

“When We Hear Trumpets”
A Sermon for Rosh Hashanah
Leviticus 23:23-25 & Matthew 24:30-31
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 16 September 2007/4 Tishri 5768

Usually, when we hear trumpets, something big is about to happen:

- the bride is on her way down the aisle,
- the queen is appearing on the royal balcony,
- the sun is about to dip below the horizon at the military base,
- or the fallen one is being honored at the graveside.

Actually, *Taps* is usually played by military musicians with a bugle instead of a trumpet. And the bugle is one of the simplest of horns – much like a shofar – the most ancient of horns which comes literally from the horns of an animal.

The first shofar was made from the horns of a ram but they could also be made from an antelope or a gazelle. They are notoriously difficult to blow, and the sound is not all that pleasant to most ears.

But I suspect that, while to most of us think the shofar sounds like a dying donkey, to the faithful Jew the sound of the shofar brings profound comfort. It marks the holiest days of the Jewish calendar.

(This is similar to how Presbyterians feel about bag pipes. To the average ear, bagpipes sound like cats dying. But to a Scots Presbyterian hearing the strains of *Amazing Grace* from a faraway hillside, the sound brings great comfort and joy.)

When we hear horns, when we hear trumpets – something grand is usually about to happen. The trumpet sound **makes us stop whatever we are doing and pay attention.**

- **This is what *God* was trying to tell the children of Israel in the book of Leviticus.**
- **This is what *Jesus* was trying to tell his disciples outside the temple in Jerusalem, according to the book of Matthew:**

SOMETHING MOMENTOUS IS HAPPENING. PAY ATTENTION.

The momentous thing happening in the book of Leviticus was what our Jewish brothers and sisters now call Rosh Hashanah – the beginning of a new year. In Hebrew “Rosh Hashanah” literally means “the head of the year.”

It is was the first day of the seventh month – marked this year at sundown last Wednesday night – the first day of the Hebrew month known as **Tishri** in the year **5768**.¹

Jesus would have called this day the Feast of Trumpets or *Yom Teruah*². He definitely would have heard the sound of the shofar, and – as the Hebrew scripture describes – Jesus would have spent the day at rest, taking stock of his life.

Rosh Hashanah – in the Jewish calendar – marks a new beginning for people, animals, and contracts – a day when people stop everything to assess how things are going.

Rosh Hashanah is basically a gut check before God. This is the day we stop and ask ourselves:

- *How are things going?*
- *Am I spending my time doing the most important things?*
- *Are there any habits I need to change?*
- *Is there any stress? Anxiety? Any burdens I need to address?*
- *Is there any darkness? Are there any secrets I need to get rid of?*
- *Is there something I desperately need to change before I can be the person God created me to be?*

God told Moses to gather the people into a holy convocation – in other words – gather together everyone into a holy assembly which starts when the trumpet -- or the shofar – sounds.

This blowing of the shofar kicked off ten days of reflection – TEN DAYS OF AWE -- which we talked about last week. And at the end of the Days of Awe, there will be another feast known as Yom Kippur – or THE DAY OF ATONEMENT – which we will talk about next week.

But in these ten days we are supposed to reflect and ask ourselves some serious questions:

- *Am I the person God wants me to be?*
- *Is my life the way it's supposed to be?*

And here's a big one: ***what can I be doing to remind myself that life is bigger than I am? What regular rituals must I do to feed me spiritually ? . . .*** which brings me to the fire offerings. Note that in verse 25 of the passage we read from Leviticus:

You shall not work at your occupations; and you shall present the LORD's offering by fire.

¹ This date was calculated from the creation of Adam – interestingly enough, not from the creation of the world in the beginning.

² Literally “the day of the blasting trumpets”

Already, we're in trouble. At least some of us have a hard time taking one day from no work "at our occupations." The Blackberry beckons. The phone and computer beckon.

Maybe the boss does more than beckon – maybe the boss considers a day off when you take your Blackberry to the beach.

We have a hard time breaking away from work, so how much harder is it to focus on spiritual rituals – especially when in the back of our minds we are thinking:

- I have papers to grade.
- I have briefs to write.
- I have projects to finish.

But even if we are lousy at keeping a weekly Sabbath – although that's in God's Top Ten List – we need to stop and do a *gut check* at least once a year.

All through the book of Leviticus, there are seemingly boring rituals that make little sense to our 21st century sensibilities:

- Sin offerings
- Grain offerings
- Fire offerings

When was the last time you studied the book of Leviticus? When was the last time you went to a Leviticus Bible Study? I'm guessing it's been a while because we consider this book to be extremely dated. All this talk about leprosy and purity laws and abominations – it's all so ancient and has nothing to do with us now.

