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April 5th: Leviticus 10 & Mark 4:1-34

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Nadab and Abihu. Teaching in parables.

[New Testament section begins at 16:36]

Some passages referenced:

Genesis 3 (the Fall of Adam and Eve); Genesis 9 (the Fall of Ham); Genesis 16 (the Fall of Abram and Sarai); Genesis 32 (the Fall of Israel); 1 Kings 10 (the Fall of Solomon); Leviticus 9:24 (the fire of the Lord consumes the sacrifices); Exodus 24:1-2, 9-18 (the covenant ceremony at Sinai); 1 Kings 12 (Jeroboam sets up golden calves).

Isaiah 6 (Isaiah's call); Isaiah 61:11, Jeremiah 31:27, Ezekiel 36:9, Hosea 2:23 (sowing the restored people in the land); Joel 3:13 (the sickle and the harvest); Ezekiel 17 (Ezekiel's parable of the two eagles and the cedar); Daniel 4:21 (the tree in which the birds make their nests); Daniel 2:35 (the stone becoming a great mountain).

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

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Transcript

Leviticus 10. Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.

Then Moses said to Aaron, This is what the Lord has said, Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace. And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel, the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, Come near, carry your brothers away from the front of the sanctuary and out of the camp.

So they came near and carried them in their coats out of the camp, as Moses had said. And Moses said to Aaron and Eliezer and Ithamar his sons, Do not let the hair of your heads hang loose, and do not tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the congregation. But let your brothers, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning that the Lord has kindled.

And do not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you. And they did according to the word of Moses. And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying, Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die.

It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean. And you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses.

Moses spoke to Aaron and to Eliezer and Ithamar, his surviving sons, Take the grain offering that is left of the Lord's food offerings, and eat it unleavened beside the altar, for it is most holy. You shall eat it in a holy place, because it is your dew and your sons' dew from the Lord's food offerings. For so I am commanded.

But the breast that is waived and the thigh that is contributed, you shall eat in a clean place, you and your sons and your daughters with you, for they are given as your dew and your sons' dew from the sacrifices of the peace offerings of the people of Israel. The thigh that is contributed and the breast that is waived, they shall bring with the food offerings of the fat pieces to waive for a waive offering before the Lord. And it shall be yours and your sons with you as a dew forever, as the Lord has commanded.

Now Moses diligently inquired about the goat of the sin offering, and behold it was burned up. And he was angry with Eliezer and Ithamar, the surviving sons of Aaron, saying, Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the place of the sanctuary, since it is a thing most holy, and has been given to you, that you may bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord? Behold, its blood was not brought into the inner part of the sanctuary. You certainly ought to have eaten it in the

sanctuary, as I commanded.

And Aaron said to Moses, Behold, today they have offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, and yet such things as these have happened to me. If I had eaten the sin offering today, would the Lord have approved? And when Moses heard that, he approved. In Leviticus chapter 10, the priesthood and the tabernacle have just been consecrated.

Seems like the start of a glorious new order, and then something goes terribly wrong. There are a number of creation and new creation stories in scripture, and we see many of them being followed by some sort of fall. In Genesis chapter 1 and 2, the earth and mankind are created, and that's followed by a fall in Genesis chapter 3. In Genesis 9, there is a new earth after the flood, and a covenant made with Noah and his sons.

That is immediately followed by a fall narrative, as Ham sinfully enters his father's tent and sees his nakedness. In Genesis chapter 16, after God has made a covenant with him, Abraham sins by taking Hagar. In Genesis chapter 32, after the gift of the law at Sinai, and the plans being given for the sabbatical tent of the tabernacle, the Israelites sin with the golden calf.

In 1 Kings chapter 10, after being given the knowledge of good and evil, building the new Eden of the temple, and being visited by the woman, the Queen of Sheba, Solomon falls by breaking the deuteronomic law of the king in every particular. In Leviticus 10, there is another fall narrative, after the blessing of the establishment of the priesthood and the tabernacle, and it has resemblances to some of these other falls. It's a violation of the father's tent, seemingly involving wine, as in the story of Noah and Ham.

It's the taking and giving of something not commanded, leading to expulsion, as in the case of Adam and Eve. Nadab and Abihu offer unauthorized or strange fire. This is presumably fire taken from a profane source, rather than the altar.

There is also the possibility that it is a private offering, that they are offering these on their own personal pans, rather than on the pans of the sanctuary that they were supposed to use. They sin by fire, and they are judged by fire. The fire that consumes them seems to be the fire of God's own presence.

