

Sermon on Number 4 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Numbers 4:1-33

We labor from the finished work of Jesus for his glory and the good of the world.

I have had a lot of jobs. Only 45, but have clocked in and out of more jobs than honestly I can fully remember. My kids have even started to say it is easier to ask where I haven't worked!

Inventory: Garden center hand; lawn mower; Grocery store cart mover and dairy stocker; I have worked for two different telemarketing firms, one as manager; hotel front desk clerk; bank teller (got robbed at gunpoint); McDonald's and Burger King; Marshalls; University outrigger; radio station DJ and morning show stuntman; Dance club DJ; bar bouncer; security guard; law library clerk; paper boy; reporter for college newspaper; law office runner; server at an upscale restaurant; regional director for the Ohio republican party; I tried to sell plasma once; special assistant for communications; assistant press secretary, deputy press secretary, press secretary, communications director, assistant to professors in the missiological department, Associate pastor, and fully and finally pastor of Reservoir Church pastor and any new iteration stemming from this vocation!

As we often mention, vocation is not meant to be our source of identity (if so much of my life would have been spent not knowing who I was!) While it's not our identity, we do work, and work is good. It is part of the design.

Sin has made it toil, but under the debris of anxiety, discontentment, and economic systems, there is something meaningful. That plays into our relationship with God, into life in his Kingdom, and the good of the world.

The Christian works differently. Approaches life differently. And from the description of the Levites' jobs, we are spurred on to think of our work in three spheres.

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For Life with God

Reading our text for today generates two questions. What do we make of work/labor, the tasks we have before us. And a question of God; our interacting, doing the things necessary to mediate relationship with God.

In both we are helped realizing it is what we were meant for.

From creation we are given, as humanity, a mandate of work. Genesis 1 & 2.

“The creation mandate is the on-going charge to humanity, in the power and blessing of God, to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth and to gently subdue and cultivate the earth.”

Genesis 1:26-27 “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

Relating to God was a walk in the coolness of the day when the labor was done. Modeled by him, inheriting in us as image bearers. Made to be creative, ordering, subduing in the best sense of the word.

All of humanity is living longing for this presence again, the immanence, nearness of God again. In our work, in our rest. We rarely can articulate this but it drives so much of life.

Special. No other creature has this type of communing. None of the other animals have this image bearing like we do. We see it in many ways.

Cooking food. Only animals that cook their food. And more than just providing flame to the bounty, we add flavors, get creative and when we get it right, it is beautiful (and tasty.) Brilliant reflection of the image we bear.

But it is an image that we have tainted.

From this mandate of creation, our first parents believed a lie and created disobedience poisoning the blood stream of humanity.

Relationship spoiled.

Genesis 3:8–11 “And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. [9] But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” [10] And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” [11] He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (ESV)

And work made toil.

Curse. **Genesis 3:16** “To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.” (ESV)

Genesis 3:17–19 “And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; [18] thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. [19] By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (ESV)

Nothing is as it is supposed to be.

God will choose Israel as an outpost meant to show the world what life with God looks like.

And this wandering is part of the presentation.

Numbers 3–8 (TWBCV15:GR): Numbers pays careful attention to the priests’ work of mediating God’s presence, not because religious work is the most important occupation, but because God is the center point of every occupation.

We see their work.

Aaron and his sons have care of the holy things, when the camp moves, they are to elaborately cover them.

Kohathites carry these items once they are covered. (longest description)

Gershonites take the curtains the covering of the tent.

Merari pack the sticks and structure of the tabernacle.

But it's not careless work.

Numbers 4:15 “And when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, as the camp sets out, after that the sons of Kohath shall come to carry these, **but they must not touch the holy things, lest they die.** These are the things of the tent of meeting that the sons of Kohath are to carry. (ESV)

Numbers 4:18–20 “Let not the tribe of the clans of the Kohathites be destroyed from among the Levites, [19] but deal thus with them, that they may live and not die when they come near to the most holy things: Aaron and his sons shall go in and appoint them each to his task and to his burden, [20] but they shall not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment, lest they die.” (ESV)

Only the priests could see and touch the holy things. Items most representative of God's presence. Anyone else who touched (v. 15) or saw them (v. 20) showed great disrespect for the Lord's holiness and would die.

Watched *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* last week. While suspect biblical interpretation, the bad guys die because they looked upon the ark (the presence of God).

God is holy and because of the fall, relating to him is serious business. Wrath.

“The God of the Bible is thus radically different from the God of our culture or of our imaginations. He is not tame, nor even necessarily “safe,” if by “safe” we mean that he will always work things out in ways that make sense to our wisdom. Though he dwells in the midst of his people, his holiness is always threatening to break out and consume the unholy people who are all around him.” ID

“We must understand that wrath is not an attribute of God. God is love. God is holy. God is just. God is not wrath. God’s wrath is the rightful expression of his holy love in the face of sin and evil. Before the foundations of the earth, the triune God had perfect love, joy, holiness, and peace. There was no wrath because there was no sin. God’s wrath arises from his holy love in opposition to wickedness. Wrath only exists where sin exists.” Jeremy Treat, *The Coherence of Atonement*

I almost called this sermon “Why So Serious?!” Life with God is serious. And we should have a humble posture before him.

John Piper mentioned preaching at a conference on the glory of God and being immediately followed by an attempt to secure the Guinness world record for the most people sitting on whoopie cushions at the same time.

We have fun, but live rightly reverent before the Creator of the universe.

His ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not ours; yet he has created us in his image, and so we are able to know something of who he is.

And we no longer have fear of igniting wrath because of redemption.

In Jesus the transcendent, holy God took into himself the death that we deserved for our sins. Christ’s purpose in coming was so that we too might live and not die when we approach the most holy things.

