued practice of the Sabbath and the Sabbaths more generally, the different feasts that arise from the fundamental feast of the Sabbath, is a way of declaring themselves to be a liberated and a liberating people, a people who continue the pattern of what God established in creation and a people who have been, as they have been redeemed by this creator God, established as a liberating people who extend that pattern to others so that their servants, so that their animals, so that their land also enters into rest.

A question to consider. Bezalel is given a number of different gifts and abilities and talents by the Spirit in order to equip him for the building of the tabernacle. How might this understanding of the gifts of the Spirit help us to understand the gifts of the Spirit within the New Testament? Matthew 26 verses 31-56 Then Jesus said to them, You will all fall away because of me this night.

For it is written, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee. Peter answered him, Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.

Jesus said to him, Truly I tell you, this very night before the roost of crows you will deny me three times. Peter said to him, Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you. And all the disciples said the same.

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, Sit here while I go over there and pray. And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled.

Then he said to them, My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch with me. And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.

Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will. And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. Again for the second time he went away and prayed, My father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done. And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy.

So leaving them again he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, Sleep and take your rest later on. See the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

Rise, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand. While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs from the chief priests and the elders of the people.

Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, The one I will kiss is the man. Seize him. And he came up to Jesus at once and said, Greetings, Rabbi.

And he kissed him. Jesus said to him, Friend, do what you came to do. Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him.

And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and He will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so? At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, Have you come out as against a robber with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me.

But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples left him and fled. The middle section of Matthew chapter 26 concerns the falling away of the disciples of Jesus as he is taken in Gethsemane and as Judas Iscariot betrays him.

Strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. We've encountered several allusions to and citations of Zachariah in these concluding chapters of Matthew and they continue here. This verse is taken from Zachariah chapter 13 verse 7. As usual it's important to hear the stories behind the story.

From the triumphal entry onwards Matthew is taking up such things as the Old Testament melody of Zachariah chapter 9 to 14 and he plays out the melody of the Passion narrative around this melody making frequent allusions to it along the way. Here are a few examples that we might think of. Chapter 9 verse 9 Rejoice greatly O daughter of Zion, shout aloud O daughter of Jerusalem, behold your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Chapter 14 verse 21 And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day. Chapter 9 verse 14 Then the Lord will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning. The Lord God will sound the trumpet and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south.

Chapter 12 verse 10 And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. Chapter 10 verse 8 to 9 I will whistle for them and gather them in, for I have redeemed them, and they shall be as many as they were before, though I scattered them among the nations, yet in far countries they shall remember me, and with their children they shall live and return. Chapter 14 verse 4 to 7 On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the mount shall move northward and the other half southward.

And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azel. And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah the king of Judah. There the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

On that day there shall be no light, cold or frost, and there shall be a unique day, which is known to the Lord, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light. Chapter 9 verse 11 As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Chapter 13 verse 7 Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me, declares the Lord of hosts.

Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. I will turn my hand against the little ones. Chapter 11 verse 12 to 13 Then I said to them, If it seems good to you, give me my wages, but if not, keep them.

And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver. Then the Lord said to me, Throw it to the potter, the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver, and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter.

We might perhaps add to this list the perplexing reference to Zachariah the son of Berechiah in Matthew chapter 23. These themes are messianic and apocalyptic. It's the rejected Messiah, wounded and killed.

And Matthew is taking this story and placing it in the background of his Passion narrative so that we can see that Jesus is fulfilling prophecy all the way along. Jesus foretells his disciples' rejection of him in a way that shows that it fulfills Old Testament prophecy, and in a way also that reveals that he knows what's about to take place, and that even those elements that take the disciples and the reader by surprise do not take him by surprise. He's already foretold Judas' betrayal, but now the disciples forsaking him and Peter's denying him are foretold.

Peter is the lead disciple, and he's the one who speaks up and declares with confidence that he will not fall away. But Jesus declares that all of them will stumble that very night. However, Jesus will be raised and he will go before them to Galilee.

