

Separated for God: The Nazarite Vow

Text: Numbers 6:1-21

Jesus, before his arrest by the Roman authorities, prays to the Father on behalf of his disciples who are in the world, but not of it, just as Jesus himself is not of the world. In the John 17, Jesus prays for their protection, that none would be lost. And I think that one of the greatest challenges that we face, and one that we as a community has been talking about, is the idea of what it means to be a Christian. How do Christians relate to the world, how are we to be different?

In the Letter to Diognetus, the work of an unknown author, written in about 130 AD, describes Christians to the Romans as follows:

"...They display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry... they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring.... They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all...They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred."

Christians of the early church, "displayed a wonderful and confessedly striking method of life." Somehow, they were different, different enough that they were hated – and persecuted. How are Christians different from the world today? A more interesting question is: if we didn't say we were Christians, would anyone notice a difference?

Honestly speaking, this tension of living in the world but not of it is not easy. I ask myself the question of "why" most of the time. Why do I chose to live a certain way? Why do I abstain from certain things? Why do I belong to a church? So I find myself being curious about this little obscure passage in Numbers 6 and the men and women who decided to follow the Nazarite Vow. It seems so strange, bizarre... yet being a Christian here in Vancouver 2010 may

seem strange and bizarre. I hope that by studying the faith practice of these ancient Israelite, we can better understand our own faith-practice. We're going to look at the background of the Nazarite Vow and its historical and cultural context. From there we'll look at what some the Christian responses would be, and finally what we can learn.

But one of the first questions I want to start with is: what's the deal with being clean?

Back in one of the great evangelical revivals in the 19th century, one of the catch phrases that capture the theological outlooks of that time was: "Cleanliness is next to godliness." It isn't hard to see where they came up with this saying. The Old Testament Law in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and Numbers pertains largely to ceremonial cleanliness, and God's desire to see His people be Holy, because the Lord God is Holy. We're not talking about hygiene here, but a state of being. Cleanliness was related to one's status in the community and was regulated by religious rituals, centered around the temple. The basic biblical premise is that God's people ought to imitate God in holy and righteous living. So there are Laws and commands, and the things that need to happen when those Laws and commands are broken.

Keep in mind that religious truths were also expressed visually, not just orally. Rituals were dramatized to denote communication between God and Man. What people ate, what they wore, what they sacrifice, all meant something. So part of the difficulty of reading Old Testament is that often we, as modern readers, don't know what these things meant. For example, scholars still don't know what made some animals clean and other animals unclean for eating. Certain foods, actions, items were associated with either being clean or unclean, sacred or profane. From Genesis we know that God created all things good, yet through associations unknown to us as modern readers, certain things became symbolic for unclean or impure. There wasn't a huge distinction between the spiritual and physical, so what one did physically profoundly affects their spirituality. Hence eating an unclean animal, makes one unclean. Being near a dead body, where death is the result of sin, defiles a person's state of cleanliness. For the Old Testament Israelite, cleanliness is next to Godliness. So keep that in mind as we study this Nazarite vow. Now back to the text...

In the Book the Numbers, we arrive at the point of the story when the Israelite nation has been lead out of Egypt in the great Exodus. Now they're in the Sinai desert, years before they enter into the promise land. The Hebrew title, *bemidbar* means "In the Desert" – and it is in this

desert that we see the people of God being formed and taught. There are three sections to the book of numbers: the community at Mt. Sinai, the Journey, and the final prep for settlement. Chapter 6 is located within the first section, the community at Sinai. One scholar says that Numbers present the "life of a community on the march." This community is centered around the Tent of Meeting, where the presence of God is witnessed.

At Sinai, the people are listed and organized according to their tribes. Instructions are given on how they are to behave with one another. It is here where the guidelines for the Nazarite is outlined. Who were the Nazarites? They are the "monks and nuns of ancient Israel." They are men and women, not of the priesthood, who have voluntarily decided to make a vow of separation to the Lord, though some may be dedicated at birth. Presumably they're of any tribe, of any age, and their vows can be life-long or temporary. Some famous Nazarites include: Sampson, Samuel, and likely John the Baptist.

Their vow is a special vow. The Hebrew word here for "special" means extraordinary, marvelous, wonderful, and it also means hard or difficult thing. They vow to do three things during their days of separation: to abstain from all things grape (vineyards, juice, wine, vinegar); to abstain from cutting their hair, and to stay away from dead people.

Abstaining from the vineyard, and all of its products, was likely a public and private act of devotion. Wine itself wasn't unclean, but intoxication was usually associated with poor behavior in the Old Testament (there isn't a good track record for drunkenness in the bible). Generally speaking though, wine and grapes were signs of prosperity and wealth. Think harvests and celebration. It takes a special act of devotion or dedication to refrain from something that is commonly enjoyed. [I think of people who are vegetarians for ethical reasons]. This vow even goes above and beyond a priest's; a priest must abstain from wine only before going into the temple.

