

Remembering how we got here

Deuteronomy 8:11-20, Leviticus 23:39-43, John 7:2-10

Sermon by Ron Guengerich

October 16, 2016

This evening as the sun goes down, *Succoth* will begin. *Succoth* is known in the English Bible as the "Feast of Tabernacles" or the "Feast of Booths." It is a 7-day festival, described in Leviticus, that Jews around the world will observe. It might be better and more accurate for us to call *Succoth* "the Fiesta of Shelters."

During the year Ruth and I and our two children lived in East Jerusalem, Ruth and I would sometimes walk home after taking the children by bus to the Anglican school in West Jerusalem. In October as we walked home we noticed that small shelters, lean-tos, very flimsy open-ended shelters or sheds began appearing beside the Jewish homes. What was going on, we wondered. Our Jewish friends told us that these were *sukkot*, temporary dwellings that families constructed to celebrate the Feast of Booths *Sukkot*. Each family could (or should) build their very own *succah* every year. It usually had four corner posts, had a roof of branches but not tightly woven with spaces between the braches so they could see the stars at night. The *Succah* had two or three walls with at least one open side.

The children loved this festival because the family was expected to eat at least one meal in the *succah* and spend at least one night sleeping out in the *succah*, weather permitting. Can't you imagine that the children would love to do that? What a ritual!

The celebration lasted for seven days and was a time of exuberant joy, following the very solemn Day of Atonement that had happened about a week earlier. During these seven days the family re-entered the story of Israel, moving their temporary dwellings in the wilderness to permanent houses in the land. We just heard the rather minimal instructions in Leviticus about the need to celebrate this fiesta. This fiesta reminded them of **how they got to the place where they were: that they were once homeless people without shelters in which to live, oppressed by the rich, powerful "Pharaoh."**

But we also need to ask very regularly, "How did we get here?" Our memories tend to be short. We talk in personal terms, about our lifetime, about our individual stories. We talk like Americans with amnesia, who talk as though we "made ourselves." We seldom give credit to how much we have benefited from others who have given us help, encouragement and opportunities. I'll come back to this later.

Along with the historical re-presentation that we came out of Egypt which is the essence of *Succoth*, the festival, probably picking up on an earlier Canaanite festival, also celebrated the end of the agricultural year: the grains were harvested and threshed, the grapes had been picked and crushed for wine, and the olives had been gathered in and were now being made ready for eating and cooking. This is a time when the people carried fruit, palm branches and branches from other trees such as willows, waving them in celebration as they remembered the journey out of Egypt and the gift of the place where they now are living. They remember that this land was a good land, a gift from God, an undeserved and unearned gift. This celebration was like our Thanksgiving multiplied by seven. What if we spread out Thanksgiving over an entire week?

But why should we as Gentile Christians ever concern ourselves about a Jewish festival that (sadly) we neither observe nor even know about? (This week I have asked a whole series of persons, "Do you know what celebration begins on Sunday?" Not one person knew—but that is not surprising because most years I would not have known that either. Why might we benefit from both knowing about this festival and even better from participating in the rituals that accompany this festival?

There are two very good reasons to consider this festival. First of all, as you heard from the gospel of John, Jesus observed this festival; it was important to him. He was and still is a Jew who joined in the observance of this festival. It might surprise us that Jesus never became a Mennonite; never became a Protestant; never became a Catholic; in fact, he never became a Christian; he never left the faith into which he was born. The reality is **he still is a Jew, an observant Jew; we need to remember** (in every connotation of that word) **that Jesus remains today a mindful, though not legalistic, Jew.** He never was interested in rejecting the faith

of Moses and the synagogue. He may have disagreed with how some of his contemporaries practiced their faith (and they disagreed with him), but he was focused on being a "good, observant, thoughtful, discerning" Jew. He claimed in Matthew 5 that he was committed to fulfilling all the "The Law and the Prophets" down to the last "jot and tittle," down to the last *yod* (jot), the smallest letter in Hebrew alphabet, and down to the last *serif* (tittle), the smallest mark that distinguishes one letter from another. The fact that this festival is important to Jesus causes us to ask, "How can we ignore it?"

