

The church year season we call Lent has been described as a time of preparation. This is true. In one sense, we are preparing for the great festival day of Easter, the resurrection of our Lord, enhanced by Holy Week's services of remembrance.

In another sense, the preparation is directed at ourselves; it is a meditation on Jesus' works and words, and reflection on ourselves, for we made his words and works of redemption necessary. As the days lengthen, we lend ourselves more time in Lent to let God's Word and Holy Spirit go to work on us, moving us to real repentance and more fervent faith. A time of preparation indeed.

Speaking of preparation, this year we are going to examine the way God was preparing his Old Testament people through their worship, preparing them through their church year, if you will. Preparing them for what? Good question. Through their worship, he was preparing them for the reign and rule of his Messiah, and here's the most fascinating fact: the Messiah himself participated in these worship patterns when he arrived. Jesus, the one person to whom all these special days pointed, participated in them. That's the link we're looking at this Lent, and it starts today with the Feast of Trumpets; in Hebrew, Rosh Hashanah.

Jesus was Jewish. Born into a Jewish home, he was dedicated at the temple according to Jewish custom, and he worshipped often at the temple, celebrating the festivals that God ordained. For him, the Feast of Trumpets would have been a day of rest and preparation, a day of sacred assembly at the temple, and a day to bring an offering to the Lord. It was a day commemorated with trumpet blasts, and perhaps, preparing for the Day of Atonement to come 10 days later.

Today the Feast of Trumpets is considered the Jewish new year, also called Rosh Hashanah, Hebrew for “top” or “head” of the year. The festivals of the Jewish community are agrarian in nature and follow the cycle of the harvest. While the first month, which normally occurs in the spring in the northern hemisphere is the beginning of the religious year, the autumn is the beginning of the civil year and starts with the blast of trumpets.

The sound of the trumpet or shofar is used by God in many ways. While many churches use bells to call people to worship, throughout Scripture God uses the trumpet to bring his people to a holy place. At this time of year, more than any other, Jewish people come to the synagogue to worship. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, are called the High Holy Days, and synagogues are full on these days.

The Jewish people believe something else about the trumpet. Tradition says that when the trumpet sounds on Rosh Hashanah, God opens three books: a book of life, a book of death, and an intermediate book. When he opens these books, he inscribes names into them. Those who have been exceptionally good (in fact, perfect,) God inscribes into the book of life. Those who have been especially wicked, God inscribes into the book of death. Everyone else, those whose fate is undetermined, he inscribes into the intermediate book. It is traditional at Rosh Hashanah

to send greeting cards saying, "May your name be inscribed in the book of life." But, that is just a greeting, a greeting with no assurance. Those who hear the trumpet and come before God are left to wonder.

For the 10 days after Rosh Hashanah, called the Days of Awe, the Jewish community works to assure themselves a place in God's book of life. This is the time during which debts are repaid, old animosities are forgiven, and good deeds are done, good deeds that will persuade God to give life for another year.

The Binding of Isaac, or the Akedah, is read on this day. The trumpet sound is a reminder to the Jewish community of this historical event. Abraham had been called out of his home. God said, "Go," so he went. He took his wife, his nephew, and all his possessions, following God's promise that he would become a great nation.

Let's travel back to Mount Moriah during Abraham's time. We are at the base of the mountain. Three days earlier, Abraham had been asked to take his son, the seed of God's promise, and sacrifice him on that mountaintop. Abraham has come to Moriah with Isaac, two servants, and a donkey. He must have been anguished. Not only was this his son, but also the evidence of God's promise for his people. Was God already breaking the covenant he had established with Abraham? Certainly not, for Abraham knew God's character as fact. God does not break his word. But Abraham still must have asked himself, "Why am I climbing this mountain to sacrifice my son?" Abraham's faith in God's character and word gave him strength. Abraham tells his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

Abraham places the wood for the offering on Isaac's back while he carries the fire and the knife. Isaac asks the question that begs to be asked: "The fire and wood are here but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" How can a father tell his son that he is the lamb? But then Abraham's faith in God gave him the answer: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."

An altar is built, Isaac is bound, and the knife flashes in the sun, raised above the head of the child of promise. But an Angel stops Abraham and leads him to a ram caught in the thicket by his horns, a ram provided by God. And for the third time, God promises that his covenant with Abraham will be fulfilled, that all nations will be blessed through him. So as we return from Mount Moriah, the ram's horn sounds as a reminder of Abraham's faithfulness and of God's promise.

The feast of trumpets calls us to worship: to a living relationship with God. The trumpet does not call us once a year, but every moment of our lives as we respond to God with thanks for what he has provided. And the trumpet does not simply remind us of Abraham's faith, with which God was pleased, but it announces that God was sending a sacrifice yet to come.

This future sacrifice is one we can show to those who cross our path, a picture for those who listen to Abraham and Isaac's story but don't see it with the eyes of faith. It is a picture that we can see ourselves that sustains us when our way gets rough. Just as Abraham put the wood

for the sacrifice on his son's back and led him up to the top of the mountain, God also laid the wood for the sacrifice on the back of his Son and led him to the top of the mountain. Jewish tradition says that Mount Moriah and Mount Calvary are the same place. God stopped Abraham's hand and provided a substitute for Isaac. It was not yet time for the lamb that God would provide.

But when the time was right, God would sacrifice his own son, it was the only way to open the book of life forever. For those who see the sacrifice and believe, as Abraham did in God, it is credited as righteousness. Their names are inscribed in the lamb's book of life. There is no more work to be done. The days of awe are no longer days of dread wondering if human work is sufficient for God, but days of wonder as we are awestruck at the mighty deeds of God, who has redeemed us through the sacrifice of his son Jesus. The days of wonder continue because Jesus did not stay in his tomb, but God raised him from the dead and he walks with us today. And we await the blowing of trumpets because they will announce the day when Jesus comes again to take us home to God.