Actually I have two things to say about that:

- 1) We are starting a weekly Bible Study on the book of Leviticus in October – one by day and one by night – for anyone who'd like to learn why in the world these ancient laws matter. And
- 2) Rituals are extremely important – as important today as they were thousands of years ago.

Back to making a "fire offering" to the LORD . . .

A "fire offering" doesn't mean that you become so willing to stop and focus so totally on God that you will be *fired* from your job.

The fire offering is simply a sweet surrender to God. In order to make a proper fire offering, there was a procedure that – again may seem tedious to us but – was created for a reason:

- An animal would be chosen – beautiful and without blemish – something worthy of God. Our very best.
- It would be given freely and without hesitation. (We wouldn't be thinking in the back of our minds: this was my favorite sheep. I wish I wasn't offering up *this* sheep. Maybe another would do.) No this is a gift given freely and joyfully.
- It would be given deliberately and meditatively.
- As the priest burned the meat, the smell would be offered up to God symbolizing a sweet surrender.

And why do we do this? Is it because God requires *meat*? Is it because God *needs* something from us? Is it because God wants to *inconvenience* us, force us into *some random practice* to prove to all the universe that ***God is God*** and we are not?

No, God does this because God knows ***we have the tendency to run around*** – not living – but filling our days with busy-ness:

We run here. We run there. We drop this thing off over there and then pick up something over here. We run, run , run to the point that we are no longer living anymore. We are just filling our lives with inconsequential things that distract us from the way we are really supposed to be doing with this life God has given us.

So God says, “Stop!” Stop and ponder what needs to be different. And make something sweet to lift up to God.

The ritual is not for God. The ritual is for the people so that we will live a little bit closer to the way we are supposed to live. It is a teaching that will remind us why God has given us this life.

Jesus came into a world that relied on ritual. As a Jewish boy and then as a Jewish man, Jesus and his family lived out these rituals. They stopped and turned to God on a regular basis and remembered why they were alive.

But here's the big difference between Jesus' life and ours:

After years and years of watching the children get it wrong . . .

After trying to help “the people of Israel” turn *toward* God instead of away from God and the God's way, God decided to come *show us himself* how to live.

And still, we refuse to live the way we are supposed to live.

But Jesus says this: listen for the sound of the trumpets. Listen for the sound of the trumpets because in the very end – when the world is finally the way God wants it to be – when I come again, **there will be trumpets.**

It will be better than the bride coming down the aisle. It will be more regal than the sighting of an earthly king or queen. It will not mark the end. It will mark a new beginning.

We know about the blowing of the shofar for Rosh Hashanah. We know about the requirement to stop and do a spiritual gut check. But there are many other practices that vary depending upon your specific tradition of Judaism.

One practice is to – literally – cast your sins upon the water,³ to be cleansed and begin again. Today, we will practice a ritual of the church that also about beginning again.

I remember once baptizing a woman in her late thirties who had confessed some of the things she wanted to put behind her. She had not been living the way she knew she had been born to live. But when the moment came for her baptism, when she kneeled and received the waters, **she wanted to hear trumpets.**

Or maybe feel lightning! At the very least, she hoped to see bright lights, have a profound peace come over her, maybe hear a still small voice say “Amen, my child.”

But no such luck. She got nothing but wet hair.

Sure, it was meaningful in that people hugged her and clearly loved her and she became a part of the family of God forever. But there were no trumpets. Major disappointment.

Eventually, something profound did happen however. In her daily living, she found an ever closer relationship with God because she started to practice the daily rituals of her faith: prayer, reading her Bible, talking about her faith with other people – to the point that it became the core of her life. It centered her. It calmed her. Every week, and often every day – she stopped – and she did a spiritual gut check. Was she living the way God wanted her to live?

And one Sabbath day – one Sunday – she was sitting in these pews witnessing the baptism of a baby. And it happened. She thinks she heard trumpets.

We who would love to hear trumpets, to hear the Voice of God each day know that the rituals of faith are important. If we want life to be different, if we want a fresh start – this is where we begin:

- We say our prayers,
- We read our Bibles and study together with others,
- We stop – on a regular basis – from the work of our occupations.

³ This is not a practice mentioned in scripture – the practice of Tashlich (or throwing our sins to the running waters) but the book of Leviticus does mention purification by water – a mikvah.

And we focus on God. We assess how life's going. We turn *to* God for help and forgiveness and thanksgiving and praise. And when we do these things in devotion to the LORD, we begin to hear more than trumpets. We hear the voice of God.

Shana Tova. A Good Year!

Let us pray: Holy God we who run from place to place know that we need to stop. We long to hear trumpets. We crave spiritual peace. You know too well our fevered souls.

And so we ask that – in these days of awe – we would indeed notice your awesome creation, your amazing power, your exquisite love. Stop us from running ourselves into an empty place, we pray in the name of Jesus who has saved us. Amen.