

On Pilgrimage

A Sermon on Deuteronomy 16:1-17

Series: Deuteronomy

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Texts: Deuteronomy 16:1-17; Nehemiah 8:13-18; John 6:35, 11:49-50, 14:15-18, 1:14,29

Sometimes it's easy to see yourself in a piece of Scripture; at other times, the world it presupposes feels far removed from your own. Today we re-enter our series on the Book of Deuteronomy with a talk on the three great pilgrimage festivals of Ancient Israel: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. If you're like me, you'll find this passage a mix of the familiar and the strange. The pilgrimage festivals in the Old Testament combine two things which in Christianity tend to be kept apart. On the one hand, they involve travel to a location of religious importance, in this case, 'the place where the LORD will choose to place his name'. On the other hand, by observing them in their order, they effectively make up a 'liturgical year': they tie the rhythms of the agricultural year to the remembrance of particular acts of deliverance which the LORD has carried out on Israel's behalf.

What feels familiar to me in this passage is the concept of a liturgical year. Christmas and Easter, Lent and Advent, Pentecost and Reformation Sunday: these are annually recurring features of the Christian church year that sink important truths of the gospel deep into our lives. We remind ourselves at Christmas that God has chosen to dwell among us; on Good Friday that Jesus has died to reconcile us to God; at Pentecost that God has sent his Holy Spirit to dwell within us; during Advent that Jesus is coming back to judge the world.

But we don't need to travel somewhere to observe these festivals or seasons. They're incorporated into our common life Sunday by Sunday as we meet in our local church. Pilgrimage, then, is for me the exotic element in this passage. The closest I've ever come to going on pilgrimage was when Anthea and I travelled to Germany the year we turned thirty. We spent most of our time in Berlin and in the former East Germany. As part of our trip we visited the Augustinian abbey in Erfurt where Martin Luther began his life as a monk and the Lutherstube in the Wartburg, a little room in a castle just outside Eisenach, where Martin Luther wrote his translation of the New Testament while in hiding from the Emperor; and we visited the house of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's parents in Berlin, where Bonhoeffer lived after the Gestapo had shut down his illegal seminary in Finkenwalde. Why do we seek out sites like the

Bonhoeffer Haus and the Lutherstube? What are we hoping to experience in visiting them? Keep this question in mind, because I'm going to return to it at the end of this sermon!

What I'm going to do this morning is to walk through verses 1 to 17 of Deuteronomy, and paint a picture for you of the three great pilgrimage festivals as Deuteronomy conceives of them. I'm then going to look at these festivals, this time through an explicitly Christian lens as events that point forward to Jesus and his rescue and provision for us. And lastly, I'm going to ask: What does pilgrimage as a concept have to teach us as about being a Christian? Let's dive in!—

PART ONE

The Three Festivals

The first of the three festivals is the פסח (*pesah*), or Passover, and its purpose is to commemorate the night God led the Israelites out of the land of Egypt. The animal slaughtered and eaten in the family house reminds later Israelites of the sheep or goat whose blood had been smeared over the doorframe of the entrance to their houses in Egypt, so that the angel of death wouldn't enter into the house as he would those of their Egyptian neighbours. The unleavened bread they baked and ate would in its character as the 'bread of affliction' remind the Israelites of the suffering they had endured in Egypt and of their hasty flight out of the land, pursued by Pharaoh and his army.

The second of the festivals is the חג שבועות (*bag shavuoth*), or Festival of Weeks. Greek-speaking Jews in the New Testament period called this feast by the name of Pentecost from the Greek for fifty days, the period of time that would lapse from the beginning of the grain harvest until the commencement of the festival. Pentecost is a harvest festival that commemorates God's provision for his people in the Promised Land. The Patriarchs had been nomads, relying primarily on livestock for their sustenance. But in entering the Promised Land the Israelites became an agrarian people with land of their own. Pentecost reminds the Israelites of how richly God had provided for a people that had once had nothing to call their own.

The third festival mentioned in Deuteronomy 16 is the Festival of סוכת, (*sukkot*), or Tabernacles. Like the חג שבועות (*bag shavuoth*), Tabernacles is a harvest festival. Now, unlike the first two festivals, Moses doesn't explicitly link Tabernacles to the Exodus, but the Tabernacles, or Tents, which the Israelites were to live in for the duration of the festival are nonetheless an allusion to

the Israelites camped in the wilderness around the Tent of Meeting during the period between the flight from Egypt and the entry into the Land. Tabernacles, then, is all about how, even without a home to call your own, if you have God, you have everything you need.

