

The Holy One

In the name of our great high priest, Jesus, dear friends in Christ: In our Lenten journey this year, we have been traveling with the Israelites through the desert as they make their way led by the Lord from where they were slaves in Egypt to the Promised Land. To be honest, they haven't been very good traveling companions. I, for one, am sick and tired of hearing their constant complaining, their stubborn refusal to trust the Lord, and the angry accusation they make every time they encounter a problem, namely: "The Lord brought us out here just to kill us all!" Pathetic. But that's not the worst of it. The worst part is recognizing and having to admit that I fit right in with them.

In our last devotion we got to the very root of all their faithless and rebellious ways. Camped in the shadow of Mount Sinai and with the glory of the Lord in plain view (though veiled in cloud and smoke) on the top of the mountain, the Israelites made for themselves an idol, a golden calf. They pointed to it and said, "This, not that guy thundering up there on the mountain, is the Lord God who led us out of Egypt!" They bowed down before it. They offered sacrifices to it. And then they held a full blown pagan feast and orgy of sexual degeneracy. Why did they do this? It wasn't, as it is commonly assumed, that they felt they needed a visual representation of God. They had a God they could see. They had a God they could hear, who actually spoke his Word to them. They had a God who could see and hear them, too. And they didn't like it. So they made for themselves a god who couldn't see, who couldn't hear, and most importantly who couldn't speak, because when the god is silent, *we* get to speak for him. That puts *us* in the driver's seat. It makes *us* our own god. And then *we* get to make the rules.

The episode of the golden calf reveals that the source of all sin and idolatry is a rejection of the Lord God's authority. We can't stand the idea of having a God above us, who makes the rules for us, who tells us what to do, who judges our behavior, and who punishes us when we're naughty. We want a god who takes care of us, sure; but not one who is in charge. And this evening's reading reveals that our rejection of the Lord's authority extends also to the human authorities that he places over us.

We come to the rebellion led by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. You'll note that it's recorded in the book of Numbers rather than Exodus from which have come all the previous readings in this series. That's because the Israelites have moved on from Mount Sinai and are now camped on the southern edge of the Promised Land. Twelve spies were sent to reconnoiter the land. Upon their return, they gave a mixed report. Two of the spies said it was just as the Lord said, a land flowing with milk and honey. They urged Israel to go forward and take possession of it, confident that the Lord would fight their battles for them. The other ten spies, however, were afraid. They saw the Canaanites' walled cities and fortifications, their heavily armed and armored soldiers, and they were terrified about what would happen when it came to war. So they reported that the land was a horrible, desolate place populated by giants who would crush them like bugs. And here, you thought fake news was a new thing.

Naturally, the Israelites believed the lies. Their trust in the Lord melted away. They refused to go in and take the land. So the Lord said, fine. Have it your way. He sent them back out into the desert, a sentence of 40 years: one year for each day they had been at this campsite complaining and not believing that the Lord would give them exactly what he promised.

This faithless generation will die in the desert, he told them. I'll give the land to your children instead.

Well, they didn't like the sound of that. So, against Moses' strict command, some of them they organized a fighting force and launched an invasion. It was quickly rebuffed by the Canaanites, suffering many deaths and casualties because the Lord wasn't fighting on their side. Moses essentially said to them "I told you so." He turned and led Israel back into the desert.

This appears to be what lies behind the complaint that the leaders of the rebellion bring to Moses and Aaron. They are profoundly unhappy with the leadership of Moses and Aaron. "Look at you two guys: you think you're a couple of big-shots. You said you'd bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey, but you couldn't deliver, could you? Who do you two think you are, ordering us around? You're losers. You're failures. And yet you exalt yourselves above all Israel and think that you're better than the rest of us."

Two things to point out here: first is the question they don't ask, which is "Who put you in charge?" There's a reason they don't ask it. They know the answer. It's "God". They know it, but they don't want to hear it because that would take the wind out of the sails of their complaint. The other thing to see is that they couch their complaint in religious terms. Aaron and his sons have been appointed to the priesthood. Aaron himself serves as the high priest. The complaint of Korah and the others is that in their view, all Israelites are equal. We are all God's chosen people. We are all holy. Therefore the priestly duties like offering incense and making the prayers of the nation before the altar of the Lord can be performed by anyone and in particular *us*, the leaders of the rebellion. It's rather ironic that they accuse Moses and Aaron of exalting themselves, but it's precisely what they are doing.

