

“Never Was”

Leviticus 25: 1 – 17

Makemie Presbyterian Church

August 16, 2009

Leviticus 25: 1 - 17

²The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: ²Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. ³Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; ⁴but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. ⁵You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. ⁶You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you; ⁷for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.

⁸You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. ⁹Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. ¹⁰And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. ¹¹That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. ¹²For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. ¹³In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. ¹⁴When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another. ¹⁵When you buy from your neighbor, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. ¹⁶If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. ¹⁷You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God.

Back when, well way back when I first was living on my own with my roomies Janey & Carolyn we made up a game to fill the occasional free evening. We called it “Definitions”. The game goes like this; one person would take the dictionary & look up a word that we thought the other two wouldn’t know. Then we would make up three definitions. You got points if someone guessed your made-up yet probably sounding definition; while your opponents got points for guessing the right definition.

Let’s use for an example, (the word) rogation.

Here are our three choices:

1. A method by which those trying to grow thinning hair use Rogaine.
2. A rotating of water to irrigate crops.
3. A law of Moses whereby God commands that cultivated fields go fallow once every seven years.

Here is a hint, the scripture that Ted just read is from Leviticus, one of the five books of the Torah; the law of Moses. But really, why would anyone of us know this word? (I would still like to see how many points I made.)

Ooh, ooh, let’s do fallow.

1. British slang for fellow. As in, “Crickey, he’s a jolly good fallow.”
2. When a child falls down & cries, “I fall. Ow!”
3. Land left unplowed & unseeded for a season or more. Uncultivated.

So here we have it. In these dog days of summer, when the corn is topped with gold & the soybeans are green talking about rogation days.

And there is no reason why any of us would know the word “rogation” or why it belongs in church. It’s a word left over from the days when farmers were thought to be more essential to life on earth than attorneys, say, or politicians. It’s a word left over from those places where children grew up knowing that peanuts grow underground, not on trees, & that eggs start out warm, in nests, before they’re ever collected in Styrofoam trays & chilled to stop the life in them from growing.

Back when village life was the norm & most parish churches looked out on fields of lush green & high gold. Rogation Days were the three days after what is now the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time when the faithful said special prayers for the fruitfulness of the earth – thanking God for it & begging God for it – because they knew how quickly a sudden storm could ruin a whole field of mown hay, or how thoroughly a cloud of grasshoppers could reduce a crop of new corn to stubble.

These dangers are not as apparent to those who live in towns & buy most of their produce in grocery stores. We will no doubt complain about the small, hard plums this year with no recollection of the late frost that killed most of the plum blossoms. While in California the warmer winters are playing havoc with the growing season of plums. The plums I just

bought weren't at all tasty, mealy with almost no flavor except a bitterness under the skin where once upon a time ruled the juicy nectar. We are a big fresh fruit & vegetable consuming household so these Rogation Days matter to me.

They also matter to most of you because we live in the midst of a farming community. Worcester County (Wuss-ter) consists of almost 304 thousand acres in which almost 213 thousand acres are zoned for agriculture. This means 70% of our county is used for farming or is in forest. The other 30% is Ocean City. Farming & farmers are a huge part of our lives here. And when folks spend so much time in touch with the earth, well it makes us more aware that our globe is in distress – a lot or a little, depending on your economic & political views. But whether you lean left or right, whether you are an unrepentant industrialist or a militant tree hugger, chances are that you still think of land as a resource – one to be protected or one to be profited from – but either way, as something inert, with no rights or wishes beyond those of its owners.

In popular thought, land is clay in the hands of those who have gained possession of it. The owner says, "Let there be a subdivision," and behold, there is a subdivision. Or the owners say, "No trespassing, Keep

out,” and lo, there is a private park. It’s the will of the owner that determines the use of the land & it’s a rare owner whose thoughts never turn to the dollar value of the land.

That’s why the twenty-fifth chapter of Leviticus is so interesting – a little snippet of the law of Moses that overturns all our notions about ownership of land. It’s not yours & it never was, God says to the people through Moses. You’re all tenant farmers as far as I’m concerned & you have my permission to work the land for six years in a row. Whatever you make of it is yours to keep. You can put up a hundred jars of tomato pickles for your family if you want, or you can sell them at market for a shekel apiece, but on the seventh year, you shall hang it all up.