In verse 24 of the previous chapter, fire has come out from God's presence to consume the sacrifices on the altar, at the end of this great celebration of Aaron's priesthood being established. The judgment on Nadab and Abihu provokes an appropriate fear of the Lord in the people and the priests. Those who come near to God are in a position of extreme danger, and should not take their duties lightly.

And perhaps we are supposed to see something in the similarity between Nadab's name and that of the free will offering. Nadab offers a gift on his own terms, but the gift is a

trespass. It's violating the boundaries that God has set up.

He's giving a gift, but it's not actually a gift that God wants or desires. It may be similar in some ways to the sacrifice of Cain, who gives a tribute offering, but without approaching God in the proper way. He's giving to God and approaching God on his own terms.

And this is a violation of the principles of the tabernacle, but also of the free will offering. There is a time and a place for the free will offering, but it needs to be in terms that God has established, not on people's own terms. To make more sense of this story, we should probably go back to Exodus chapter 24.

In Exodus chapter 24, we encounter Nadab and Abihu for the first time. Starting in verse 1, Then he said to Moses, Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from far. Moses alone shall come near to the Lord, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.

And then in verse 9, Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet, as it were, a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel.

They beheld God, and ate and drank. The Lord said to Moses, Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction. So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.

And he said to the elders, Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and her are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them.

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud.

Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain, and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights. This is the previous time that we have encountered Nadab and Abihu.

And in that story, they are joining Moses and the elders and Aaron as they go up on the mountain and eat before the Lord. As in the previous two chapters, there is a period of waiting for seven days. And they are waiting for Moses to enter into the presence of the Lord.

There is also in that story the devouring fire as the presence of God. And so there are a

number of elements that are similar. We've already noted the way that the tabernacle is a sort of portable Sinai.

And here it's being established as the place where they can come into God's presence. But they were held back that last time, and now they seem to want to press forward on their own terms. They ate in the presence of God and they were not destroyed.

But they had to obey God. They had to come on his own terms. And now they want to come on their terms.

They want to come to God with strange fire, and they are breaking the requirements that God has given them. Moses gets Elzaphan and Mishael to carry out the bodies. Because the anointed priests were not allowed to defile themselves with corpse contact.

They have been anointed and they must not waver from their proper duties. And even more so now as they see how serious it is to be servants of the Holy God. Protecting the people from God's holiness breaking out, and then also being mindful themselves and ensuring that they do not commit any trespass in the sanctuary.

The rationale for the killing of Nadab and Abihu begins to make more sense in the statement that the priests are to distinguish between the holy and the common, the clean and the unclean. Now the holy and the common and the clean and the unclean are different things. So the holy and the common is the distinction between those things that are dedicated to God, that belong to God, those things that are set apart for him, and those things that are not.

So the priests are holy in a way that the average Israelite is not. But the average Israelite who can worship in God's presence is clean. And those who are outside of the camp, those who are defiled by corpses, those who are defiled by emissions or some other thing, they are unclean.

Now those distinctions overlap to an extent. They can't be broken down into just two distinctions, but there is an overlap between the clean and the common. So clean is not identical with holy.

There are some things that are clean but not holy. The average Israelite who's worshipping can be clean, but they're not holy in the way that the priests are. Nadab and Abihu had failed to observe these distinctions, and the priests were supposed to teach the Israelites to exemplify these distinctions in that area where those distinctions mattered most of all.

When Nadab and Abihu failed to observe these, God had to uphold the boundary of the holy himself, breaking out with that fire that consumed them. Why the prominence of the prohibition on alcohol here? Perhaps it may be an indication of what led Nadab and Abihu to sin. Alcohol affects a change of mental state, and people can often mistake that

change of mental state with some intoxicating substance, a drug or alcohol, with attaining that higher level of holiness.

Many forms of religion involve that change of mental state through intoxicating substances, and using that as a means to get close to God. Israelite religion was not to operate like that. Rather, it was supposed to abstain from that altogether in the service of God.

The holy was not to be sought through changing your state of mind and taking mind-altering substances. Rather, it required sobriety and seriousness, and a recognition of the need to distinguish, to have your faculties alert and ready to uphold the boundaries that God had set. And if there was indeed alcohol involved in this particular sin, maybe it reminds us of the sin of the golden calf, where they sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

That sort of worship, a worship characterized by revelries, by altered states of mind, by inducing ecstasies through dancing and other things like that, that was out. That was not the sort of thing that should characterize the worship of Israel. And in the sin of the golden calf, and in the sin of Nehdev and Abihu, I think we're seeing something of the fault with that sort of worship, and how God completely rejects it and wishes to be approached in a very different manner.

