

In normal life -- life before COVID, that is -- it's the question you'd be asked as you arrived at the restaurant: *Where would you like to sit?* It's the question you'd ask yourself as you arrived at the movie theater: *Where do we want to sit?* But for my family, at least, that was never a question when we arrived at church. For my entire childhood, as far back as I can remember, we always sat in the same place, the same pew. Fourth from the back on the right-hand side, right behind Mr. & Mrs. Blakeslee. It was "our" pew. It's still my parents' pew. They've been sitting there, every Sunday morning, for close to forty years.

That is, until COVID.

Maybe you can relate. Back before COVID, maybe you always sat in the same place, the same pew, at the same time, next to the same people. Maybe you've done that for years. Or if not the seating arrangements... perhaps another aspect of your Sunday morning routine. Getting up at the same time. Reading the same newspaper or tuning in for the same morning news show. Stopping at the same place for coffee. We humans are creatures of habit, after all. We settle into routines. Those routines become ingrained in us. Week after week, Sunday morning finds many of us doing the same things.

That is, until COVID.

Now we have a whole new routine, a whole new way of doing "Sunday morning," a whole new way of doing worship. Most of you are in your living rooms. A few of us are here in the sanctuary. And even the experience of being in the sanctuary is different. We've adjusted the lighting and sound, expanded the livestream, limited traffic, kept our distance, donned masks. When it comes to our regular Sunday morning routines, we've all had to adapt to a lot of changes in a relatively short amount of time.

And some of the changes have been positive. It's not all bad. We get to reach new people via livestream, people we might not have been able to reach in person. We can

maintain better connections with those who have moved away, or with those who are just away for the weekend. Besides, more than a few of you have confessed to me that worship in your pajamas on your couch while drinking your coffee has not been the worst experience in the world. (I keep joking that when we're finally able to be back together for in-person worship, I'm going to have to have a "pajamas and coffee" day in the sanctuary just to help you all transition back into normalcy.)

But even with all of that "looking on the bright side," the fact remains: we humans are creatures of habit. We settle into routines and resist change. 2020 has thrown us for a loop. COVID has thrown us for a loop. Social distancing has thrown us for a loop. So at some point -- perhaps even at this point -- you may just want things to go back to normal. You may want to stop doing things in a new way and go back to doing things the old way. You're tired of being flexible. You're tired of being adaptive. You're tired of finding new ways to do things... especially things like worship. You just want things to go back to normal, so you can come back and sit in *your* pew and worship God like you've always worshipped God.

I know. Me too. So from time to time, I'll indulge myself with that temper tantrum, that pity party. Then I remind myself that the coronavirus isn't going anywhere anytime soon, and that distance is the new norm, and that it's time to figure out how to deal.

Luckily, church... it turns out we have a head start. A head start that arises from the pages of scripture itself. I don't know about you, but I've found that when I'm particularly preoccupied with something, when I have something on my mind, I tend to notice that "something" in the pages of the Bible. For the past few weeks and months, I've had "distance" on my mind. That means that for the past few weeks and months, as I've been reading scripture, I've been noticing all the distance in the stories of scripture.

More to the point, I've been re-discovering that our God is a God who works with distance, who works in spite of distance, who makes distance work... and who, when faced with a problem of "distance," comes up with a whole new way of doing things.

We read of it in the book of Deuteronomy. On the whole, the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy contains a full and wide array of writings. In Deuteronomy, we find historical narratives and battle accounts. We find warnings, blessings, and legal expectations. We find divine pronouncements -- all that "thus saith the Lord" kind of stuff -- like the Ten Commandments and the Shema. It is a full book.

It is also a detailed book. Very detailed. And let's be honest, church: when we come across the kind of extensive detail we find in a book like Deuteronomy... in our best moments, we may find it fascinating, but in our less-best moments, we may find it a little mind-numbing. In fact, we might be prone to read the Ten Commandments (at the beginning) and the last words of Moses (at the end) and just kind of skim over the stuff in the middle. *Seriously, Pastor, you might be thinking, can detailed commandments about ancient temple offerings hold any real meaning for us today?*

Well, I'm glad you asked. Because we're going to read some detailed commandments about ancient temple offerings. But stick with me, church! Don't turn off the livestream. I think these detailed commandments about ancient temple offerings can hold some real meaning for us today -- especially today.

[Deuteronomy 14:22-29, NRSV]

²² Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. ²³ In the presence of the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. ²⁴ But if, when the LORD your God has blessed you, the distance is so great that you are unable to transport it, because the place where the LORD your God will choose to set his name is too far away from you, ²⁵ then you may turn it into money.

With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the LORD your God will choose; ²⁶ spend the money for whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your household rejoicing together. ²⁷ As for the Levites resident in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you.

²⁸ Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; ²⁹ the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

See, I know what you're thinking. *Why, Pastor, you're right! Detailed commandments about ancient temple offerings can hold real meaning for us today! So glad you chose to read that passage this morning. Now my spirit is renewed and my hope is restored. I'm ready to take on the world.* Am I right?

Ok, well, on the off chance that some of you may not find this passage so naturally and obviously uplifting... maybe a little context can help. This passage, this detailed set of commandments about ancient temple offerings, is really about abundance. It's about what to do with abundance. It's about what to do when God blesses you with abundance, when your fields produce and your flocks and herds grow. What do you do? You set apart a tithe. The first fruits, the first of your fields and flocks, the first tenth of everything belongs to God. You give it to God. You "offer" it to God as a way of recognizing that it already belongs to God, as a way of recognizing that God's blessing has been at the heart of your success, as a way of recognizing that you have *received* as much as *produced* in this whole endeavor.¹ You offer it to God because it belongs to God.