Park the tractor. Put the tools away. Oil your work boots & put them in a closet, because the seventh year shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land. There shall be no sowing, no pruning, no gathering into barns. There shall also be no shooining strangers off your property. If some wheat grows up from last year’s seed, it’s there for anyone who needs it. If some grapes still grow from the unpruned vines, they belong to anyone who is hungry for them including the wild animals you used to shoot for stealing.

Because, God decrees, during the seventh year, they're welcome to it. We're all welcome to it – landowner & servant, plow ox & wild jackal. We're released from our roles. We're excused from our work. We're free to forage together in these wild, overgrown fields & vineyards which if we stop & think about it – may remind you of that time before time when you didn't live by the sweat of your brow but walked with me in the garden in the cool of the evening.

It was the vision of an earth in which forests, vineyards & fields of dirt were as much creatures of God as the human creatures who exercised dominion over them & it was a reminder to those same humans that they were only temporarily in charge – and never for more than six years at a time. On the seventh year, the land itself had a duty to God that they must stand back & allow it to fulfill. The land had a sabbath commandment to follow, with which no human being was supposed to interfere.

We did interfere of course. Some people grew rich on the black market fruit business during sabbatical years, while others slapped their heads & said they had lost track of time. Was it really the seventh year again? Already? A little later in Leviticus, Moses warned the people what would happen if they didn't allow the land its rest. God would lay waste to it

& scatter those who lived upon it, he said. Then, while the people were in exile & the land lay desolate, it would enjoy the Sabbath years it had missed (26:34).

It wasn't a scary enough threat, apparently. While the sabbatical year was briefly observed around the turn of the first millennium, it was largely ignored after that. According to one of the sources I read, it still worries some extreme orthodox groups in Israel, but most of them get around it by arranging a fictitious sale of their land to a friendly Gentile every seven years, farming it as a sub-lessor & then buying it back again after the sabbatical year is over.

We know why don't we? Because there is hardly a human being alive who can sit & watch a field, a yard, even a flower bed "go to waste" for a year. That's what we say about things that have been removed from our control, by the way. We say they are "going to waste," as if their worth depended on our involvement with them. And not only their worth but our own as well. In our world, there isn't much payoff for sitting back & letting things go. A field full of weeds will not earn anyone's respect. If you want to succeed in this life (whatever your "field" of endeavor), you must spray, you must plow, you must fertilize, you must plant. You must never turn your

back. Each year's harvest must be bigger than the last. That's what land & people are for.

According to Moses, God sees things differently. When the fields are lying fallow, when purple morning glories cover last year's cornstalks & white tailed deer help themselves to the wild river grapes that have overcome the vineyard – when the people who belong to this land walk thorough it with straw hats in their hands instead of hoes & discover that the three plums that survived the frost are sweeter than the thirty that might have been saved – God does not call this “going to waste.” God calls this “observing the sabbath” and wonders why humans are so resistant to it.

What do we think will happen if we rest for a time? Whatever it is, we have been afraid of it for a long time & what our fear has done is to separate us – from God, from one another & from this patient forgiving earth whose sabbaths we have stolen. This land that gives us our food, our water; these trees that clean the air for us to breathe, all these green & growing things that bless our bodies with their beauty – these are not *resources*. They are fellow *creatures*, with their own rights & responsibilities before God. They have their own sacred duties to perform, if only we will let them.

I don't suppose it will ever happen. It never did, except for a couple of hundred years, but it's still the word of the Lord, as much as "Thou shalt not kill" or "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it Holy." Sometimes I think God didn't say such things with any real expectation that we could or would keep them. I think God said them for the record instead – so we would know who God is & how the world works, whether or not we ever choose to live according to that knowledge.

At the very least, the knowledge we are offered is that the earth does not belong to us. It has its own dignity, its own holiness, its own life in God. When the Sabbath comes, it comes for all God's creatures, stopping them right where they are to recognize their kinship under the dominion of one Lord. Each of us was meant to rest in that knowledge on a regular basis, & to let the resting itself prick our dearest beliefs about who we are & what we're supposed to be doing here.

My prayer for each of you during these rogation days is that you will run into some tree, some body of water, some rain drop or blade of grass that shouts your name out loud & that you will have the good sense to go over & introduce yourself – in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.