

“When the Asphalt Gets on Everything”
A Sermon on Leviticus 16:20-22; 29-31 and John 1:29
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October 11, 2020

Growing up, I used to play a lot of pick-up basketball games with friends in our driveway. We had an asphalt driveway, which meant that as soon as I dribbled the ball would come back to my hand and cover my hand in asphalt. Dribble again, more asphalt. (dribble, dribble, dribble...) then pass. That person gets the asphalt on both hands. Maybe they dribble a couple of times and then they shoot toward our white, wooden backboard. And maybe the ball then hits the rim and clanks sideways and rolls over to the white wooden fence lining one side of the driveway. And that’s all just within maybe 5-10 seconds.

We start getting sweaty, wiping our face with our hands, using our shirt to wipe our faces...Even a 15-minute pick-up game meant the backboard, the fence, our hands, faces, clothes, under our fingernails...everything is covered in asphalt - and it only ever spreads and deepens as the game continues. It was inescapable.

That is something of how the ancient Israelite society and really all of the Bible and certainly the Reformed Tradition conceives of the nature of sin. We are not a theological tradition that believes sin is a one-time thing here or there that needs to be fixed or amended. It’s more like something that bounces and immediately it begins spreading like multiplying marker upon everything it touches. And you keep playing the game, it keeps spreading.

Those of you who have ever worked in an office environment or been a member of a church – goodness – you know how a little gossip here or there is never just a little gossip here or there. That stuff spreads. It gets on everybody and everything and suddenly two people over here are supposedly talking about the deadline for a project and that conversation blows up into a whole other thing because the asphalt is covering everything.

Or in marriage, you’re talking about the color you want to paint the bathroom, and that turns into this whole other thing with name-calling and hurt and... The asphalt gets on everybody and everybody’s assumptions and the way folks communicate or don’t or address their emails or...

Sin has a pervasive, viral way about it.

The Bible understands that the asphalt cakes with layers through history as well. And so you start at a new company or church or marry into a new family or move to a new country...and it doesn't take long to see, "Oh, there are layers of asphalt from years previous, decades previous, centuries previous weighing this whole thing down, that still raise hurt in this space."

David Brook had an Op-Ed a couple of years ago that I found fascinating on this front. He talks about soldiers who have been through war and known oftentimes significant moral injury. Brooks laments, "most ancient cultures put returning soldiers through purification rituals. The men came back from battle and the terrible things they had done there, and they were given a chance to cleanse, purify and rejoin the community..." Even as they knew themselves covered in asphalt inside and out...they had a communal cleansing process.

Brooks summarily writes, "I wish our culture had many more rites of passage, communal moments when we celebrated a moral transition. There could be a community-wide rite of passage for people coming out of prison, for forgiveness of a personal wrong, for people who felt they had come out the other side of trauma and abuse. There'd be a marriage ceremony of sorts to mark the moment when a young person found the vocation he or she would dedicate life to."

I wish we had rituals to name forgiveness, a new start, a cleansing...because the asphalt is real and it touches everything - and unless there is some way to truly forgive and be forgiven, the community breaks. Could it be Leviticus chapter 16 is one of the most relevant chapters of the Bible in our day and age? It is a chapter on rituals of forgiveness.

In fact, Leviticus 16 details the highest of holy days for the Israelites – the Day of Atonement, the day of God's forgiveness (Yom Kippur, which was just celebrated this year in late September). There is a lot in chapter 16 alone about the details and rituals involved on this annual Day of Atonement, and for this morning we will only be able to focus on a portion of the whole of that day's rituals. But first, we need briefly to appreciate the 10 days leading up to the Day of Atonement.

They were called the "Ten Days of Repentance," which begins on Rash Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and then continues until the Day of Atonement. During those ten days, the people would be somberly fasting and confessing their sins as a community. Some Jewish sources write of these 10 days as a time when God would open up a giant book with all of the deeds and thoughts of humanity...and each person stood to be evaluated before God.

That may sound heavy, but the point is that those ten days provided a space of significant self-examination: No finger pointing, no debate about the real trouble-makers in the community... self-examination as individuals and self-examination as a community. Where have we missed it? What have our actions really been? Inactions? Words? Our posts? Our emails? Our silence? Our thoughts? Where have we put our attention? How are we part of what is happening way over there recognizing that all are part of the asphalt-spreading-equation?

Can you imagine 10 days of asking those questions together in the sanctuary of God? I could see days 1, 2, and maybe 3 being awkwardly quiet. But eventually some courageous souls would start to speak a truth about themselves or about us...and the High Priest would hold all of what was named in those ten days.

This also, perhaps, sounds heavy.... but we should readily recognize as Presbyterians in the Reformed Tradition that we have long talked about believing in 'total depravity,' which is a term that simply means that we believe all humans - even the very best - are fundamentally tainted by, broken by, enslaved by the reality of sin and so need forgiveness.

And then day 10 arrives – the Day of Atonement.

The High Priest we read earlier in chapter 16 is to wear very plain garments on the Day of Atonement. Even though this is the high holy day, he is not to wear the spectacular vestments...rather, he is to dress plainly for on that day he is to be a representative of all of the people. And as a common representative of the collective, the High Priest, we read *"...shall bring forward the live goat. 21 He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat's head."*

The Hebrew word here for "goat" here is "Azazel," and it has a meaning of "to take away." This is where we get the concept of "Scapegoat." Dwight Eisenhower once quipped, "The search for a scapegoat is the easiest of all hunting expeditions."

On one level, he is naming what we all know – we are pretty good at finding someone or someone(s) to blame for things. But, he is also pointing out that humans - we intuitively know the sin, the failure, the evil has to reside somewhere, with someone.

