

**The Scapegoat**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
January 30, 2022-PM Service  
Reverend Peter Jonker  
Leviticus 16:6-22

Tonight's scripture reading concerns one of the major ceremonies of the Old Testament. Leviticus 16 contains God's instructions concerning the feast of Atonement. Every year, the people of God celebrated Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement, and at the centerpiece of that great day was an elaborate sacrificial ritual that allowed sinful people to live in fellowship with a Holy God. Let's read it and see if we can form a picture of what the ceremony looked like. And as we read, pay special attention to the role of the scapegoat in this ceremony

These are strange instructions. We are Bible people and they sound strange to us. But imagine how these laws must sound to modern secular people! I'm sure many modern secular people would call these laws primitive and horrific. 'What kind of people slaughter animals and spray blood around? What kind of people send an innocent goat out into the wilderness to die?' Well, modern people, that's who. People like us. This ceremony addresses something in the hearts of modern people.

Let's talk about Steve Bartman. It's October 14, 2003 and game 6 of the NLCS is being played at Wrigley Field. The Cubs are up 3-2 in the series and 3-0 in the game. There's one out in the eighth inning and Wrigley Field is electric. The Cubs have not won a World Series since 1908, and now they are five outs away from getting to the World Series. I remember watching the game on TV and you could feel the tension, the anticipation. The Cubs had been in exile for almost 100 years and now, finally, they would go to the series.

Mark Prior, the Cubs pitcher, was pitching to Luis Castillo of the Florida Marlins. Castillo hit a foul ball into left field. A lazy pop fly that was right at the border between the field and the grandstands. Moises Alou, the Cubs left fielder ranged over to the where the ball was and reached over into the stands. It seemed as if he would be able to reach the ball and record an out. But right at that moment a fan, a Cubs fan, wearing a Cubs hat, reached out and did what millions of baseball fans have done with foul balls over the years: he tried to catch it. That man was Steve Bartman. His outstretched arm collided with Alou's glove and seemed to prevent a catch. The ball bounced harmlessly into the stands, and the crowd let out a collective groan.

Moises Alou jumped up and down. He was furious that he was bumped by the fan. The camera zoomed in on the fan. Steve Bartman sat holding his popcorn and looking miserable. He looked like he wanted the earth to swallow him. Boos started cascading down. The at bat continued. Luis Castillo got on base. He drew a walk. The batter after him-Miguel Cabrera-reached on an error. The next batter singled. The next batter doubled, and so on and so on. By the time the smoke cleared, the Cubs lost the game 8-3 and the Marlins came back to win the series.

As the Cubs started to fall behind and the game slipped away, an ugly mood arose in the stadium. People began yelling at Mr. Bartman. Some fans threw popcorn at him. Others threw beer. Some fans started to work their way towards him in the stands ready to give him a piece of their mind. Every time his face appeared on the stadium screen people in the stands booed and chanted obscenities. Security had to come and remove him before he was harmed. From there, things just got worse. In the media, on the streets, on sports talk radio, Steve Bartman's name became a byword, people blamed him for the Cubs' collapse. People published his personal

information, his address, his phone number - on the internet. He received harassing phone calls and death threats. Police had to protect his home. Mr. Bartman had to go into hiding. His whole life was turned upside down.

We have a word for what Cubs fans did to Mr. Bartman, they made him a *scapegoat*. And I don't just mean that in a general metaphorical sense. We all know the word scapegoat has come into English as a word for someone who takes the blame. Steve Bartman certainly took the blame for what happened to the Cubs, but he was a scapegoat in the full, Old Testament sense. Mr. Bartman was cast out of the community, sent out into the wilderness in order to bear the anger of Cubs fans. Leviticus 16 does not describe a primitive, barbaric ritual; it describes a God-given process to address the very real, very contemporary, impulses of the human soul.

