

We are spending time this morning with God's people Israel as they wander in the wilderness. It's a story I imagine that many of us know well – Israel was taken out of Egypt, delivered from slavery by the mighty arm of God. They were guided through the wilderness to the land God had promised to them; but once they got there, they feared the people of the land more than they trusted God, and so God sent them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. I think some of us read this as God simply waiting out an unfaithful generation, making sure that everyone from that group dies before they get a chance to try again; but God is doing so much more than that through this time of wandering. God spends time with his people – he works on them, teaches them, directs them on how to become his people in truth. He shows them, time and again, what it means to be His people, as He is their God.

This passage makes it clear for us that in this time of wandering and living in the wilderness, God still wants his people to learn something of how he is setting them apart for himself. In this case, what we are seeing is an explicit call to respect life and blood. Elsewhere in Leviticus we find calls to respect the lives of your fellow people. In this passage, we find calls to respect the lives of animals and sacrifices, which perhaps seems to be counter-intuitive to us. These animals are raised either to sacrifice to God or perhaps to eat themselves; why so much care for their lives? – but for Israel, this is just another reminder of who God is; he is the maker of all they know, he is the one who brought them out of slavery, he is the one who dwells with them and guides them through the wilderness through his literal presence at the Tent of Meeting; and he is holy. And as we can see time and again in Leviticus, the call for the people of Israel is to be holy, just as the Lord their God is holy. So even

as these particular commands might seem at times to be unnecessary or counter-intuitive, we are reminded that these are a holy God's words to his people, whom he has called to be holy. We also see in this passage a glimpse of the sacrifice to come; the blood that will one day be shed for the sins of the world.

Blood is very much the theme of what we've read today in Leviticus 17. I worked through a series last year on Leviticus as we went through Lent, building up toward Good Friday – and one of the things I heard a lot as we worked through that series was just how much blood would have been spilled for offerings. And to be fair, it is a ton of blood! One biblical story that gets brought up a lot in this context is the building and dedication of the temple by Solomon, David's son. That narrative tells us that Solomon offered sacrifices of 22,000 head of cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats. If all those animals were sacrificed at the altars, the people would have been wading in rivers of animal blood. That story also mentions that fire comes from heaven and consumes at least some of the burnt offerings and sacrifices, so perhaps not all those animals were sacrificed on the altars at the temple. However, it does say later in that story that the altars weren't large enough to hold all the sacrifices, so at least some of them were sacrificed in the ways prescribed by the law, pointing to the holiness of God; meaning there was still a lot of blood shed.

What we do see here is that while there is likely to be a ton of sacrifice in the Israelite camp, God's intention is not that there is blood being spilled all over the place. That appears to be what was happening at the time here, as God tells Moses that the point of all this is to pull the Israelites away from

making these sacrifices in the open fields. This serves two purposes here – it reminds the people of Israel who it is that they worship and make their offerings to by forcing them to bring their sacrifices to the Tent of Meeting, and it pulls them away from pagan religions. God makes mention of this in verse 7, where we read about the goat idols that the Israelites are apparently worshipping with these open-field rituals. That could mean any number of things; there were some Egyptians gods according to Egyptian mythology took the form of goats. Ba'al, the Canaanite god that the Israelites would be repeatedly seduced by throughout the times of the Judges and their kings, was sometimes depicted as having goat horns. It could be any of those things, it could be something else entirely – there's significant literature out there on these goat idols; some translations call them goat-demons. It's a fascinating little aside if you feel like jumping down a rabbit hole in your own study of Scripture. But the point here is that whatever these goat idols were, they were not God – and were not to be worshipped as gods in any sense. YHWH alone is Israel's God. The first commandment of the Ten is that there should be no other gods before YHWH, and that is reinforced here.

God is so insistent on this that he sets out a really strict command – that anyone who offers a sacrifice and fails to bring it to the Tent of Meeting needs to be cut off from Israel. That person could be a native Israelite, or that person could be someone who had joined the community and was learning to live among them. So even those people who were with Israel despite not strictly being Israelites themselves were held to this standard: if you are a part of God's people in any way, you are expected to follow God's laws in this regard.

