

To dwell with His People

Notes from Leviticus 16:1-5, 15-22 and Matthew 20:28, 26:26-28, 27:50-51

13th Sunday after Pentecost: August 23, 2026

Rev. Heather Carlson, St. John's Presbyterian Church, Medicine Hat, AB

God wants to dwell with his people - Eden, Abraham/Isaac/Jacob, called out of Egypt for freedom of worship.

Problem: Eating the apple, murder, tower of Babel, flood, Pharaoh, golden calf.

- Not simply out there somewhere, but internal bend away from God.

How can a holy God live among an unholy people without destroying them?

- Pause: purity is God's nature, and it is catchy
- Psalms uses image of refining gold

SLIDE: gold. Impurities: dirt, gravel, bugs?

SLIDE: put into holder, place next to fire. Melts because it is a different substance. Impurities rise to the surface, skimmed off. The fire's nature interacting with the gold.

So Exodus ends with plans for tabernacle - a moveable Eden.

SLIDE - tabernacle

- Curtains, rods
- Courtyard: sacrifice and water stations
- Tent of meeting - holy
- Holy of holies: ark of the covenant representing God's throne and presence
- **VEIL: protection. God is present but access is restricted.

Leviticus begins with God calling to Moses from the tent.

- Spoiler: Numbers begins with God speaking to Moses in the tent

Doesn't happen automatically. Just before this section of Leviticus, Aaron's two sons waltz into God's presence, and they die. So how can holy God live among unholy people without destroying them?

SLIDE - Leviticus structure: rituals, priests, purity

The sacrifices, priests, washings, offerings, and regulations are not arbitrary hoops God invented to make Israel's worship complicated. The problem isn't that God doesn't want Israel near him. The problem is that sin makes direct access to God's holiness deadly. And yet, remarkably, God does not abandon his people. Instead, he provides a way.

At the center of Leviticus is the Day of Atonement - Yom Kippur. One goat is sacrificed as a sin offering. The other goat—the scapegoat—is brought before the Lord, and Aaron lays his hands on it and confesses Israel's sins over it. Then the goat is sent away into the wilderness. The picture is powerful: The people's sin is carried away from them. Israel cannot simply pretend sin doesn't matter. Instead, God provides a means by which their sin can be dealt with and their relationship with him restored.

But there is also a limitation. The curtain remains. The high priest enters the Most Holy Place, but only once a year. The people remain outside. The sacrifice must be repeated. The system provides access—but the gospels tell us how God brings us close enough that we may be one.

In Matthew 20:28, Jesus describes his mission: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus isn't merely saying that his death will be an inspiring example of sacrificial love. He is saying that his life will be given for others.

This is why the Last Supper is so significant. In Matthew 26, Jesus takes the cup and says that it is his blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Now the language of Leviticus comes rushing into the Gospel. Blood. Sacrifice. Covenant. Atonement. Forgiveness. Jesus is identifying his own death with the sacrificial system that Israel has known. Yet now Jesus becomes the sacrifice.

Matthew 27:50–51 gives us one of the most dramatic moments in the entire Gospel. Jesus cries out and dies. And immediately: "The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom."

SLIDE

That is not a random detail. Matthew wants us to see what Jesus' death means. The curtain had symbolized the separation between sinful humanity and the holy presence of God. And now, at the death of Jesus, the curtain is torn. Torn from top to bottom. It's not that humanity has finally figured out how to climb up to God. God has opened the way to us. The curtain is not torn because God's holiness has become less holy. It is torn because Jesus has dealt with sin.

SLIDE

Leviticus	Jesus
High priest	Jesus is our great mediator
Sacrifice	Jesus gives his own life
Blood of animals	Jesus' blood establishes the covenant
Day of Atonement	Jesus' death brings definitive atonement
Sin carried away	Jesus bears our sins
Limited access	The curtain is torn
Repeated sacrifices	Jesus offers himself once for all
God's presence behind the curtain	Access to God is opened

Leviticus wasn't a failed system. Leviticus was preparing Israel to understand what Jesus would accomplish.

A. We don't have to run from God

Sin naturally makes us want to hide. But the Gospel says that because of Jesus, God's invitation is not "Stay away." It is: Come. We come not because we are worthy. We come because Christ is worthy.

B. We don't have to earn access to God

We don't approach God by becoming good enough and accumulating enough religious achievements. Jesus has done what we could not do. Grace begins with God.

C. We can take holiness seriously without being afraid of God

Leviticus prevents us from reducing God to a harmless, comfortable deity. God is holy. But the cross prevents us from believing that his holiness means we must remain permanently distant. In Christ, the holy God becomes the God who welcomes sinners.

D. We respond in worship

A holy God has made a way for us to know him.

Jesus has given his life as a ransom.

His blood is poured out for the forgiveness of sins.

The curtain is torn.

God has made a way home.

Leviticus can seem like a book about rules. But underneath it is a stunning story: God wants to dwell with his people. And in Jesus the circle is complete. The curtain is torn in two. Come.