¹ Ronald E. Clements, "The Book of Deuteronomy: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2, ed. Leander E. Keck et. al (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 403.

And -- bonus! -- it belongs to God, but God is going to let you eat it. God, it seems, is not hungry. Besides, this offering isn't about self-denial or sacrifice. It's about recognizing God's role in creation, right down to this very harvest. It's about appreciating and celebrating God's blessing. It's about learning, in the words of the scripture, to "fear the LORD your God always" (Deuteronomy 14:23, NRSV). And that "fear": it's not about being *afraid* of God (this divine relationship is not an abusive one); rather, it's about having the proper awe and reverence for who God is and how God acts towards you. It's about understanding "what's what" when it comes to God.

So you offer it to God because it belongs to God, and God is going to let you eat it... but *where* you eat it matters. We read: "In the presence of the LORD your God, *in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name*, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock" (Deut. 14:23, NRSV, emphasis mine). *In the place that [God] will choose as a dwelling*. Where is that? It starts as a tabernacle in the wilderness... and eventually becomes a temple in Jerusalem.

And what you have to understand is the tabernacle, and then the temple, is not just a generic worship space. It's not simply a place where God's people worshipped God, or prayed to God, or offered special sacrifices to God. It was understood to be God's actual address, the very location on earth where God chose to dwell amongst God's people. That's where this offering takes place. You get to eat the offering... but you do it at God's house, the very place where God lives. God is inviting everyone over to eat and drink and celebrate this bounty. God is like my grandma, inviting everyone over for Thanksgiving.

There's a problem, though. Do you see the problem? It's the same problem that, before COVID, crowded airports every year on the day before Thanksgiving. Travel is

the problem. Distance is the problem. Not everyone lives nearby God's house, and you can't just take this offering to your local neighborhood dwelling of the Lord of Hosts. There's only one of those, and it's way off in Jerusalem. So distance is a problem, because you're supposed to take all of these "first fruits," all this tithe -- not just some symbolic representation of it, but the *actual stuff* -- and eat it in Jerusalem. And... hauling all that grain and wine and oil and firstlings of herd and flock all the way to Jerusalem? That's a little impractical. And by "impractical," I mean impossible. It would be hard enough now, with modern conveniences like highways and refrigerated box trucks and rest stops and Google Maps. In ancient days? *How are we going to get all of this stuff to Jerusalem?* God's people might be wondering.

Here in the scripture, God anticipates this problem. *Distance is your problem? No problem!* the Almighty says. You still have to come. God still wants to see you in Jerusalem. Get packing and book your stay. But instead of hauling all that stuff along with you... turn your offering into money. Sell that tenth, that tithe, those first fruits. Don't pocket the money. It's not yours, it's God's. And bring the money with you to Jerusalem. Cash travels better than lambs and calves and jars of oil, after all. When you arrive in Jerusalem, use that money to buy new stuff... and make your celebration with that. Remember, this offering is not about the specific items you've produced. It's about recognizing God's role -- God's blessing -- in producing it.

Is distance getting in the way of you obeying this command and making your offering? Turn it into money and cross the distance with a full wallet rather than a caravan of firstlings. That may seem like an obvious solution to us... but then, our economy is primarily a currency system. We're used to "monetizing" things. Money is how we typically do things, how we typically make offerings. In this situation, though, what God is proposing is outside the typical norm. God is providing a new way to do

things, a new way to make one's offering, a new way to worship... a new way made necessary by a problem of distance.

So why does this matter today? When I read this detailed set of commandments about ancient temple offerings, especially in this season of covid-tide, I see something remarkable. When circumstances prevented God's people from worshipping in the typical way, God made way for a new way. In particular, when circumstances of *distance* prevented God's people from worshipping in the typical way, God made way for a new way.

This has meaning right now, church... because right now, circumstances (in particular, circumstances of *distance*) are preventing us as God's people from worshipping in the typical way. In this moment, I believe God is calling us to seek new ways of worship, new ways of connecting with God and being in God's presence, new ways made necessary by this problem of distance. But I also believe that's clearly in keeping with what God has apparently always done. See, church? Detailed commandments about ancient temple offerings can hold real meaning for us today -- perhaps even more today than they might have a year ago.

Friends, I know that it feels like what is happening now is really different, strangely different, totally out of the norm... but "making way for a new way" is God's norm. Finding new ways to adapt to new circumstances is what God -- and God's people -- have always done. What we're dealing with now? Friends... I think we've just become part of that long-standing tradition. It's in the wisdom book of Ecclesiastes that we read: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9, NRSV). COVID may be new, but adapting worship to new circumstances and new challenges? In that, friends... there's "nothing new under the sun." When everything around us seems to be changing

and spiraling, take some comfort -- and find some equilibrium -- in that. We've been here before, and we've been here with God.

It's a new era, this season of covid-tide. As we follow God and worship God, we're making way for a new way. The new changes aren't over. I can only begin to anticipate what's ahead. I don't know for sure what worship will look like, or even where "worship" will take place, in the weeks and months to come. But I know that even as things change, and even as we adapt, God will still meet us there, wherever worship is... because that's what God has always done.