When Jesus' brothers encouraged him to go with them to Jerusalem to celebrate this festival (in John 7), Jesus at first says that he will not go there because the time "is not ripe" for him to go to Jerusalem where he will be opposed and rejected. However, after his brothers leave for Jerusalem, Jesus changed his mind and went, very quietly and secretly, to Jerusalem, trying to draw no attention to himself, but desiring very deeply to participate in this festival.

The second and more important reason that this festival is important is that it reminds us about the narrative that underlies and shapes God's community. (That would be us.) This festival comes in the fall, at the very end of the harvest year. Now the crops are in, the grapes have been picked, crushed, stored and are being transformed into wine. This is the "Thanksgiving week" for those who **remember**.

Remembering is a crucial activity for Jesus and his fellow Jews. **Remembering** is not just "knowing about" an event; **remembering** is about imaginatively re-presenting that event: it's about "being present again" in the events that we "re-member." **Remembering** happens as the people of Israel participate in that past event in their own time and place. **Remembering** means that "we are there." **Remembering** is a "truthful fiction." Today we often have trouble knowing what to do with this "truthful fiction." Our African-American brothers and sister have much to teach us about this way of **remembering**. They talk about their **remembering** when they sing "Were you there when they crucified my Lord, when they laid him in the tomb, when he rose up from the dead."

Now we know, realistically and logically, that none of us "were there" when those events happened. After all, those events happened nearly 2000 years ago. Is there anyone here who is that old? So were you there? Yet, for myself, I can say

wholeheartedly that “I was there.” I have experienced it. I know about this kind of remembering, because I also join with Jesus and my Jewish brothers and sisters who say during the Passover/seder meal that “We, **yes, WE**, were slaves in Egypt and God brought **us (not just them)** up out of the land of Egypt, and God brought **us (not just them)** through the wilderness where God made a covenant with **us (not just them)**, and God brought **us (not just them)** to this place that is fruitful and flowing with the wonderful produce of this land. In Moses’ final sermon which we heard in the Deuteronomy passage, this is the kind of “remembering” that Moses exhorts the people of Israel do.

Succoth is a time when Jesus, as an “Israelite,” **remembers** with his mind and his body that God brought him out of slavery in Egypt, fed and protected him, and all of God’s people, in the wilderness, and brought them into a land that was fruitful and productive. We don’t know exactly *what* Jesus did to “**remember**” during *Succoth*, but we do know that this “fiesta” was important to him, and that as an observant Jew, he **remembered** with his body as well as with his mind.

We would be enriched today, here in this place, to **remember** humbly and thankfully that God, in an act of undeserved grace, has given us this place that is fruitful and productive. So I ask you to remember the long story of how you got to this place. So much of that for which we are thankful is the result of things over which we have no control: the place and situation in which I was born, the encouragement of those around me, the productive terrain in which I live, the mental capabilities which I inherited. For these things I cannot take credit—I can only be thankful and praise God.

Additionally, *Succoth* is a celebration that is focused in the family and the home more than in the synagogue. The *succah* is in the family’s back yard. This celebration is one of the great “classrooms” in which parents teach their children about the meaning of God’s grace and God’s people. The symbols and the rituals will elicit from the children spectacular questions: “Why do we build a shelter? Why do we wave the palm branches? Why do we eat outside during these days?” The parent then is delighted to answer, “I’m glad you asked. Let me tell you **our story**.” This is an incredible teaching strategy. Children ask the question and we tell the

story that is surrounded and reinforced by activities and symbols. Too often we try to provide answers for questions that our children are not asking.

This way of commemorating and celebrating—getting the children to ask the good questions—is a procedure we need to re-learn. And the place of this kind of commemorating—both here in the gathered congregation and in the home with the family—is a practice that we need to adopt.

Today we will celebrate communion. Today we will return to the Hebrew way of “remembering,” of “making the past present with us today.” In the spirit of *Sukkoth*, our communion today will be a great Eucharist—a word that means a great thanksgiving or a great “blessing”. We remember that Jesus invites the multitudes, Zacchaeus, the publicans and sinners—just as he invites us today—to eat with him at his table. We **remember** that Jesus “takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to us to eat.” Today we **remember** that right now Jesus takes our bread that we give him; he blesses it; he breaks it; and he shares it, making sure that everyone has just enough to eat (with an abundance of leftovers). Today we **remember** that we are invited to do this kind of celebration as we gather around our tables to “taste and see that God is good.” In doing this we **remember** who Jesus is, all of what he says and all of how he lives and dies.