So, having sketched a portrait of the festivals in their Jewish context, how are the themes they evoke picked up and fulfilled in Jesus?

PART TWO

Jesus and the Festivals

Let me try to answer the question I've just posed by drawing on just one book of the New Testament – the Gospel of John. One of the things you might notice when reading John's Gospel is how the vast majority of the action in it takes place in Jerusalem during the different pilgrimage festivals. Some of these festivals are identified by name, others are anonymous. The Passover is the festival which John mentions most frequently. Jesus calls himself the bread of life, in chapter six, when, shortly before the Passover, he has fed the five thousand, and in doing this he may intend the phrase to contrast with the 'bread of affliction' eaten during the Festival. And in chapter 11, with another Passover about to be celebrated, the high priest Caiaphas tells the Sanhedrin that 'it is better ... that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish'. Caiaphas wants to avoid a confrontation with Rome, seeing in Jesus a popular rebel, but John views Caiaphas' words as an unconscious prophecy identifying Jesus' death with the death of the Passover lamb, slain so that the sons of Israel might live. (And, in fact, John, both here and elsewhere, emphasises that Jesus' death is not only for the nation of Israel, but for the sins of the whole world.)

The Festival of Weeks, or Pentecost, is never mentioned by name in John, though it may be the festival referred to in John 5. Of course, ever since the first Pentecost after Jesus' ascension, Christians have associated the Festival with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Israelites had dwelt in the good Land, God's New Covenant people would from then on be indwelt by God's own Spirit. 'If you love me,' Jesus had told his disciples in John 14,

'keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth... He will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.'

Jesus' return to his Father's side is in John 14 the setting for his request to his Father to send his Spirit to dwell in us, the Spirit who assures us that we really are God's children. Jesus' disciples in John 14 have troubled hearts, alarmed by Jesus' saying that he is about to leave them. Jesus comforts them by saying that, in sending us the Spirit, the Father hasn't abandoned us, that he is with us, even though we don't yet see him face to face, and that Jesus is with us, even though he's gone to be at the Father's side.

What about the Festival of Tabernacles? In the Prologue to the Gospel, John writes, 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,' or, more literally, 'tabernacled among us' (ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, *eskenosen en hēmin*), which is, almost certainly, an allusion to the Festival of Booths, or Tabernacles. In taking the flesh of a human being, Jesus pitched his tent among us, just as the Tent of Meeting was pitched in the midst of the Israelite camp, as the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness on their way out of the Egypt towards the Promised Land.

As with so many other aspects of Israel's life, the festivals, then, are ultimately a form of education helping the Jewish people to perceive something of who Jesus is. Jesus is the bread of life; he is the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one who will not let us be orphaned, sending the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. In Jesus, God pitches his tent among us as we journey on our way out of slavery to sin and into the Heavenly Jerusalem.

PART THREE

Being on Pilgrimage

At the beginning of this sermon I posed the question: Why *do* we seek out sites like the Bonhoeffer Haus and the Lutherstube? What are we hoping to experience in visiting them? For me, the reason had something to do with being able to imagine myself into a past which has ongoing significance for me. I value being able to read God's word in my own language, and Luther's determination to give his own people a German New Testament is historically speaking a big part of the reason why I'm holding an English Bible in my hand today. Naturally timid, I value Luther's and Bonhoeffer's courage and trust in Jesus when every worldly instinct of theirs must have been urging them to compromise the truth of the gospel.

Of course, at a deeper level, the whole of the Christian life can be thought of as a sort of pilgrimage. To borrow from John Bunyan, every person who has come to put their trust in Jesus

has set out, like Christian, the hero of Bunyan's novel, from the City of Destruction on a pilgrimage to the Celestial City. Israelites seeking to obey Deuteronomy 16 would, three times a year, journey to Jerusalem, to celebrate God's acts of salvation in the past and his ongoing provision for them in the present. Christians reading Deuteronomy 16 in the light of Christ's death and resurrection know that they are on a journey to the New Jerusalem. Their passports are stamped with Jesus' blood; his Spirit strengthens them when they grow discouraged, and start to wonder whether all they've been doing is wandering round in circles. They live their lives like backpackers on a hike, pitching a tent in the evening and taking it down the following morning, knowing that every day brings them a little closer to their final destination: they pass through this life lightly, fixing their eyes on the home Jesus has gone to prepare for them.

Let's sing!