What impulses are those? In the atonement ceremony, what exactly is the goat carrying away into the desert? Dig deep into this ceremony and you see some interesting things. Most of you probably came to this service with a sense that the Day of Atonement festival was a day in which the Israelites had their sins atoned for, forgiven. Most of you probably knew that those sins were paid for by the death of an animal. You probably knew that the blood of the animal made atonement for Israel's sin. But when you dig into the ceremony, it's more complicated. There are multiple animals slaughtered, and the two central sacrificial animals are both goats. One of those goats is killed by the high priest in the temple. The blood of that goat is sprinkled on the atonement cover of the ark, in the holy of holies. Through the blood of that goat, the high priest makes atonement for the people of Israel. As verse 17 says, the blood of that goat makes atonement for himself, his household and the people. In the flow of the ceremony, once that goat is slaughtered, it seems like the work is done. Atonement has been made! The sins of the people are paid for. But along comes this other goat. This goat is called the scapegoat. Its blood is not shed by the priest. The priest lays his hands on this goat, he confesses all the wickedness and rebellion of the people, he puts that wickedness and rebellion on the goat's head, and then that goat is led out to the desert and abandoned.

Why does God ordain this second goat? I thought verse 17 told us that the sins of the people had been atoned for? I thought it was done? Why does God add the scapegoat to the ceremony? What sin, what part of sin, does this goat address that wasn't addressed by the first goat?

An acceptable answer here is, I don't know. We don't know because God does not say exactly. But I wonder if the two goats can be distinguished something like this. The first goat makes atonement before the Lord, restores fellowship with him. That's why it is made in the tent of meeting, the place where God meets his people. The first goat restores chiefly, our vertical relationship with the living God. The second goat is God's way of restoring the damage that sin does within community. That's why the goat takes the sins of the people from within the camp and carries them away outside the camp. It removes the sins from their midst. The first goat is about Israel's reconciliation with God. The second goat is more about their reconciliation with each other. You can't have one without the other of course, but the two goats point in different directions. The first goat is more vertically oriented, the second more horizontal.

Another way to think of this, the scapegoat is meant to take away the sort of rage, the sort of hatred, that causes things like the Steve Bartman incident. Why do we human beings do these things to each other? What is it in the heart of human beings that causes us to rise up as a mob and gang up on one person, pour out our anger on them? Whatever it is, it's pervasive. Middle school kids do it. Often some poor kid becomes the outsider in the class and the kids tease them, push them outside the camp. Use that child as a repository for their insecurities. It happens in the

justice system. Bryan Stevenson is a lawyer who works to exonerate those who are serving prison terms for crimes they didn't commit. He works of the Equal Justice Initiative. If you read his book you see that, many times, people are falsely imprisoned because when a violent crime is committed people become anxious. They become impatient. A kind of restless menace builds up in them. They want this crime solved. Police feel pressure to arrest any person even if the evidence against that person is slim, just to calm everyone down. The mob needs a sacrifice. The same impulse that we saw in Wrigley Field in 2003 is behind the spirit of lynching. It's what drove pogroms in the middle ages. It's what drove the Nazi mobs into the streets of Berlin on Kristallnacht. When we human beings are unhappy with our life together, when we are tired of being anxious, tired of being pushed around, tired of the nonsense, some dark force rises in us and causes us to turn on some person, some group of people and make them a scapegoat.

When I was maybe 12 years old, I remember seeing a newscast in Canada talking about the conflicts in South Africa. This was before Mandela became president there. In the townships of Soweto, because of the poverty and injustice, there was deep unrest. Simmering rage. The report showed what happened when one person was accused of being as an informer. Some young man was accused of sharing information with the Apartheid regime. Once the accusation was made, all the simmering rage of the mob was unleashed onto that young man. A crowd gathered. They got clubs and machetes. The report showed footage of the mob chasing this man through the streets. He fled for his life but the mob caught him and they beat him to death. They showed it on the video. They warned you beforehand that it would be disturbing, and it was.