The remarkable thing about the Day of Atonement is that after 10 days of repentance, the people are saying, "the sin resides on us. With us. And now – by way of the Great High Priest - they are placed upon the head of the goat."

There was some tradition surrounding the goat about a red cord. You can only find it in a few sources. They would take a red cord—red being symbolic of sin and judgment—and at the end of these 10 days of confession, the red cord would be placed on the head of the goat - symbolic of all of the sin that is about to be carried away. Because then the next thing in the ritual is for the High Priest to “*send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness...*”

Later Jewish writings talk about the great fear people had about that goat, loaded with all that sin, meandering back in from the wilderness and into the community. **Can you imagine?! The old sin might come haunting again, the old emails and social media posts and stuff that really hurt and you should not have said, the profound callousness, the shameful deeds...What if all that asphalt came sauntering on back in one, large clump?** So you will read how the person who took the goat into the wilderness would find a cliff...they needed to make sure that particular goat was dead and would then not return.

And finally all of this would take place on a particular day of the week. 29 “*This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work...because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins. 31 It is a day of sabbath rest.*” The Day of Atonement happened on the sabbath. On a day when people were not to work. That’s important.

If someone were to ask, “How does this process work? Do I need a special goat? A really amazing High Priest to confess for all of us? What about this ritual makes sure we are forgiven and that sin is not defining or holding us or weighing or marring or doing any more damage – how do we know we are free for a new beginning with God and one another?!” The most fundamental answer is, “This all happens on the Sabbath which means none of your work or charity, none of your donations or sacrificial acts of love gain you forgiveness. God does the work of forgiveness. You rest in that. You trust in that. There is nothing else to do.”

Many years later the prophet Isaiah spoke of a day when an annual Day of Atonement would not be necessary: He wrote, “*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way (we’ve all got lots of asphalt on us); and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*” (Isaiah 53:6).

Isaiah speaks of a once-and-for-all time sacrificial lamb upon whom all sin and evil and iniquity would be laid. And then many years after that, John the Baptist sees Jesus and

cries out, “Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” And then do you remember later in Jesus’ ministry where he is standing before Pontius Pilate, falsely accused? And people begin crying out to Pilate in this raucous trial scene...do you remember what the people shout?

(John 19:15) They shouted, “*Take him away! Take him away!*” And then they add, “*Crucify him!*” The soldiers during this time twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on Jesus’ head. And of course if you have a crown of thorns on your head and it punctures your skin, you’re going to get red lines covering your head. And after Jesus has been on the cross for hours and breathes his last breath... a soldier jabs a spear into his side. You ever wonder why they do that? To make sure that he is dead and would not return. And then they take the lamb away and put him into a tomb.

When Christian churches and especially churches in the Reformed Tradition...when we put a cross at the center of their architecture, the center of their imagination, what we are naming is that forgiveness is not a nice thing we try to have and do toward one another, one thing among many that matters to us...but that forgiveness, newness, freedom, reconciled relationships with God and another...that stuff is central. Defining. Because three days later Jesus rises from the grave having destroyed the power and reality of sin.

How does Paul put the implication of that so forthrightly in 2 Corinthians? “*If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation - the old has gone, the new is here.*” The sin is gone. But how? How does it work? How do we know our stuff does not define us? How do we know the lamb carries the sin away and it shall not return but its power is destroyed?

What did we say last week?

“*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.*”

It is a Sabbath grace. There is no work to be done to secure it...the invitation is simply to trust that we are not our sin or sins against us...but that most fundamentally God has and God does make us new. The Lamb has taken away the sins of the world. So easy, right?

I’m always struck in church circles how readily we talk about Christians of previous generations as “saints.” She was a real saint. Grandpa – now there was saint. Deacon so-and-so from back in the day, such a saint. But we are often loath to think of anyone among us or ourselves as “saints.” It is a word that means “a most holy person,” and

that's too lofty, too shiny, too grand for any of us. If anything, sometimes you will find people who seem far from saintly and far more filled with bitterness or judgments. And yet I am mindful of Howard Thurman's insight in his Meditations of the Heart: "Every judgment is self-judgment. When you see things you do not like in others you are really recognizing that there is something you are judging within yourself. The more judgments you have the more things you feel unsettled about."

He points out that yes, the saints of God do a lot of judging of one another's actions and inactions, decisions and indecisions, habits and priorities and all the rest. The judgments, they come out in words, in gossip, in thought, in action. They often do not look like saints...The truth is, they are saints.

They are saints who are having a profoundly difficult time accepting their own forgiveness, their own "saintly" newness ...in fact, the amount of judgment they dole out is directly proportional to the amount they do not know themselves graced by new mercies of Jesus. Many saints still see themselves covered in asphalt - and the proof is found in the finger-pointing.

Perhaps the Apostle Paul knew how hard it is for us to accept this sabbath truth of forgiveness and sainthood. And so when you read his letters to all of these small churches in Thessalonica, Galatia, Philippi, Corinth, Rome, he always begins by addressing the people as "saints." First priority, first fundamental truth, first thing of central definition... *"To all of God's saints in Jesus Christ at Philippi...."*

Even if Paul's letter has some challenging words in it (and they always do!)... Paul starts with choosing to see the church as God sees the church. Most fundamentally forgiven and made new not because they're so amazing but because he trusts Jesus has carried away the asphalt and now lives in them such that his way and love and justice is their defining center.

"To the Saints of God in Jesus Christ at Georgetown, TX... we love neighbor only insofar as we know ourselves loved; we forgive only insofar as we actually know ourselves forgiven. Rest this day in this assurance: though the asphalt is real...in Christ Jesus you are forgiven. You are this day at the most essential level a new creation; the old is gone, the new is come." Amen.