It is what the work of the Levites eventually points to.

“The Levites’ high and holy calling was accomplished profoundly by Christ, who came to serve (Mark 10:45), and whose food was to do the will of the Father (John 4:34). In his service to God, Christ is our substitute, fulfilling righteous obedience to the law and becoming the atoning sacrifice for our sins on the cross.” GTB

No longer in danger of death in his presence, oppositely given life in him.

But work doesn’t end, however it certainly looks different. Purpose is different.

For the Life of the Church

When we belong to Christ we belong to his body, the church. And a flourishing life is found when we dive deeply into the local church.

The church, as a reflection of the Kingdom, is a collection of different brought together for purpose, to show the world life with God.

1 Corinthians 12:12–14 “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. [13] For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. [14] For the body does not consist of one member but of many.” (ESV)

Each member (part) of the body has a role to play in the life of the church. All ages, backgrounds, experiences get to play when we are united as one body.

Modern attitudes promote jumping from body to body until you find a suitable host! Essentially living as *zits* on the church rather than members of the body.

This is why we use family language at Reservoir. Part of each other. Committed. Working side by side for the glory of Christ.

The Levites’ work complemented each others’ making each family essential. You can take up the curtains but the structure won’t move itself...

In the same way, we don’t just have producers and consumers in the church. We are all gifted by God to be part of the church.

1 Corinthians 12:4–7 “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; [5] and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; [6] and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. [7] To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (ESV)

“Let it not be forgotten, then, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the great head of the church, calls out all his redeemed to his service and that he lays on each one a burden which no one else can carry. Each one throughout life must be “steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord’s work.” *Charles Spurgeon*

Holding each other up, being held. Singing, teaching kids, brewing strong coffee, setting up the elements, praying for one another...

Numbers 3–8 (TWBCV15:GR): The Levites assist all people in bringing their life and work into line with God’s law and purposes. Moreover, the work performed by the Levites in the tent is quite similar to the work of most Israelites—breaking, moving and setting up camp, kindling fire, washing linens, butchering animals, and processing grain. The emphasis, then, is on the integration of the Levites’ work with everyone else’s.

All of it and more ministry. Keeping the tent.

We labor here because we have been brought in by the labor of another. Jesus, creating family/the kingdom.

Matthew 25:40 “And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.’” (ESV)

The church is also where transformation is sparked in us.

“When the local church is neglected, sanctification is neglected. It is vital that the Christian sees the link between these two and strives to make the local church central.” Josh Loftus

Because of Christ we are made part and given a part to play. For his glory and our good.

1 Corinthians 15:58 “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (ESV)

And our work doesn’t just stay within the tent, it goes out, because it’s supposed to!

For the Life of the World

The Levites’ work was on the move. Taking new territory - advancing so the world would see life with God. Imperfect, stumbling, but onward.

The church then is meant to be a place of equipping and sending rather than an end in itself.

This might call for some reframing. [Five Chapter Gospel]

If we only see life with God and the life of the church - we might only hear a two chapter gospel. Fall and Redemption.

Maybe even a third, Restoration, as we hope for heaven.

But when we see the story correctly we recognize five chapters.

Creation (mandate, made for this), Fall (sin), Redemption (Jesus), Renewal (Kingdom work), and Restoration (new heavens and new earth).

As ambassadors of Christ, those in his kingdom work for the renewal of others and all things.

The church, the people that make up the church, as a creative minority, a renewing presence bringing life to the world. Mixing some flavors for others to savor. Meeting needs. Seeing the unseen. Speaking for the voiceless. Loving our neighbors well even with our work.

Christ working through culture - through us to bring shalom.

This is for all vocations - all hands. Working as unto God, and as instruments of God.

Bringing beauty, security, innovation that helps, and care that heals.

You are not what you do but you are meant to do something.

In Christ we work for the life of the World, and we do so differently. We don't just work to get more. We use what we have and how we labor to build his kingdom here.

From a task list in numbers we are freed to dream of how the Lord will use our work. Some of us might see it as a resource to support other things. Some of us will see it as working redemption in broken places. All of it incarnating like Jesus, moving in, blessing.

In the church we can then champion uniqueness and get creative with how God will use us.

“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” Albert Einstein

All of our labor, our work, energized by what Jesus has done and how his Spirit will equip us for what lies ahead. Showing the world life with God. Glorious grace, beautiful creativity, renewal.

The Levites worked for a purpose.

“Likewise today, the products and services of all God’s people are expressions of God’s power at work in human beings, or at least they should be. The New Testament develops this theme from the Old Testament explicitly. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). All the work we do is priestly work when it proclaims God’s goodness. The items we produce—leather and cloth, dishes and plates, construction materials, lesson plans, financial forecasts, and all the rest—are priestly items. The work we do—washing clothes, growing crops, raising children, and every other form of legitimate work—is priestly service to God.”

All of us are meant to ask, “How does my work reflect the goodness of God, make him visible to those who do not recognize him and serve his purposes in the world?” All believers, not just clergy, are descendants of the priests and Levites in Numbers, doing God’s work every day.”

We labor from the finished work of Jesus for his glory and the good of the world.

Ephesians 2:8–10 “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one

may boast. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (ESV)
What will you do?

For Life with God - give him back his seat (throne). Meet him, hear what he says of you, and find life in Jesus.

For the Life of the Church - dive in. Shoulder-to-shoulder labor for each other and all who may come. Start something.

For the Life of the World - wake up with a new perspective. Give yourself permission to dream God-sized dreams of how he will use you for his glory and the good of others.

Worship Jesus in all of it.

I have had lots of jobs. Lots of potential identities. Varied vocations... but always one calling, as a worshiper. Life surrendered to Jesus, making him known.

There is nothing sweeter. Shall we share?!