

MARCH 3, 2021 | WEDNESDAY DEVOTIONAL

Holy God, Holy Lives



ART: ROMARE BEARDEN, GOLGOTHA (1945)

THE GO-BETWEEN

LEVITICUS 8:1-13

I'm going to tell you about a man named Simeon; this isn't the Simeon from the Bible, it's a different one. When he was about 13 years old, Simeon decided that he wanted to dedicate his life to God. So he joined a monastery. But he was so into the practice of austerity – depriving himself of food, sleep, and physical comforts – that the monks kicked him out. For years, Simeon tried other things – locking himself away in a cabin alone, standing upright until his knees gave out, encamping on a rocky ledge high in the mountains – all to bring him closer to God. But people kept seeking him out, asking for his prayers and spiritual advice, making pilgrimages even to his rocky ledge, and Simeon didn't appreciate the interruptions. So he hit on a new idea: he would live at the top of a tall pole. Luckily, Simeon lived in the Middle East, so winter was not an issue. Simeon discovered a pillar which had survived among the ruins in Telanissa, in Syria, and he built a platform at the top of it. Simeon's first pillar was only about ten feet high; but over the years, he swapped out for taller and taller ones, eventually settling on a fifty-foot pillar with a 3 x 3" platform...with a railing, of course, for safety. Small boys from the village would send up goat's milk and flatbread to him, and so Simeon became famous as Simeon Stylites, the holy man up a pole. He was admired by everyone, even kings and emperors, and continued to be a pilgrimage destination and was still sought out for his wisdom and prayers. It even started a trend, with other people choosing the stylites lifestyle. Simeon spent 37 years up on a pillar. He died on 2 September 459AD.

Why did Simeon do the things he did? Some of them were pretty extreme! And why did people admire him for it, seek out his prayers and his advice...rather than avoid him or try to help this strange and unusual man?

Back in the early centuries of Christianity, holiness was something pursued only by an elite few. And they were elite, like Olympic athletes of holiness, engaging in extreme practices and active, continual devotion to God: extended periods of prayer, fasting, sleep deprivation, isolation and more – Simeon was not alone in pursuing a life as clearly and dramatically “set apart” as he could manage, all in the quest for holiness. Other Christians would come to someone like Simeon to ask for prayer or advice, on the basis of Simeon's holiness, his relationship with God, rather than their own, less holy Christian life. Simeon, in

turn, was not withdrawing from the world so much as serving the world by being holy in it, modelling a devout faith for ordinary believers, making holiness accessible to them through him.

Over the centuries, this practice of ordinary Christians accessing holiness through the holy living of a holy, elite-athlete Christian became very organised. The medieval church taught that a “treasury of merit” was being accumulated by holy people, like the saints and monks and nuns, and this excess of holiness could be accessed through the church...for a donation or by doing penance and making amends in other ways. It wasn't until our own Protestant Reformed churches came into being about five hundred years ago that the expectation of living a holy life dedicated to God was applied to all Christians. No longer could we borrow the holiness of another human being or use them as a go-between, as someone whose holier life brings them into God's presence and whose prayers could thus be better heard by God than our own; instead, holy living and a personal faith are the lifelong work of us all.

I'm not suggesting we set up a series of pillars in Wenino Hall to camp on top of, but the idea of a “go-between” bears some thinking about, especially as we consider the Cross at the end of our Lenten journey.

Our reading from Leviticus today describes setting up Aaron and his sons as “go-betweens,” priests who could be physically and spiritually made holy and who could thus move between the world and the inner, holy, sanctum of their newly-established worship space. The details are a little obscure, but an ephod is a garment, probably like a tunic. The Urim and Thummim, we're a little less certain about, but these are likely symbolically-meaningful objects used to communicate with God or discern God's will. The gold plate that was attached to their headdress was inscribed with the words, “holy to the Lord.” Moses concludes by using anointing oil to consecrate or set apart as holy both people, place and things, making the priests “go-betweens” and the place and objects of their work just as holy and set apart for God as they themselves were.

The priests are visibly different, as different as Simeon up on his pole; they were ritually clean of their sin and could therefore handle the offerings and sacrifices brought by the people to God for the altar. Twice each day, the priests would burn fragrant incense, too; there's a couple of beautiful references elsewhere in the Bible, like Psalm 141 and Revelation 8, that connect this incense, wafting upward from the altar, to prayers, drifting up into the heavens and into God's hearing. So these ancient priests, in their symbol-laden clothing and with their work handling sacrifices and offerings and prayers,

acted as a holy elite that could physically go between the people and the altar, and spiritually connect the people to God, without bringing anything unholy or unclean into God's presence.

But now, of course, we have Jesus. We don't need anyone else to be our go-between, and we understand now that living a holy life isn't something we can get someone else to do for us. John Calvin, one of those early protestants from 500+ years ago, described our sinfulness as a cloud cast between us and God, obscuring our ability to see and be in God's presence, creating an unwanted distance or brokenness between God and us. And Jesus' task is to restore us to God's grace: made right and whole, holy and acceptable; to drive away that dark cloud and help us journey fully into the light of God's presence. Jesus mediates between God and us, as both divine and human person, the perfect go-between.

If we take this idea of Jesus as go-between or mediator and then consider the Cross, it affects how we understand what's actually happening through his death. We tend to use words like "paid" or "substituted," as in Jesus paid for our sins, substituting himself for us in death. But that seems a bit cold and impersonal to me; as though we've entered into a contract with a grim and angry god, where a balanced ledger is the ultimate goal, who cares who pays. But if Jesus is our go-between, that takes us into a world of self-giving and relationship; the Cross becomes something Jesus does for us to express the holy love of God and his own love, too, love that reaches down to us in our sinfulness and walks us out of it and back into God's holy presence. Jesus is the way to holiness, however you want to phrase it: go-between, mediator, bridge, it all means the same thing: to get to God, we go by way of Jesus, and Jesus leads us by way of the Cross...forgiven, unburdened, set free, and in devoted pursuit of holiness.

This week, I'm inviting you to think about prayer. Perhaps you're so accustomed to praying, you just do it, whenever you like, or perhaps you struggle to pray. You might pray at particular times each day, and prefer to be quite formal about it. Maybe you mostly pray to God or Jesus, or even the Holy Spirit. A very wise nun taught me that we should pray as though we're spending time with someone we love. So whether you're at the getting-to-know you

stage with Jesus or you've been rubbing along together for years, I invite you to add a little spice to your prayer life this week and try something new. Maybe a morning or evening prayer, a conversation over the dishes, something a little more formal than usual, or just sitting together with God and watching the sunset...in Christ, through Christ, your prayers can bring you right into God's holy presence, and that is a place where every Christian longs to be.