Watching that video as a 12-year-old, way too young, I remember two things: I remember the man's life leaving his body. You could see the moment when he died. And I remember the change in the crowd once he died. When the scapegoat died, the crowd was appeased. Their rage broke like a wave on the shore. They dispersed and went home. That video taught me that there is something dark and angry in the human heart, and that something wants blood. That dark something is looking for a place to vent. That dark something wants a sacrifice.

In the Bible reading, I pointed out to you the translation issue in verses 8,10 and 26. The word translated scapegoat is the word *Azazel*. Literally verse 8 says, 'take two goats. One will be for the Lord and the other will be for Azazel.' No one is really sure what that word means. Later, much later, *Azazel* is given as the name of a demon. In Jewish intertestamental literature, *Azazel* is the name of one of the angels who fell from heaven with Lucifer. Intertestamental literature came a long time after this passage, but can we read backwards to say that this goat was an offering to a demon named *Azazel*? I don't know. It's possible. Demonic forces are real. In the end though, I agree with the majority of commentators who say that the Lord would never call for sacrifices to demons.

But I'm also not surprised that the energy of mob violence and mob rage should be personified into a demon. Because when you see the rage of the mob—in Wrigley Field, under the lynching tree, in the streets of Soweto—something evil, something demonic is at work. A dark energy takes hold of human beings in those moments. I'm not alone in that observation. Some of you know that ESPN made a documentary about the Steve Bartman incident. Some of you may have seen it. It's called "Catching Hell." Even ESPN senses the darkness.

Jesus came to destroy the power of the devil! Jesus came to destroy evil in all its forms, to destroy our dark impulses. The work that Jesus does on the cross is world changing, it is the center of all God's work on earth. Christ's death doesn't just the fulfill one Old Testament sacrifice, his work fulfills all of the sacrifices. It is the confluence of many Old Testament themes. The New Testament writers don't just compare Jesus' death to one Old Testament

sacrifice, they make multiple comparisons. Christ is our Passover lamb sacrificed for us says Paul in 1 Corinthians. Jesus is the Lamb of God come to take away the sin of the world says John in John 1. That's not the Passover lamb; that's a different lamb. Hebrews says that Jesus is our sacrifice of atonement, he's like the goat sacrificed by the priest in the tabernacle.

And what about the scapegoat? Is Jesus also our scapegoat? Does he do for us what the scapegoat did for Israel? Let's see: Is there any place in the story of his crucifixion where Jesus takes on himself the fury of mob violence? You bet. "Crucify him Crucify him," cries the mob. Jesus takes their rage into himself. And not just their rage, our rage too. Jesus takes all the vengeful scapegoat rage of humanity on his own head, and he carries it outside the city, outside the walls of Jerusalem, outside the camp, where he bears it on his cross. Now we have a place to pour our rage, and our hunger for revenge.

There are lots of leaders in this world, in all areas of this world—not just politics—who love to mobilize people by playing on our dark instinct, our mob instinct, our Azazel instinct. They are really good at channeling our dissatisfaction into hatred of one common enemy. They build up our rage and get our mob instinct going, so they can get our money, our votes, our allegiance, so they can keep us watching their show, listening to their program. It happens all the time. These are people who want us enraged.

Rage is a sin. It is evil. It is deadly. Anger is more complex. Sometimes a Christian should be angry, that anger needs to be managed properly, and that anger should seek justice. Rage is different. Rage wants revenge, rage is not interested in management, rage wants a sacrifice. Rage wants satisfaction and it wants it now.

Christians are never people of rage. We should feel about rage the way we feel about adultery. We get angry. But the scapegoat came to take our hunger for vengeance. When that feeling starts to rise in us, "Someone needs to pay and they need to pay now"—we give that rage to Jesus. 'Vengeance is mine,' says the Lord. We give it to him. And he drinks it down. In return he gives us his body and his blood and he says, "Don't be afraid. I will make every crooked thing straight. I will make all the hard judgments. I will make all things new." So come to the table, take refuge in Jesus. Give him your rage and your frustration, give him your sin, give him your fear, and let him give you his everlasting life. © Rev. Peter Jonker