

The Red Heifer
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Numbers 19

This sermon is the second in what might be considered a mini-series. For the second week in a row we will take a deep dive into one of the ceremonies from the Old Testament law. These are dives into a part of the Bible that people don't generally visit, and if they do, they're not always sure what to make of it. I think these texts are interesting. I think it's fun to study these Old Testament rituals. They can teach us something about ourselves and our God. Last week it was the scapegoat; this week it is the red heifer. Let's read the whole of Numbers 19.

Last week when we reflected on the ceremony of the scapegoat, we said that modern secular people would find this ceremony strange and barbaric. Modern people would dismiss it as primitive nonsense. I'm pretty sure they would do the same with the ceremony of the red heifer. Here's another ceremony where the Israelites do strange things to an animal as a way to get right with God.

This ceremony is doubly strange because it deals with the whole realm of ritual cleanliness. In the Old Testament world, if you touched certain things, you were unclean, and you had to submit to ceremonial cleansing. Skin diseases made you unclean. Your monthly period makes you unclean. An emission of semen makes you unclean. Dead animals were unclean. And here in this passage, dead human bodies are unclean. In fact, a dead body is so unclean that if someone dies in a tent, the body contaminates everything. Just its presence radiates uncleanliness. This idea of contamination that requires ritual cleansing is utterly foreign to most modern people. Modern people say to themselves, 'We are advanced! We know better than those people back then.' Well, just as we saw last week, I'm not so sure these strange ceremonies are as far from the modern world as we think. Let's look deeper to see how that's true.

To provide Israel with a way of keeping ritually clean, God institutes the ceremony of the red heifer. The priests are commanded to find a young cow, one that has never been worked, one that had this unusual red color. They are to take this animal outside the camp and slaughter it. The priest takes some of the blood from the slaughtered animal and sprinkles it towards the tabernacle, connecting this ritual to the cleansing power of God. Then the heifer is burned, and not just burned, incinerated. Cremated. As the heifer is burned the priest adds some scarlet wool, some hyssop and some cedar wood to the fire. The ashes of the cedar wood and the red yarn mix with the ashes of the heifer. The ashes are collected and stored in a container and the container is kept outside the camp in a place that's ceremonially clean. From that point on, if an Israelite becomes unclean either by touching a dead body or by being in a tent with a dead body, they can go to the priest outside the camp. That priest will mix some of the ashes of the red heifer with living water (spring water), the priest will take a hyssop branch, dip it in the mixture and sprinkle it on the unclean person. And that sprinkling - on the third and seventh day - makes the person ritually clean.

Let me say a few things about this ritual. First, notice all the red. The heifer is red. And Jewish tradition was pretty strict about the redness of the red heifer. One Jewish rabbi insisted that more than two black hairs were enough to disqualify the animal. So the heifer was completely red. Now look at the items added: cedar wood is red. The yarn is red. All this red is meant to symbolize blood. These ashes functioned like blood. And, as I think you know, in the world of Old Testament sacrifice, blood was the force of life. The life of a creature is in its blood. (Leviticus 17:11) Blood was treated with dignity, like it had God-given power in it. You didn't eat blood because that would be a kind disrespect for life. That would be like zombie cannibalism. Because life force was in the blood it could clean and purify. So all the red in the sacrifice was meant to show that these ashes had the cleansing power of blood.

Second, there's a kind of convenience function here. The ashes of the red heifer function like an instant sacrifice. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but this is a helpful way to think of it: the red heifer is like the instant coffee of the sacrificial system. Just add water and you have an offering. God is making things convenient for his people. He's given them a system where they don't have to go through the fuss and bother of killing an animal and drawing its blood every time they become unclean. The Israelites have no excuse for not submitting to the ceremonial cleaning because God has made it as easy as possible.

Third, if you want to understand the function of this ceremonial washing and all the ceremonial washings of the Old Testament, you have to know the enemy. The ceremonial washings and all the rituals dealing with uncleanness have a different target than all the blood sacrifices like the sin offering and the offering of the goat on the day of atonement. Those sacrifices are aimed at the sins of the people. That's clear in the way they are described. The goat's blood is sprinkled on the altar to make atonement for Israel's sin. Those sacrifices are aimed at sin. The ceremonial washing has a different enemy. The ceremonial washings are not washing away sin, they are washing away the power of death, the contamination of death. Death is clearly the enemy in our passage. It's contact with dead bodies that contaminates people. But death is also the contaminating force in other kinds of uncleanness. The decaying molds were associated with death and decay. The flaking skin diseases are associated with death and decay. Even the bodily emissions that made people unclean were associated with the cycles of birth and death. So the Old Testament rituals fought enemies on two fronts. You had the sin offerings and the atonement offering that fought the enemy of sin. And you have the ceremonial washings that fight the enemy of death. The ritual washings were a way to stay close to the Lord of life, and to push back on the power of death. Sin and death. We know these enemies. Sin and death are the great miseries of our existence. In the New Testament you hear those enemies distinguished all the time. Romans 8: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because the law of the Spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death." Read carefully and you see that the Old Testament already distinguishes between these two enemies.

