

Dedicated Servants

Unlike the spontaneous gifts of gratitude from the heads of the twelve tribes we talked about last Lord's Day, the Levites were themselves an offering. As Old Testament scholar Martin Noah put it: "an offering brought by the Israelites at God's command."

If you were here a month ago – you may remember that God ordered that the Levites be set apart for His service. Because God "passed over" the homes of the Hebrew people when He took the lives of the firstborn sons of the Egyptians, He claimed all the firstborn Hebrew males for Himself.

However, He later traded them for all the males of the tribe of Levi – the Levites. The Levites were presented to God – consecrated to God – dedicated to God – much as a sacrifice would be, as completely as a sacrifice would be – except that they would survive the process. Essentially, they were examples of what it means to give your life *to* God, rather than *for* God.

The process of dedicating them began with a ceremonial cleansing – sprinkling them with water that had been set apart for this purpose. It symbolized their being purified from sin. In some ways, it foreshadowed the Sacrament of Baptism – in which our children are marked as belonging to the Lord.

Then the Levites shaved their entire bodies – from head to toe. In Leviticus, God instructed that someone who had been healed of an infectious skin disease was to shave off all the hair on his or her body. The Hebrew people would have understood that in the Egyptian culture they had just left behind, hair was considered unclean. Upper-class Egyptians would shave their whole bodies and then put on wigs to replace the hair they had shaved off their heads.

The Levites were then to wash their clothing – not by merely a quick rinse, but a thorough cleaning that included walking on the clothing in water – an 38-hundred year-old form of agitation.

Moses presided over all of this ritual as it took place in front of the Tent of Meeting – in full view of all the Israelites. Then representatives of the people placed their hands on the Levites – a way of authorizing the Levites to stand before God on their behalf.

The Levites placed their hands on two bulls, which were sacrificed for the sins of the Levites. Oil and flour were also sacrificed.

Then the Levites were presented to God like a "wave offering." That concept first appears in Exodus 29: bread and meat were offered to God – some to be burned as a sacrifice, and some to be given to the priests to eat. In the same way, the Levites were offered to God and then given to Aaron and the other priests to help them in their service in the Tabernacle.

It should be pointed out that – although the Levites belonged to God, they did not spend their entire lives working around the Tabernacle. They started at the age of 25 or so, and retired at 50. After that, they could help the priests with their work in the Tabernacle, but they were no longer allowed to do any of the heavy lifting – that is, moving the Tabernacle from place to place. God had commanded that the Levites be dedicated to Him, and He took care of them.

God has called us to be His dedicated servants, too – much like the Levites. As we read this morning in Peter’s first pastoral letter:

“... you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

We have been chosen by God to serve Him – in whatever way God decides. Some do the physical heavy lifting – taking care of the buildings or taking groceries to people in need. Some do the emotional heavy lifting – sitting with people who are sick, listening to people who are troubled, holding the hands of people who are dying. Some do the financial heavy lifting – setting budgets, promoting stewardship, paying the bills.

And all of us are called to lift up our hearts, our voices, and – only if you’re especially daring – our hands to heaven as we worship God. As followers of Jesus Christ, you have dedicated your lives to serving Him – and there is no retirement age for that. The day may come when you can no longer do the heavy lifting, but you will always have ways to serve. You can give; you can encourage; you can share ideas; you can worship; you can pray.

And after this life is over, you will worship our Lord and Savior forever.

Today, we recognize and we honor those who have dedicated their lives to extraordinary service. Whether they signed up or were drafted, volunteered or chose a career, they have dedicated their lives to protecting, rescuing, and saving us. Many of the ones we would like to honor this morning are not here because they are serving today – on duty at the fire station, on patrol, making a squad run, looking for IEDs along the road in a hostile part of the world, watching the coastline or the skies for enemy ships and planes, and protecting innocent civilians from attack.

Today we think especially of those who are serving in war zones – both internationally and here at home. We also think of Sergeant Ron Helus of the Ventura County Sheriff’s Department, who died Friday night trying to stop the massacre in Thousand Oaks, California.

The call to serve – whether it be service directly to God or indirectly by serving people created in His image – it is God’s call. It requires commitment, courage, and dedication. Often their families, friends, and fortunes must take a back seat. Always they are asked to live differently from the way most of the world lives. Some may be asked to give their lives for God and others – but all of the people we recognize today have given their lives to God and others. May we always express our appreciation and gratitude. And as God provided for the Levites

when they reached retirement age, so we must do everything we can to ensure that those who serve us are taken care of well when their service has ended.

Amen.