This is the closing scene of the Gospel, and the fact that Jesus foretells it here suggests that it is important that it happens in Galilee. He's returning to the point where he first gathered them. The shepherd is going to regather his sheep and he's going to send them forth as shepherds themselves.

It's a reunion of the scattered sheep and the risen shepherd. Peter's excessive confidence in his own abilities and his insistent denials that he will deny Christ are striking here. He presents himself as the most faithful disciple.

All the others might reject him, but Peter would not. And perhaps there's an invited comparison between the proud, crowing cockerel and Peter himself. Peter is crowing about his faithfulness, but that very morning he will be reminded about that crowing that he is engaged in by the crowing of the cockerel, who alerts him to the fact that he has just denied his Lord.

From the prediction of three denials, Jesus goes on to pray three times in the Garden of Gethsemane, three times for the cup to be removed. And he takes with him Peter, James and John. They're the same disciples as were present at the Transfiguration, and they're probably near enough to hear his prayers.

He tells them to watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. We've had that statement before in the context of the Lord's Prayer. Lead us not into temptation.

Or we can think about the way that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted. It's that entrance into that place of testing and trial, that place of tribulation,

where your faith will be pushed to its limit and maybe beyond. And they're supposed to pray that at this very moment, this critical moment, that they will not find themselves pushed beyond, that they will not find themselves in a situation where their faith is overwhelmed.

They must pray for that. You can also think of the way that people are warned to keep awake in the Olivet Discourse. Warned to stay awake because they do not know when the time of trial and testing and tribulation will hit them.

They must be prepared at all times. And the disciples here just fall asleep. They cannot keep awake.

Three times they are tested and three times they fail in contrast with Jesus in the wilderness. He talks with Peter in particular in verse 40 in a way that maybe anticipates Peter's denial. The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

Peter is zealous but he lacks the ability to carry it out in practice. And Jesus wrestles with the reality of his forthcoming suffering. These are agonized, passionate prayers calling upon his Father.

And yet there is a shift in the balance of the prayers between verse 39 and verse 42. In verse 39, And it seems by verse 42 he has his answer. His first prayer is a prayer that if there is any way according to God's will that the cup could be removed, that it would be removed.

And the second prayer is knowing that it cannot be removed. Let God's will be done is a prayer in which we see the will of Christ according to his human nature conformed with the will of the Father. A will that is set on the same thing.

Once again we might hear an echo of the Lord's prayer here. Your will be done. And perhaps further, an echo of the story of the binding of Isaac and the relationship between Isaac and his father Abraham.

Having prayed these three times, Jesus then gets up and goes out to face his betrayer who has come. And Judas is accompanied by a mob. He's one of the twelve we're told.

Now we know that Judas is one of the twelve but this underlies the scale of the treachery that is taking place here. He betrays Jesus with a kiss. Maybe it reminds us of Joab betraying Amasa with a kiss in 2 Samuel 20 verses 9-10.

One of those with Jesus, identified with Peter elsewhere, strikes the high priest's servant. This again might make us think of the story of David fleeing from Absalom and the way that Abishai, the son of Zeruiah, asked to strike down Shimei who comes out against him with curses. Here, Peter is forbidden and in that place Abishai is forbidden by David.

Those who deal in the coin of violence will receive their recompense in violence. But Jesus is not being taken for want of force. If he wanted he could summon legions of angels to his aid.

However the scriptures must be fulfilled. What are the scriptures in question? We could think of a number of different stories. The story of David and his fleeing from Absalom and the different events that occur there.

The story of Joseph being betrayed by his brothers and Judah in particular. We could think of the story beneath the final part of the prophecy of Zechariah. We could think of a number of other places like these that seem to point forward to what Jesus accomplishes and suffers.

In other gospels we see this particular incident associated with Isaiah 53 verse 12. He was numbered with the transgressors. They come out against him like a brigand because he's numbered with the transgressors in fulfilment of the scriptures.

A question to consider. What similarities can we see in the way that Paul prays in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 7 to 10 concerning his thorn in the flesh and the way that Christ prays in the garden of Gethsemane? What can we learn by the comparison and how does it relate to the broader themes at the end of the book of 2 Corinthians?