Now back to the modern secular person. A modern person could hear this explanation and say, 'Wow, that's interesting. You've done a good job of explaining the logic of this ancient ritual, but this is still primitive. Washing people with the ashes of a red heifer to ward off death. It's primitive mumbo jumbo. We're way beyond that.' But are we? I went online this week and I googled anti-aging treatments. I got some really interesting results.

According to *Real Simple* magazine (March 2021), here are some of the things you should consider putting on your skin to slow the aging process, to fight off the progress of death and decay. Snail mucin. That's the slime trail left by snails. The magazine claims it has reparative properties that hydrate the skin, reduce inflammation, and support collagen production. Red algae. More precisely called rhodophyta seaweed. Red algae is rich in antioxidant, like beta carotene and can-allegedly-contribute to skin brightness and elasticity. You can buy it online. A little jar for \$105. If the red algae isn't your thing you could try bird excrement. The droppings of the Japanese bush warbler are rich in uric acid and guanine. Uric acid is supposed to have plumping properties guanine will give you – and I quote – a "shimmery glow-like appearance." And last of all the magazine suggests that you could try to slow the aging process with something called a vampire facial. That's where they draw your own blood and then slather it all over your face. The treatment is supposed to "spur collagen synthesis to boost skin texture and tone."

Death is still an enemy to modern people. Modern people are still terrified by death. Everywhere you look people do strange and desperate things to ward off its power. They put algae and bird excrement on their face, they have mid-life crises, they undergo risky surgeries, they perform elaborate and exhausting exercise rituals that cause them to contort their bodies into all sorts of strange positions. A little red heifer ash mixed with water is nothing compared to what modern people do to ward off the encroaching power of death. Of course, modern people don't think in terms of ceremonial uncleanness, but they feel the contaminating power of death in other ways. The graying of the hair. The wrinkling of the skin. The bags under the eyes. The cracking of the knees as you rise from the chair, the ringing of the ears – as we age there are a hundred everyday ways in which death says, "I'm here. I'm coming." A hundred ways in which we hear death's footfalls behind us. And every day the footsteps get closer.

There is only one way to deal with the encroaching power of death. And that is to take refuge in Jesus. God gives Israel the ceremony of the red heifer as a stay against death, the ashes of the red heifer point to Jesus. Jesus comes to this world to defeat both enemies, both sin and death. Already in the events of his life you see that Jesus picking a fight with death. During his ministry, Jesus touches all kinds of unclean things. He touches lepers and beggars. He even touches the dead body of a widow's son. And what happens when Jesus does that? Is he contaminated? Does death infect him? No, he infects death! The leper is cleaned! The dead boy rises! Death flees before Jesus! It falls back in confusion and retreat!

All of that comes to a head on the cross. Death knows that Jesus has come to destroy his power, and so death tries to strike a fatal blow against Jesus. Death tries to make the first move and swallow Jesus down. But

God raises Jesus from the dead. Death suffers a mortal wound, death is swallowed up in victory. Death thinks that by pouring out Jesus' blood he will win, but instead Jesus' blood becomes a cleansing flood that washes us clean and makes everything new.

We Christians still struggle with death. Even when we belong to Jesus, even when we've been baptized and washed with his resurrection power, we still struggle with fear and uncertainty around death. It's hard not to. Especially as we get older it seems like every week we hear about another person who has stage 4 cancer, another person who has dementia, another person whose health is suddenly failing. Death still makes a lot of noise and even though it's beaten, it can cause fear and panic. When the Israelites were touched by death, they went to the priest to be sprinkled by the ashes of the red heifer. What do we do? We come here. As I thought about it our weekly church services are like a stronger fulfilled version of the red heifer ceremony. Every week we are out there and the power of death 'contaminates' us. We hear bad news. People saying, it's all falling apart! We hear the anxiety and the anger and the fear. But then we come here and we say Christ is risen, don't be afraid. We say it again and again every week.

Sometimes I'm actually amazed people come back to church over and over again because let's face it, I basically say the same thing every week. "Jesus loves you. He has died and risen don't be afraid." You know what I'm going to say and you keep coming back. I know why. Because every week death makes noise, death spins us around, death makes us dizzy and afraid, and so we need to hear it again. And again. And Again. And so tonight, again, I wash you in the hope of these words. Jesus loves you. Jesus is risen. Death is beaten. Don't be afraid.

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