

FEBRUARY 24, 2021 | WEDNESDAY DEVOTIONAL

# *Holy God, Holy Lives*



ART: ROMARE BEARDEN, GOLGOTHA (1945)

# WHEN GOD MOVES IN

LEVITICUS 1:1-9

How do we know what to do in church on Sunday mornings? Have you ever thought about it? The specific forms and times for prayer, the four hymns and an anthem, the sermon and Scripture readings, communion and baptism, weddings and funerals...barring a little wiggle room, there's a particular way of doing all those things, a way that we feel best fits our understanding of acceptable, God-honouring worship. But how do we know what actions or words are an acceptable part of worship? Not every church does it the same way, either. And although the broad strokes are there in the Bible, the details definitely aren't. Happily, our Presbyterian Church in Canada has the Book of Common Worship, which lays out all the agreed-upon presbyterian ways of doing worship on Sundays and in a whole host of other situations, too.

This first part of Leviticus is the ancient equivalent of a Book of Common Worship. One of the reasons Leviticus is so alien to us today is that it's not really focused on belief in God, something we share with God's people in all times and places. Instead, Leviticus is about what we do to live in accordance with those beliefs, and how we understand what it means to be in – or desire to be in – the presence of God. And the *doing* of belief and worship, that can look very different and still be acceptable worship.

Leviticus begins at a unique and special moment in the history of God's people. During their desert wanderings, God was very active and involved with his people, especially through Moses. God gave them the Law to follow and many demonstrations of divine power and care, like the parting of the Red Sea when they were escaping Egypt or manna and quail when they were starving. But God's people still found it really hard to hang onto their beliefs and their relationship with God. After struggling to stay faithful to God while wandering in the wilderness, God instructed Moses to create a physical space for the people to worship using the tent of meeting; or more accurately a series of physical spaces, some of which were accessible only to the priests. The last verses of Exodus, right before what we read today, speak of the glory of God filling the tent of meeting, as either cloud or fire. And this tent of meeting was at the heart of their encampment, re-erected every time they settled somewhere new, proclaiming that God had come to live right in middle of their community, undeniably and visibly present among them.

The tent of meeting included the altar for making burnt offerings, and so God begins Leviticus by instructing Moses how those offerings are meant to be treated.

The idea of sacrificing animals seems kind of barbaric to us, these days, although it's worth noting that birds and agricultural produce were also used as sacrifices, too. The slaughter of sheep, cattle, goats and birds, the offering of cakes and fruit and grain, all of it seems strange and rather pointless to us. What good could burning these things possibly do? But this kind of offering – these sacrifices – were the very heart of worship, as central as reading Scripture or prayer are to us. Sacrifices were not meant to be a kind of exchange either, trading meat and cake for forgiveness. Sorrow and love, regret and gratitude must always find an outward expression in worship, and God always gives his people the means to do so. For us, it might be a hymn or prayer or a monetary donation; for Israel, wandering lost in the desert, it was giving freely of their own vital resources.

The purpose for these sacrifices was atonement, being reconciled or made right – at one – with God. And that is also the reason for Jesus' death and resurrection, too.

For God's people, way back when, God made himself unignorable; a visible and real presence, right in the middle of their lives, cloud and fire, filling their place of worship with his glory. And God...is **holy**. God's holiness is so deeply ingrained, so much a part of who God is, that nothing sinful, nothing unholy, could be in his presence. And we are, on our own, deeply unholy. And that's because of sin.

God's law illustrates how sin touches every part of our lives – our thoughts, our actions, our motives and our desires. That's why, as we'll discover, Leviticus has such a diversity of laws about so many ordinary things. But sin is far more than law-breaking or doing things God has told us we ought not do; sin is also what lies behind the law-breaking, what causes us, however, unwittingly, however purposefully, to do and say what we shouldn't, and to avoid doing what we should. The foundation of a sinful life is a lack of love for God, and for our neighbours.

But even as God explains his people's unholiness, their sinfulness, to them, God provides a way to free them from their sins and allow them to draw close to him. And that is both amazing and completely expected, too.

When they were stuck between the Egyptian army and the sea, God provided a way through; when they were lost in the desert, God provided pillars of cloud and fire to lead them; when they were starving, God provided manna and quail to eat. And now, when they were lost to sin, God provided a way for them to make amends and to atone – to be at one – with God again, through sacrifice.

This is the foundation of holy living. Even as we recognise our own sinfulness, how far off the mark we are from being the kind of people God made us to be, even as we see our own unholiness, God provides the means of transformation, the means of becoming one with him once more. So holy living isn't strict adherence to the rules; it's something we pursue in response to our holy God who descended to Israel in the wilderness and lived in their midst...and who descends to us at the Cross, graciously providing the holiness we cannot earn on our own. The beginning of holy living is our response of faith to the God who dwells in our midst.

We are not so very different from God's people so long ago, even though they lived under the old covenant made with Moses. For them and for us, it's God who provides the means of atonement, the path to holiness, whether symbolically through the kind of sacrifices we read about today, or in truth and reality by Jesus. God has come to dwell with us in Christ; sin still touches every part of our lives and God still wants to replace that touch with his own, healing and making right and whole every part of us, so we can be at one with him. Christ's self-sacrifice on the Cross is this grace, the means provided for us. But it's on us to respond in faith, and to embrace this grace, freely given to us, as we make that first step into holy living.

One of the most special and comforting parts of being Christian is God being present with us, in each moment. But that presence is not inactive – it couldn't be, this is our living, loving, always-has-a-plan-for-us God! – his presence touches and transforms every area of our lives. This week, I invite you to spend some time thinking about what it means for you, this idea of God's presence as something that can transform you, nudge you, towards holy living. How do you live differently, knowing that our holy God dwells with you?