

The Days of Awe

Isaiah 58:1-14;3-7;15-29

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At sundown on this Friday evening (September 18, 2020) our Jewish friends and Jews throughout the world will enter what is known as “The Days of Awe.” Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, year 5781 on the Jewish calendar, begins on that evening and initiates ten momentous days which are known in America as “The High Holy Days,” culminating on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The Days of Awe are a time of solemn penitence at the start of the autumn festival season. The words of the ancient liturgy during the Days of Awe, some of which we have incorporated into our service of worship today, create a mood of personal introspection and individual judgment. Faithful Jews ask themselves before the Lord, where have I been and where am I going? The ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are called Teshuva. It is a time for turning around, for repentance and for seeking forgiveness for oneself and from those we have wronged in the past year.

Now I must say that both professionally and personally it makes a great deal of sense to me to begin the new year in the autumn. Oh, I know, the liturgical calendar does not begin for the Christians until the first Sunday of Advent, but I’ve never been a strict devotee of the liturgical calendar. And the civil calendar begins the new year on January 1. For many people in the business world and now even for many congregations the fiscal year starts on July 1. But for those of us who are employed by or active in the church, autumn is really the beginning of the new year. There are fresh opportunities for growth and service. Teachers and leaders are commissioned for their sacred tasks. Children are promoted and adults sign up for various opportunities, for Christian Formation. Autumn is also traditionally the season of stewardship when church members reflect upon both their past and their future and seek to discern what the Lord would have them to do with their resources in the year ahead. New commitments are made in the fall of the year which will largely determine how faithful and effective we will be as individuals, as families, and as a community of faith.

I believe our Jewish forebearers were onto something both symbolic and significant in setting the beginning of the year in the fall. They were reminded both in the liturgy and in nature with the falling of the leaves, and the gathering of the harvest that there is a divine rhythm to life, a time to die as well as a time to live. It was a time for looking back and taking stock, for gathering the year’s harvest and assessing what one had been able to do and accomplish with

God's help. In the Days of Awe, as in the days of autumn, there is something of a melancholy tone. The passing of another year sounds a message of rebuke and judgment for we realize that many of things we had hoped to do, we did not; and many of things we hope not to do, we regrettably did.

For the Jew, no sound so characterizes the melancholy tone of this new year's celebration as the blowing of the shofar, the ram's horn. It blows on Rosh Hashanah at least 100 blasts as the Days of Awe begin and it calls out to the people of God to wake up, to rise from their lethargy, to examine themselves anew and return to God. It calls them to confession and penitence, to Godly sorrow over the laws of God that they have broken over wrongs committed toward neighbors, over sacred vows that had been violated, over all the sins committed in the course of the year now concluding.

The sounding of the ram's horn reminds the faithful of many things – the trumpet blast on Mount Sinai when God gave the law to Moses. It is blown to celebrate the loyalty of Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. It reminds the faithful of how on occasion God calls his people into battle for the things of God ("Go blow that ram horn," Joshua cried, "for the battle is in my hands!") The blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah summons the people to repent, to remember the things that are truly important, and to return to God while they have time remaining. And nothing so stirs the soul of the Jew as the mournful sound of the shofar on Yom Kippur. It is not unlike the sound of the bagpipe that stirs the souls of the sons and daughters of Scotland. Like the shofar, the bagpipes can be both war music, a call to battle, a call to worship, and also a sad lament because of people and opportunities lost in the course of life.

But while the Days of Awe are solemn and serious, they are not completely somber. Indeed, a Talmudic reference invites worshippers to approach Rosh Hashanah in a mood of confidence and hope because the faithful know that Yahweh is a God of steadfast love, compassion, and mercy and stands ever ready to forgive those who truly repent and genuinely desire to live afresh as his children. Sins confessed are sins forgotten. Sins confessed are sins forgiven. And thus, a new year can begin filled with the promise and potential for faithful and sacrificial service. The mystical, magical sound of the shofar is heard again on Yom Kippur. One long note sounds on the ram's horn (called the Tekiah) signaling to the people: "You are forgiven!"

