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Ohavi Zedek Synagogue
Burlington, VT

Good morning!

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to share God's Word with you in this congregation today. It is indeed an honor and a privilege to continue this tradition between Ohavi Zedek and the First Congregational United Church of Christ. We look forward to hearing your rabbi's interpretation of this same word tomorrow morning from our pulpit.

In truth, I wish that our Sabbath days fell in the opposite order, so that Amy would preach first and I would follow! Rabbinic scholarship is renowned and I am certain she knows way more about Leviticus than I do! Although I've been preaching for more than thirty years now, in all kinds of places and in front of all kinds of interfaith people, this is the very first time I have been invited to speak at a synagogue. It is also one of a very few times I have spoken about a passage from the codes of law, as we call them. I've read through the story of Nadab and Abihu at least once, but since it does not appear anywhere in our three-year cycle of lectionary appointed texts, honestly I did not even recognize the names.

So I'm starting from scratch, so to speak. Fortunately Amy shared some of her commentary on the Shemeni; there are Christian scholars of Leviticus whose commentaries also helped guide me.

Let me be merciless honest: when we read this passage in the rabbi's office a few weeks ago - before our highest of holy days last week – all my internal biases came

flooding back to me, as they may have to other Christians who have not studied or learned a context for this passage.

Who is this God in the Old Testament scripture, as we call it in our church? The balance of judgment and mercy seems askew to us. First of all, God is very violent in this encounter. God appears to be nitpicking about what sounds to me like minor details of worship law. Most difficult for me is the lack of forgiveness – first strike and you're out for these guys. God is vengeful for his own honor and status – the penalty for violation of ritual correctness is death.

There's the first task of interpretation: opening up to us all, especially to Christians not so familiar with the Law, the interpretation that Nadab and Abihu might actually have deserved this kind of fate.

Amy helped me tremendously by saying she understood it differently. She would place the responsibility squarely on Nadab and Abihu instead of upon God – in fact, if I understood her correctly, it might be that God was not even the direct cause of their death.

Nadab and Abihu took an action which was outside what they (hopefully) knew was the norm. As a result, they suffered the consequences. It was a trouble of their own making. Those who play with fire know they risk being burned, and that metaphor works metaphorically as well as literally.

What was there so wrong or risky about their burnt offerings? What does it mean: they put “strange” or “alien” fire in their censers? (Those are little baskets which carry fire still used in Catholic or Episcopal churches.) My first clue came from reading the English translation in the Jerusalem Bible, which says it was “unauthorized” fire. The immediate context of this passage in Leviticus itself doesn't give us any clue about why

the fire is strange or unauthorized. One fundamentalist Christian sermon online suggests that is because only Aaron was authorized to offer incense on the altar (Ex. 30: 7) and that's why his sons were NOT authorized to do so: because he was the chief priest.

Certainly there were many additional rules about exactly how to make an offering on God's altar, and that it had all been explained to these two young men. The actual setting in Leviticus is part of the ordination ceremony making Aaron and his four sons into priests. God has given them all the rules already, yes, but these are the physical rituals and actions which turn their divine appointment into reality.

Why would Nadab and Abihu flaunt the rules? It seems the Talmud has multiple and diverse theories about that and no one has settled on "the right" answer. Perhaps they had evil intent, trying for a power grab in taking over the unique role of the High Priest, their father. Maybe they were in full-blown adolescent rebellion mode and were just seeing what they could get away with. Maybe they were drunk. What if they were genuinely ignorant of the fine details of God's rules? Maybe they really didn't remember that particular factoid and were just trying to make it nice. Or maybe they weren't listening carefully at the time the rules were explained. Those of you who have taught young men know that Nadab and Abihu were probably not the first young men to be inattentive in a public lecture, and most certainly not the last.

I would like to give Nadab and Abihu the benefit of the doubt. I would like to believe that their motive was not especially evil, perhaps simply careless. The image that popped into my head when Amy said "Actions have consequences" was this: a couple of young adolescents playing with a chemistry set in the basement and mixing together the "wrong" ingredients with a disastrous, even fatal, result. That was a stock image from growing up in the fifties and the sixties, but I do have a vague memory of my older brothers getting into some sort of trouble in our family's basement. Perhaps I

only remember it because it was one of those stories that was supposed to happen? Anyway, there were no permanent injuries.