The sin of Nehdev and Abihu is followed by a crisis with the purification offering. Aaron and his sons were supposed to eat the purification offerings, whose blood was placed on the horns of the outer bronze altar. The ones that were brought into the holy place, with their blood placed on the horns of the golden altar, they were not to eat those.

Rather, the flesh of those had to be burnt outside the camp in a clean place. For the sacrifices that were offered on the outer bronze altar, with their blood being placed on that altar, the priests were able to eat that. They took the impurity of the flesh of the purification offering upon themselves and consumed it.

Presumably, the idea being that their holiness, their holy status, was able to overwhelm the sin and the impurity of the purification offering associated with the average Israelite. A problem came, however, when the priests themselves sinned, or when the people as a company sinned, and then they couldn't eat the sacrifice. Rather, it had to be all burnt up.

Now, what seems to have happened here is not that they're just mourning and want to be let off the requirement to eat meat, because it just seems unfitting. There seems to be more going on here than that. Rather, the problem is that once Nadab and Abihu have died, there is impurity that has not been addressed.

And so, if they were to eat the sacrifices, they would take an impurity upon themselves

that they're not able to take upon themselves, because the sin had been done in the holy place itself. Just as in Genesis chapter 3, the fall is followed by a divine address to the people that deals with the problem. In the chapters that follow, we have laws concerning animals and purity of animals.

We have laws concerning childbirth. We have laws concerning the impurity of skin disease, and then also the leprous house and being expelled from that and it being torn down. And then we have laws concerning bodily emissions and the flesh and its pollution.

Then finally, we have the day of coverings, coverings being given for the sin and the nakedness of the people. And all of that is connected with the sin of Nadab and Abihu. It's following on from that.

And it's also following the pattern of Genesis chapter 3. Judgment upon the serpent, judgment upon the woman and her bearing of children, judgment upon the man in his skin, his flesh, and its connection with death. And then finally, offering of coverings for them. And it's the same pattern that's playing out here.

There's been a fall, but then God's grace is being spoken into the situation so that the system can be restored so that they can relate to him once more. There is something paradigmatic about the sin of Nadab and Abihu. In 1 Kings chapter 12, we see that Jeroboam sets up golden calves for Israel and he has sons called Nadab and Abijah.

The resemblance is quite strong. He resurrects the idolatry that Aaron was involved in in the incident with the golden calf in chapter 32 of Exodus. And he also has sons that die before their time who are involved in his idolatry.

And this suggests that in the story of Aaron and his sons, we have a paradigm of false worship that plays out in the later history of Israel. Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, is the one whose idolatry sets the terms for Israel's continued idolatry throughout all its different kings. And so the sin of Aaron and Nadab and Abihu is paradigmatic for the false worship that plagues Israel from the days of the split of the kingdom.

It's important that we pay attention to what's going on here because it will help us to read those later stories. A question to consider. The book of Leviticus is not just about the worship of Israel.

It teaches us patterns for our own worship. How can the sin of Nadab and Abihu and the distinction between the holy and the common, the clean and the unclean that the priests were supposed to maintain, help us to understand the proper manner of our own worship? What are some of the ways where we might violate these things as Nadab and Abihu did? Mark chapter 4 verses 1 to 34 Again he began to teach beside the sea, and a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea,

and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them, Listen, behold, a sower went out to sow, and as he sowed some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.

Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up since it had no depth of soil, and when the sun rose it was scorched and since it had no root it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

And he said, He who has ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.

And he said to them, Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown, when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground, the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy, and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while, then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

And others are the ones sown among thorns, they are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. And he said to them, Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret except to come to light.

If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. And he said to them, Pay attention to what you hear. With the measure you use it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you.

For to the one who has more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And he said, The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and it rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows, he knows not how.

The earth produces by itself first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.

And he said, With what can we compare the kingdom of God? What parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth.

Yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants, and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

In Mark chapter 4 we move into Jesus' use of parables. Once again he's surrounded by a large crowd as he has been in the previous chapters. He goes out onto the sea on a boat and teaches them on the land from the boat.

The fact that each of the gospels see fit to tell us where Jesus was teaching from, suggests that maybe it's an interesting and important detail to note. Each one of them think it's important enough to register within their account. Why is that the case? Perhaps because the sea more generally is associated with the symbolism of the Gentiles.

As Jesus goes out on the boat onto the sea just a bit out from the land, it's like a bit of Israel going out upon the sea of the Gentiles and addressing the Jewish crowd from that position. The parable of the sower contains four different types of soil with different responses to the seed that is sown in them. Seed along the path consumed by the birds, seed on the rocky ground without much soil and scorched by the sun, seed among thorns choked by the thorns, seed on good ground producing 30, 60 or 100 fold.

