

## 07/23/2023 WORSHIP SERVICE

### WELCOME!

It's good to see you all here this morning! How many are without power yet? Well, we're grateful for the rain, for sure. It seems like it could take some time to get repairs made and get the power back up and running, so please let us know if you need anything in the coming days. I chose "Rain Down" as our final, sending song this morning... maybe we should change that!?

What announcements or opportunities do you have to share with one another this morning?

The focus for our worship this morning is on gratitude for the harvest. I invite you to join in the Call to Worship as it's printed in your bulletin.

Leader: Let anyone who is thirsty come!  
 People: We come to receive the living water.  
 Leader: Let anyone who is hungry come!  
 People: There is enough food for all.  
 Leader: Let anyone who is tired come!  
 People: God calls us to a time of holy rest.  
 Leader: Let anyone who is grateful come  
 People: and join this celebration!  
 Leader: Thirsty and hungry, tired and grateful,  
 All: We come together now in worship.

**PRAYER** – Holy God, thank you for calling us to rest and to celebration. Thank you for this time set aside from our ordinary work when we can gather in prayer and praise, in song and silence. We rejoice in your presence and open ourselves to your Spirit. Amen.

### **Celebrating the Harvest; Peacemakers share the bounty of the earth**

Leviticus 23:33-43; Deuteronomy 16:13-16

Pastor Lois Harder

For the faithful Jewish ancients there were three annual festivals that were pilgrimage festivals which meant that if at all possible, they would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for these celebrations. The first was in the springtime, the Festival of the Passover and of unleavened bread. The second, in the summer was the Festival of Weeks. This was held seven weeks after the Passover. The third – the one we're talking about today, was the Festival of Booths or, Sukkot. Held in the fall, this was the harvest celebration. All of these festivals centered on God's faithfulness and God's provision – provision that came from the beauty and bounty of the earth as it had been created, provision from the fruit and the grain, from stewarding and tending the ground.

For Sukkot, the people would come into Jerusalem and would make their booth. It was a temporary shelter put together with simple materials – sticks and branches, boughs and palms. They brought offerings to God. Literally, their first fruits from what they had just harvested. The festival lasts for seven days, so it was a little bit like camping, except in the city of Jerusalem, with hundreds of other people.

There are three fun facts about the ancient Festival of Booths that I think still hold truths for us today. I will talk about Sukkot in the present tense because although these festivals are recorded and mandated in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, there are modern-day Jewish people who continue to celebrate these high holy days, making their pilgrimages to Jerusalem or celebrating with their own religious communities wherever they are.

First, the people are to rest during Sukkot, to take a break from their regular jobs, especially on the first day and the last day. The days in between are for prayers and readings, singing and dancing, eating and celebrating as they remember God’s faithfulness to them, as a people. So Sukkot isn’t just a one-week long corporate lay-off where everyone takes a mandatory one week vacation and each family goes off and does their own thing. It’s also not a time to just sit, mindlessly on social media. It’s an intentional, focused seven days – the same seven days for everyone – to come together to rest, to worship, to eat and celebrate together, to tell stories from one generation to the next about God’s faithfulness. For instance, building the sukka, the temporary campsite dwellings became symbolic of how God provided for them and protected them as they wandered in the wilderness after their escape from Pharaoh.

A second aspect of Sukkot is the mandate to rejoice and celebrate as these harvest gifts are offered to God. There is time for serious, hard work. And there is time for weeping and grieving. There is time for discipline and competition. But Sukkot is a time for rejoicing. These harvest festival offerings are above and beyond the general offerings that people regularly give. And the spirit with which they are to be offered is one of great joy and gratitude to God. Anyone watching a Sukkot festival ought to be able to catch the sense of celebration and gratitude, the idea that it’s a privilege to be one of God’s beloved and an honor to be able to return some portion of God’s bounty.

The third important point of Sukkot is to share. With everyone. The verses from Deuteronomy that Noah read earlier make this point abundantly clear:

<sup>13</sup> “You shall keep the Festival of Booths<sup>[b]</sup> for seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress. <sup>14</sup> Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns.

That list pretty well covers it. Everyone. EVERYONE is included in the joy and celebration of God’s bounty.

So, what can we learn about our own faith formation from the Festival of Sukkot? While we don’t really observe 7 consecutive days for celebrations of any kind – and we don’t necessarily

include pilgrimages as part of our faith tradition, maybe we can still benefit from the main ideas of how the Festival of Booths is a faith forming event. I've talked about three ideas that I think could be helpful to us. The first is rest. This idea might seem counterintuitive to the ways most of us celebrate special festivals or holidays. Resting is the LAST thing we're often doing. But what if we dig a little deeper and get to the idea *behind* the idea of resting – simplifying. One way to eat and sleep and visit with one another outdoors for 7 days is to simplify, to temporarily abandon our materialism and embrace spirituality and hospitality, worship and gratitude...make things simpler...rest. Second is the idea of rejoicing. The Festival of Booths calls us to celebrate God's abundance joyfully and to give generously out of our joy. And finally, share God's abundance wholeheartedly, with everyone, welcoming all who are in our towns.

It seems to me that we already incorporate a number of these ideas into lots of things here at Alexanderwohl! I wonder what it might look like to keep doing the good things we're already doing and just tweak them a little bit to reflect more of the Sukkot ideas? For instance,

- Simplify and rest. What are some of our own beautiful traditions that could be even more meaningful and more deeply worshipful if we could simplify them and rest into their beauty?
- How can we encourage rejoicing in our giving? We have amazing, faithful givers in this congregation! There are those who give generously of their time and their skills. There are those who give generously with their commodities. There are those who give generously and faithfully with gifts at regular intervals and those who give steadily as they are able. I wonder if there are ways we could practice our generosity with more joy and celebration? If we could, I wonder if we would find more inspiration and liberation that could lead to deeper gratitude?
- I wonder how we could be more inclusive? It's amazing that in this south-central Kansas area we are so eager and committed to passing on our history and our stories of God's faithfulness that we have the Mennonite Heritage and Agricultural Museum here in Goessel, the Kauffman Museum in N. Newton, the Inman Museum, the Mennonite Settlement Museum in Hillsboro... maybe there are more that I'm not aware of!? What an incredible and important testament to the faith of our God and our forebears! I wonder how we could welcome more people into that circle of faith and love? What would it look like to share that abundance regardless of family name or heritage?

The curriculum that we've been following this summer points out that part of "Seeking Peace Together" is for us to celebrate the harvest and share the bounty of the earth. We know that bounty extends way beyond the little corner of the earth that we inhabit. This mandate to celebrate and share surely includes what is within our personal space and experience, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we also have a much more global perspective. We can see and appreciate God's abundance much more broadly. And we can also see that we are a part of systems that live by a whole different set of rules and expectations, systems driven by greed and power. That was true for the ancients as well – they just didn't have quite the capacity that we do to see the bigger picture as clearly.

We also know that we can't "fix" what's broken on a global scale, or even locally! But it seems to me that if we could try to live out these three key points that were made so long ago in Leviticus and Deuteronomy – simplify and rest, celebrate with gratitude and share with abandon – we could embody more fully our Creator's intentions and be more thoughtful and purposeful peacemakers in the world. I think it might be worth a try! Amen.

## QUESTIONS

1. What are the special "festival" days that you and your family observe?
2. How do they help to honor the sacredness of every day?

## BENEDICTION

God, we have come to this place of worship to receive your wisdom and to be empowered for your work in the world. Send us out with your peace and blessing. Amen.