Hello Leviticus! The God Who Ritualizes our Scapegoating Schtick to Redirect it and Eventually End it *Ken Wilson 5.17.15*

Well Hello Leviticus! Whodathunk the3rd and much avoided book of Bible (Gen/Ex/Lev) could speak to things we deal with today?

Like when your division has underperformed and everyone's afraid it will be spun off and sold to Bain Capital for parts and instead corporate fires the head of division who was good at her job but the first woman in a man's world….and everyone feels great relief.

Like when family moved from city to small town. You had those glasses that fit the city style but stood out in your new digs. A new group of playmates took you in, but when their dads were laid off from local plant they turned on you. *Because of those glasses*

Or when that carload of under-employed young men slowed down menacingly on Stadium near Packard and yelled out the "N" word or the "B" or the "F" word and you thought *what is going on?*

<u>Lev 16 **adopts & adapts** something common to every human culture</u>: the **scapegoat**. **Lev: 16: 6-10, 20-22.**

Scapegoat theory says when things are bad and a community is upset, it looks for a scapegoat to blame. The community turns into a mob, ejects the scapegoat and everyone feels better.

After 9/11, Falwell & Pat Robertson blamed it on those wicked secular liberal and gay people. All Muslims were scapegoated. (When a group is singled out for scapegoating we act as though misbehaving members of the group represent the whole group.)

<u>Scapegoating i</u>nvolves something called **projection**. I project my bad traits on you so I can blame you and get the focus off me. None of this is conscious, which makes it hard to recognize when we're doing. It relieves the bad feeling we have about ourselves and projects it others, because blame feels better than shame.

This allows nice people to collude with others to drive the scapegoat out of the group so we all feel weird sense of relief.

People of Israel knew about scapegoating. Story of Jonah: he's a foreigner on a ship in a horrible storm so people look for a scapegoat. Jonah admits he's running from God, and they've got their man and Jonah is tossed overboard to calm the sea.

In Leviticus God **adopts & adapts** scapegoat. He adapts it by first ritualizing it, so as to **redirect** it, **revealing** it for what it is in the hope of one day **ending** it.

Remember in order to connect with us God adopts things he didn't invent. God didn't invent human language. We invented language and God wanted to connect with us so he adopts our language to speak to us in ways we could understand.

God adopts animal sacrifice. Humans were offering sacrifice long before God called Abram. So God **adopts** the practice of sacrifice to **adapt** it and eventually **end** it.

As soon as God **adopts** scapegoat practice notice how he **adapts** it. By **ritualizing** it, he **redirects** it in some big ways. You need to scapegoat? Once a year under these supervised conditions here's how it's done. To begin with the victim is a goat, not one of your kids or a fellow human being or some minority group.

The way the ritual is practiced **unmasks** the mechanism of **projection.** The priest places his hands on the goat confessing the sins of the people for the entire year. Projection is more about our sins not the sins of the scapegoat but that is hidden in projection.

Scapegoating is driven by our sins, not the sins of the scapegoat. God's scapegoat ritual makes that clear.

Scapegoating can't end until we take responsibility for their own crap rather than projecting it on others.

Here's something I just noticed recently so I offer it for consideration. It's speculative.

Ritual calls for two goats: one for the Lord, another for "Azazel" (also called the scapegoat). 6 "Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household. 7 Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting. 8 He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. 9 Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. 10 But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat.

Newer translations (Robert Alter/NRSV) has "for **Azazel**" rather than scapegoat. Azazel means "fierce/angry god" thought to be a demonic goat-like figure associated with the wilderness.
God
Rabbis debated this: one goat is for YHWH, other for Azazel (fierce/angry god, demonic figure)? What's up with that?

Maybe this is a hint that scapegoating is not God's idea or something he needs in order to forgive us. It's actually something our dark side demands. When we scapegoat each other we're making offerings to the fierce/angry god--our own demonic side.

The scapegoat ritual in Leviticus, sanctioned by God, is **beginning** of process of **reform**. Goal of the reform is to **end** scapegoating.

Enter Jesus. In Jesus, God himself becomes the scapegoat. Jesus represents every scapegoated person--every minority group on the wrong side of power equation: **women**, **racial minorities**, **immigrants**, **Muslims** (lots of scapegoating since 9/11) **sexual minorities**, **the mentally ill**. It turns out to be a lot of us.

When we scapegoat people, we are actually driving God out of our community. And this is not good for us.

Jesus was perfect candidate for scapegoating. Every disadvantage: a Jew among Roman occupation force, a peasant Jew among wealthy elites, by reputation an illegitimate child, a rabbi without formal credentials calling the credentialed to task.

High priest Caipaphas designates Jesus as scapegoat saying, ***"it's better for one man to die than for the whole nation to suffer."***

Anyone who knows the story thinks Jesus got raw deal!

Anyone who meets this Jesus is called to abandon scapegoating. Like Saul. He's a up and coming leader in Israel at the time who has a great zeal for his nation. It's killing him that the nation is under foreign rule when they are the people of God and their founding story is about being liberated from bondage. Who is to blame for this state of affairs? Surely not us. Must be those Jesus followers. Let's ban them from the synagogue, if they don't go quietly, let organize the authorities to sanction stoning them.

In the vision that converts Saul: **Jesus the scapegoat who is risen from the dead** (the triumph of the victim over the oppressor) **says what to Saul?—*stop scapegoating these people!***

For millennia before Jesus people were scapegoated: women, (Adam: *"she's to blame!"*) minority groups forced into slavery, anyone different from the dominant group always first to blame

And the work of the Spirit? A **slow march of revelation** over the centuries that amounts to the Spirit of Jesus saying to humanity: *stop it! When you do that to them you do that to me!*

To love Jesus is to receive this revelation from him and bring the scapegoating to an end.

For Reflection

Let's do a little pre-communion reflection. In a few minutes when we've finished our communion prayers, Oceana will lead us in the call and response which begins **"The Lord be with you!"**

"The Lord" in this case is the Lord Jesus and he can be with us because he's not dead, he's risen from the dead. And **his rising is the promise of triumph for every scapegoated person**. Yes he was sent away from the community, rejected, excluded. But he's back and he's back not as a victim anymore but as Lord.

There's a promise here for everyone who has ever tasted scapegoating.

Let's sit with this for a bit and let Spirit speak to our hearts.

For example, If you have suffered scapegoating, it's a painful experience. For next minute or two bring that pain to the God who suffered it himself in Jesus and let the promise sink in.
God will have the last word. In Jesus he's already spoken it.

[Prayer ministry: Spirit power to forgive….First thing the risen Jesus said to his disciples (who were subject scapegoating he suffered), If you forgive sins of any they are forgiven. It's easier to do our forgivin' when we remember he's risen and he ain't no victim anymore. It's an act of victory over your oppressor to forgive him.]