Jesus then explains his use of parables. The kingdom of God is a secret known only by those to whom it is given. This is to fulfill the judgment spoken of by Isaiah in a passage that is very prominent within the New Testament, Isaiah chapter 6. And this passage speaks of the catastrophic judgment of the people.

They're hardening so that they will not hear, they will not perceive the message that the prophet has been given to bring to them. However there will be a remnant and at the very end of chapter 6 Isaiah's commission moves into a statement about how the people will be restored. Keep on hearing but do not understand, keep on seeing but do not perceive, make the heart of this people dull and their ears heavy and blind their eyes lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed.

Then I said, how long O Lord? And he said, until cities lie waste without inhabitant and houses without people and the land is a desolate waste and the Lord removes people far away and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land and though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump. Jesus' reference to Isaiah's commission at the end

of which there is that reference to the holy seed I think provides us with some basis and background for understanding the parable of the sower, where it is coming from.

The passage speaks of the catastrophic judgment of the people, their removal from the land but there will be a remnant and those will be the seed that will be sowed in the land. God sows his people in the land in the return from exile. This is language that we find on several occasions within the Old Testament.

In places like Isaiah chapter 61 verse 11, for as the earth brings forth its sprouts and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations. In Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 27, For behold I am with you and I will turn to you and you shall be tilled and sown. And Hosea chapter 2 verse 23, Jesus is describing what the restoration looks like.

God is sowing the seed in the land, he's restoring the people from exile, he's restoring his presence to them, he's overcoming in part the judgment spoken of by Isaiah. But even in this situation there is that hardening of the people and so Jesus is explaining why even as God is restoring his people, sowing the land with that seed, there are people who are not responding in the proper way. That seed that's being sown is producing different responses.

This frames Jesus' own ministry as God's sowing of the land. His word is being sown among the people and producing fruit of persons who either respond and in some cases people who reject that word. Jesus is the one who's bringing about the fulfillment of these Old Testament prophecies and the awaited kingdom of God is happening in their midst but it's not happening in the way that they might have expected.

Jesus teaches that a lamp is not brought in to be hidden, he has not come to the scene in order to hide his identity forever. It will be revealed, things secret are to be brought to light and things hidden to be made known and people must act accordingly. Actions right now, the measure that people use with others has consequences in the future.

Those who perceive the message of the kingdom now will be blessed with more later whereas those who reject it and are darkened and hardened will lose even what they currently have. The parable of the growing seed is the only parable in Mark not found in either Matthew or Luke and there are many questions about what is the actual focus of the parable. Is it the secrecy of the seed's growth? Is it the man who scattered the seed? Is it the harvest? Like the parables that surround it, the parable of the growing seed seems to address the question of why things are as they are if the kingdom is present.

The growth of the kingdom occurs without human intervention and there seems to be an allusion in the reference to the harvest to Joel chapter 3 verse 13. Put in the sickle for the harvest is ripe, go in tread for the wine press is full, the vats overflow for their evil is great. The harvest is certain but the growth is largely hidden and it occurs apart from

human involvement.

It is God's kingdom and God establishes its process and the person who's waiting for the kingdom must trust and be patient. In the parable of the mustard seed Jesus is once again working with Old Testament background. I think here particularly the parable of Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 17 concerning the two eagles and the vine.

What Jesus says about the mustard seed does not fit with the actual reality of the mustard seed but the expectation that should do seems to arise from the mistaken notion that Jesus is just giving an illustration from nature. He isn't doing that. The whole point is that the mustard tree is not a grand tree and yet it's described as becoming very grand.

We are to recognize that this isn't a natural situation. Daniel 4 is also about a tree in which the birds take refuge Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom and his empire and what he represents. However this mustard seed against all appearances is going to be one that outgrows all the great trees of the nations.

Although Israel may seem small, although the kingdom may seem weak and insignificant, it will become more important and extensive than all of the great empires that had led to that day. The Babylonians, the Medo-Persians or the Greeks or the Romans, it was going to span the whole world and yet it would rise from the smallest seed of all, a seed altogether without natural promise and it would be that seed from which the kingdom would grow. Perhaps we should also think about the stone that becomes a great mountain in Daniel chapter 2. A question to consider, reading these parables of growth, how should we think about the growth of the church relative to the sorts of growth that the world tends to put its store in? What encouragement, what challenge can we draw from these parables for our own experience and view of the world?