Now if you listened carefully to the passage I read from Hebrews this morning, then you know why as Christians it is no longer necessary for believers under the New Covenant to celebrate the rites and rituals of Judaism. While the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament served a valid purpose in their time, we believe as Christians that they were pointing toward a greater truth yet to be revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. They were symbols, types, and images of what was to come. Because the blood of Christ has been shed, ("once for all") blood sacrifices

are no longer warranted even if there were a Temple in Jerusalem. Because the sins of the world have been placed upon the One nailed to the cross, no longer is the scapegoat needed on the Day of Atonement, to be driven into the wilderness bearing the sins of the people. The ceremonies of Judaism make use of tangible, visible images which point toward the Christ who was the fulfillment of all the best hopes and promises of the children of Israel.

But while all of this is true and while we need not celebrate Rosh Hashanah or observe the ceremonies of the Old Covenant, I believe that as Christians we would be well served to recapture something of the spirit of this Jewish new year festival. We would benefit, I believe, from Days of Awe in our own lives. We would do well to recover the mood at least of Rosh Hashanah as autumn comes upon us once again. We too need to recover what it means to stand in awe of a holy God who has clear expectations for his servants.

By and large I believe our generation has lost a sense of awe in the presence of God. We speak so much in the church today of the love and mercy and forgiveness of God that we tend to forget that this God we serve is also the sovereign judge of the universe who holds us and all people accountable for the lives we live, the prayers we pray, the deeds we do, and the desires and drives that govern our days. Perhaps our generation has been guilty of domesticating God, of reducing the Almighty to a kindly and harmless old grandfather figure who pampers and indulges his spoiled children. The Days of Awe and the words of Scripture remind us that nothing could be farther from the truth.

I am sure that all of us love God, but do we truly respect God? Do we have a sense of Godly fear and reverent awe as we consider the fact that this sovereign King of the universe knows all about us and also expects us someday to give an accounting of the lives we have lived and goals we have pursued? The tenth chapter of Hebrews reminds us all that there is a coming day of judgment and warns us that if we think it is a serious offense to trivialize or disregard the Law of Moses, how much worse is it to spurn the sacrifice of Christ, to take lightly what Jesus Christ has done on our behalf and dismiss what he expects of us as his disciples?

During the Days of Awe, beginning with Rosh Hashanah, faithful Jews are called to remember that God is the Creator and Ruler of the universe and all of its people. They are called to remember and confess their own sins and the sins of the world of which they are a part. They are called to examine closely their own lives and remember that they will appear before the judgment seat of the Almighty. They are called to remember past vows and promises that have been broken and are encouraged to reaffirm the promises they intend to keep in the coming year, asking to be excused from any vows they cannot keep. They are invited to repent and to return to God and are reminded that their own future and the future of the world in the new year will largely depend on the genuineness of their sorrow for past sin and the fervency of their

intention to live in faith and obedience in the year ahead. That is why the proper greeting for a Jew on Rosh Hashanah is “May you be inscribed for a good year.”

Hebrews 10:31 reminds us that “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Other versions say, “a terrifying thing” or “an awful thing,” as in filled with awe. As Christians we may not be celebrating Rosh Hashanah with our Jewish neighbors but let us think with them soberly and seriously as autumn comes upon us once again of the character and quality of our discipleship in the past year. How faithful and obedient have we been? In what ways and in what areas have we compromised our discipleship? Has the Lord been the Lord of our lives? Has Jesus governed our family life and our marriages? Has he been Lord of our business and social affairs? Has Jesus really been in charge of how we have managed our resources, treated our neighbors, cared for the earth entrusted to us, cared for our physical bodies and worked in the political arena? Surely we too stand in need of confession and repentance.

And secondly, what do we intend, with God’s help, to do differently in the year before us? Will we be present in worship? Will we enroll in any of these wonderful educational opportunities that will help us to learn and to grow? Will we find ways to work and serve in the kingdom of God? Will we be a part of the fellowship of the people of God, encouraging and supporting one another?

What will you say to God this autumn? And, more importantly, what will you do for God? During the Days of Awe a reading from Isaiah 58 this Friday will once again remind Jews observing Rosh Hashanah that the real evidence of true repentance is not pious sounding words, extended prayers, fervent promises, or elaborate fasting, but rather sacrificial and compassionate service within the world, service that liberates people and invites the blessing of God.

Prayer: Lord God, a new year in the life and work of the church looms before us and we enter it by your grace. It is a wonderful opportunity for fresh and vital discipleship. With your people of old enable us to reflect upon the ways we have lived and served in the past, to repent of the wrongs we have committed and the vows we have broken, and to renew our fervent intention and great desire to live more faithfully and more obediently in the days to come. Forgive what we have been, amend what we now are, and by your grace determine what we shall become, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.