Long hair would have been the most visible marker for a Nazarite. The untrimmed hair was symbolic of being set apart for holiness, a gift from the Lord which had to be returned to God in sacrificial fire once the Vow was concluded. Defilement coming from contact with a dead body would result in having the Nazarite be rededicated: Their head must be shaved, then two small birds are offered as sacrifices, their head is consecrated and a lamb is given as a guilt offering. The Vow is reset, previous days are not counted and the Vow begins again. When the Vow is

completed, the Nazarite has to offer the same range of sacrifices as the high priest Aaron at his ordination. The ceremonial cleanliness of a Nazarite is more stringent than a priest, even a priest is allowed to mourn a close relative's death.

This passage only tells us how the Vow is to be maintained, not the reasons why one takes such a vow. The name "Nazarite" derives from the word, Nazar, for "to dedicate." The idea is twofold, to separate oneself from anything, and to dedicate, or consecrate, oneself to the Lord. Unlike the priests, no special duty was given to the Nazarite. We don't know if they received special honor or respect. We don't know if they gain anything in return for their vow of consecration. However, they would have been recognized for being a Nazarite. Anyone could be a Nazarite, anyone can volunteer to give up certain liberties and pleasures and in doing so... but why?

We can speculate that there was a personal devotion to God, some kind of piety that needed expression in the Israelite community. Or perhaps they took up the Vow in order to do a sort of penance. Still, the idea was to be set apart from others in behavior and appearance, to be in a "clean" state. This clean state was connected to being holy, which is connected to the holiness of God. This was serious business. And because there wasn't a distinction between the physical and spiritual, the material and immaterial, what a person did physically affected their spiritual status. These were not just quiet and private vows either; The Nazarite was consecrated by the priest, and the conclusion of the vow is held before the Tent of Meeting, the place of worship in the Israelite life.

So then, shall we as Christians take up the Nazarite Vow? It would definitely make us stand out more!

There are some who would, they believe that the Nazarite Vow is a lost way to connect with God. However, there's just one problem. We cannot make Old Testament vows, we're not meant to. For one thing, we don't have altars of sacrifices, and we certainly don't have a Tent of Meeting. We can't make the Nazarite Vow because there is no way we can fulfill them. The sacrifices are as much a part of the vows as the vows themselves. These cultic rituals also do not carry the same meaning for our culture as they did in the Old Testament.

OK, so we don't do the Nazarite Vow per se, but perhaps we ought to separate ourselves from all the unclean, impure things of the world. It's easy to think of consecration as separating from everything else that would "defile" our spirituality. But the danger here is legalism. In Luke 11 we see Jesus condemning Pharisees:

³⁷ When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table. ³⁸ But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal.

³⁹ Then the Lord said to him, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. Luke 11:37-53 [Also see Gal 3:10]

As one scholar puts it: the pharisee's boundaries of purity fails to protect them from being impure in the eyes of the Lord. These physical boundaries do not, in themselves, deal with the real problem that lies within all of us. Our sin, our uncleanness, comes within, not from external sources.

The other reaction is to swing to Christian freedom. Indeed Christ has set us free precisely because he has fulfilled the Law. After all, doesn't Paul say in Galatians: ¹ *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

But the danger here is indulgence. Paul goes on to say:

¹³ *You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another humbly in love. [Gal 5:13]*

If we're free to do everything, then we cease to be the people of God. What would distinguish us? As one saying goes: When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other.

What we need to do instead, is to see the Nazarite Vow as a symbol of a lifelong separation....unto God. It's not just a separation from, but a separation, or consecration, to the Lord. Our life in Christ is a life that is abiding in Christ. In John 15, Jesus tells his disciples that he is the true vine and they are the branches. His disciples must remain in him in order to bear fruit; we are to remain in him and he in us.

But let us not be mistaken that abiding in Christ is easy; it's even more costly than the Nazarite Vow because it requires a complete re-orientation to God. It requires us to love each other, to lay down our lives for one another. It requires us to wash one another's feet, to forgive and to ask to be forgiven. It requires for us to reach across social barriers and touch the untouchable, to feed the hungry, and give water to the thirsty. It requires laying down our rights, while speaking out on behalf of others. It requires being an agent of healing in places of pain. It requires turning away from sin, the things that would pull us away from God whether in harm to ourselves or to others.

What about holiness? It follows that anything connected with God was considered holy. In the Old Testament, these were often objects: the ark, tabernacle, priestly garments, altar. But now, dear Church, we are called Holy Ones, we are saints, the beloved of God, and members of His household... for we are connected to Him. We are not holy by our separation from the unclean things of the world but by our relationship to the Living God. As we abide in Christ, we are Saints. We are His Holy Ones.

So why follow Christ? Why be separated unto the Lord? If following Christ makes no difference at all, then why do we gather as a Church? Why do we bother to confess Christ? Over the years, I've had to remind myself, why I've made a commitment to Him, especially when my friends and family live happy lives without Him. What difference do I see? The difference I see is following a God in whose character and being gives all of life meaning and dignity, that goes beyond what we see here and now. So I've committed myself on a journey to find out what that is and who He is; He is a God worthy of worshipping. This is the same journey that the Nazarites, and the men and women of the early Church went on. Will you join?

[1 Peter 2:9-11]

⁹But 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. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. ¹²Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.