Now that I have waded my way through this unfortunate story of Nadab and Abihu, I want us to consider what happens when human beings act in a way that they haven't thought through very well. Perhaps we are just being ignorant, or sometimes silly, or at worst deliberately risky. There is an aspect of human adolescence – a bit of which remains in all of us - that loves to take high risks without thinking ahead about possible effects.

Now if human beings were totally risk averse, we'd still be living in a savannah somewhere using primitive tools and proto-language. Our human ingenuity, made in the likeness of divine creativity, is highly innovative. Our willingness to experiment is the mother of all invention.

Why was this such a bad risk for Nadab and Abihu? What possible difference could adding a bit of incense to the offering make, in the grand scheme of things, except that it was against God's rules? In my theological understanding, being against God's rules can mean the same as being against God's will – and our primary task as worshippers of God is to align ourselves with God's will.

The question I want to leave you with this morning is: are we playing with a dangerous fire when we fail to align ourselves with God's will for us and for our community?

The more specific question to raise on this April 22, Earth Day, is what dangerous fire have we played with in regard to our care for this beautiful planet earth God has given into our care?

Christians and Jews share the scriptures that appoint us as stewards of planet earth. You know them. We don't need to review them right now. The question that today's scripture invites is when do our actions with regard to Earth's environment and resources become disobedient to God's will?

Human beings have been playing with fire in the way we have mistreated this beautiful planet and squandered its resources for centuries, especially into the post-modern era. We have used all our resources in high-risk ways; we are not thinking ahead to the consequences of our actions. Air, and water, and earth; we have damaged them all, in ways that may be irreversible.

This kind of playing with fire has wreaked all sorts of havoc in our modern world: severe effects on human health, the rapid demise of many species; and the serious upset of natural biospheres. Name your own special interest here, from Save the Whales to lead in the drinking water of Flint, MI.

Arguably the worst problem has been human overdependence on fossil fuels, a perfect example of playing with fire. Digging up and processing fuels has wreaked plenty of damage all on its own, but worse by far is the actual burning of these materials. The huge amount of carbon emitted has a major role in the changing climate. Only very stubborn industrialists can close their eyes to the reality of our quickly warming planet. This time we have played with fire in such a way that our whole planet may be consumed by unintended consequences. It will take much prayer, cooperative work, and self-sacrifice to reverse the effects of what we have already done.

Every day there are scary new developments. Here are two that grabbed my attention this week. Dozens of sperm whales lay dead on North Sea beaches, apparently stranded in shallow water. When autopsied, many of their stomachs were as much as 80% full of plastic products. They are starving to death.

Yesterday I read about a new 400 foot wide waterfall coming off one of Antarctica's ice shelves. As we are entering spring, you will remember in the southern hemisphere they are actually entering winter. Such flowing water is highly unusual.

One of my go-to texts in preaching about the environment is Psalm 29. God's enormously creative voice can also be a force of huge destruction, creating storms such as these "whirling oaks."

Fierce storms on the Sea of Galilee in those days brought winds sweeping up the mountain slopes ferociously enough to break the mighty cedars and strip the forests bare. Those same cedars of Lebanon were a symbol of God's majestic creation. You may not know they are the main players in a story about one of the first large-scale environmental tragedies, according to Jared Diamond's book "Collapse."

In the ancient epic of Gilgamesh is a symbolic conflict between humans and the forest. Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk in Sumerian, fights with the god of the forest to cut down some trees. The Assyrians were not the only ones to exploit these trees. King Solomon used them to build his temple. The Philistines used them to build ships. The severe deforestation and depopulation of that area, and the subsequent weakening of the soil, happened long before the Hebrews' occupation of the land.

Humankind's actions and inactions with regard to the earth have long since overwhelmed any kind of balance that was part of God's original creation. Certainly we continue to "blame" storms of nature as "acts of God." The increasing and erratic temperatures, the number of previously unknown super storms, the prevalence of drought and famine and wildfire are in our headlines day after day.

Whether Psalm 29 simply describes the ordinary destructiveness of nature, or illustrates some of the effects exacerbated by that ancient ecological crisis, we can never know. In that context of that early ecological destruction, perhaps we can finally confess that in this modern era our actions have had incredibly destructive consequences on this one Earth God have given us. Maybe Nadab and Abihu have something to teach us after all.