But we need to unpack the whole concept of what it means to be holy. Holiness is often thought of as sinless perfection or something along those lines; but that really isn't the idea behind it in biblical theology. Holy means set apart by the Lord for his use and purposes. Another way to think of it is relative closeness to the Lord. Thus we see there are degrees of holiness. This is evident by the way the Tabernacle was arranged. The innermost chamber was called the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy place. That's where the Ark of the Covenant sat. And that's where the Shekinah, a visible manifestation of God's glory, hovered above it. The outer chamber was called the Holy Place. It was holy, but not as holy as the inner chamber. This is where the altar of incense stood before the heavy veil that divided the chambers. It's here that the priest would stand and offer prayers to the Lord who was behind the curtain. Surrounding the Tabernacle on the outside was a curtain wall that formed a courtyard. It too was a holy place that could only be entered by priests. This is where the altar of bronze was located on which sacrifices were offered.

Holiness applied not only to places and sacred articles, but also to people. In one sense, Korah and his fellow rebels were right. Every Israelite was holy. They had been chosen by the Lord to be his special people. He set them apart from all the other nations and peoples to be used for his plans and purposes – namely to reveal his glory and his Word to the other nations *and* to be the people through whom he would bring the Savior into the world. Ah, but within Israel one tribe, the Levites, were set apart by the Lord for religious functions and duties. They were to be the teachers, the scribes, the recorders, the keepers and maintainers of the sacred articles, and so on. They were in that sense holier than the rest of the Israelites. Then within the tribe of Levi one family, Aaron's, was set apart to serve as priests. All priests were Levites, but not all Levites – in fact, very few of them – were priests. The priests were then holier than the rest of the Levites. And one priest was chosen to serve as the high priest. He was the

holiest of all of them. He even wore a head covering when performing his official duties on which was embroidered these words: Holy unto the Lord.

Now, this idea that there were levels of holiness and that certain individuals were holier than others may sound offensive to our very egalitarian American ears. We were born and bred in the land of the free where we take it for granted that all people are created equal. And rich or poor, educated or not, no matter what race or ethnicity, every citizen's vote counts the same. This notion bleeds over into our theology too. We are all God's children. We all have equal access to the Lord. We can all read our Bibles and say our prayers and seek his forgiveness. So, it might be tempting to sympathize to some degree with Korah and his fellow rebels who were essentially claiming the same thing.

But that would be a big mistake. That there are relative degrees of holiness is not something humans thought up. It's the Lord God's doing, and he has reasons for it. He establishes the rules for how and by whom he may be approached. And he means to impress upon us that he can only be approached by those individuals he designates – that is, makes holy – to do so.

Why did he set it up this way? It's because in the ultimate sense God alone is holy. No sinful human can stand in his presence. But by his grace and mercy he established these rules of engagement, so to speak: one chosen people, one chosen tribe, one chosen family out of that tribe, and finally one chosen man to represent all mankind before the Lord. The whole system is set up to point to Christ who alone is our great high priest, *who is the Holy One*. He's the One who stands before the Lord on our behalf. He's the One who prays to the Father for us, who intercedes on our behalf. He's the One who makes the sacrifice of atonement for our sins, offering himself in our place. And he's the One who by his suffering, death, and resurrection makes us God's holy people.

What Korah and the other rebels were saying by their claim and actions was that *they* rather than the Lord got to make up the rules about how the Lord was to be approached. They could make up their own system, they didn't need God's – which is to say they were holy enough on their own that they could stand before the Lord without the Lord's appointed Holy One standing between them and God. In other words, they didn't need Jesus to be their Savior.

As we heard, the Lord God did not agree with them. He demonstrated his objection in a most emphatic way to impress upon all his people how much he disagreed. Those rebels who were not swallowed by the earth were consumed by fire. Not coincidentally, a similar eternal fate awaits anyone who believes that he can stand in the Lord's presence without Jesus, the Holy One, interceding on his behalf.

Now in the Christian era things have changed. We are a holy people and we do have immediate access to the Lord; but it must be stressed *that is only account of Jesus*. And while we no longer have the relative holiness system of hereditary Levites and priests who offer sacrifices on our behalf, we can see the idea expressed in the way the church building is laid out. The entry, the fellowship hall, the office and classrooms, they are common spaces. Separate from them is the sanctuary where we worship. It's a holy place, which is what sanctuary means. Within the sanctuary the chancel is set apart. It's holier ground because from there Christ addresses his people with his Word through his appointed spokesman. And in the chancel the holiest place of all is the altar, for from there Christ gives us his body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. It's all set up not to exalt the man who serves from here, but to

point to Christ Jesus who is the Holy One and who makes us holy by his service on our behalf. All praise, honor, and glory be to him, now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!