You share in the people's joy, but you also must share in the responsibility for holiness and the worship of God alone.

Throughout the history of Scripture, we see often that God's people have difficulty with this idea that God alone is supposed to be worshipped. I alluded to it earlier, but we read a lot in the history of Israel about judges who not only rescued Israel from people who were oppressing them, but had to lead Israel through a time where they were constantly tempted to worship other gods. There's a consistent cycle in Judges: the people fall into idolatry and worship other Gods; God sends another nation to oppress them; Israel realizes the error of their ways and turn back to God; and God sends a judge to deliver Israel from these enemies and lead them in worship of him. Then the judge dies, Israel turns away from God again, and the cycle begins anew. It happens so many times. But even reading past Judges, we can find kings who sacrificed their children to other gods. We can find kings who decided that they could also be priests and therefore be God's representative to the people rather than the one charged with their rule. We find Christ warning people that they can't serve God and serve their pocketbooks. We find Paul warning against participating in pagan worship rituals. There would have been no need for these warnings if God's people were constantly keeping God's law and being holy because he is holy. The shedding of sacrificial blood was supposed to honour God's holiness and acknowledge a failure to live up to that, not honour other gods.

So blood was not supposed to be just shed all over the place; but in a specific area for a specific purpose. A person couldn't just amass a massive quantity of flocks and herds and then just kill a cow or a sheep whenever he

committed a sin; there was still the responsibility of confession before God's people to God's representatives at the tabernacle, the priests. There was still the solemnness of ceremony to acknowledge the sinfulness that required a sacrifice.

Out of that, then, we find this prohibition against eating meat with blood still in it; because blood itself had a purpose. Blood signified life, and if the Israelites were going to just disregard the presence of blood in an animal that could be sacrificed as atonement for their own sin, then they were disregarding the seriousness of their sin before a holy God. God is actually explicit about the role of blood in animals here – “the life of a creature is in its blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar, it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.” The price paid for atonement is not money, it is not good deeds. The price paid for atonement is life. It is an acknowledgment that Israel's failure to remain holy before their holy God should have led to their collective death; but that God, in his mercy, gave them a way to be reconciled to him. If they were going to be flippant about that, then what was the point? And so we see this prohibition against eating blood, a prohibition that actually dates back to Noah.

Even the idea of hunting is not exempted from this, even if the purpose is different! God gave his people the animals he had created for food, and killing an animal back then was not for sacrifice, but for sustenance. Yet this rule, this prohibition against eating the blood of the animal, was not lifted. God's people did not eat blood. This idea of blood as life permeated all through Israelite society. In this time of wandering, in this wilderness period where God was shaping and molding them, they were also coming to

understand not just that blood was shed on their behalf, but why blood was being shed on their behalf: they were sinful people, not fully able to keep the law as given to them. They were unable to stand before a holy God with their sinful hearts – and yet God made a way for them to do so, a way that would point ahead towards Calvary, towards the sacrifice he himself would make for the sins of the world.

And it's that pointing ahead that really drives this home for us today. We know that those laws prohibiting the eating of blood are relaxed for us. God told Peter in Acts 10 to not call unclean what God had made clean, and Paul tells his hearers in Romans 14 that eating is one of those things that we can have some room for grace on: "One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them." So there's no need for us to look at this passage and decide that we'd better find the kosher aisle at the grocery store, or make sure that steak is well done when you cook it. As a medium rare steak enjoyer, this does make me happy.

No, people of God, this call to consider life calls us to consider the one who gave his life for us. Consider the one who was not only the great high priest, but the sacrifice offered for the atonement of all our sins. People of God – consider Jesus. The writer of Hebrews reminds of this all throughout Hebrews 9; and as much as I'd love to reach the whole section for you, let me just take a couple of verses. Here's verses 12-14: "He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for

all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” It is the shedding of Christ’s blood which buys our entry into the presence of God. It is the love of Christ for us sinners which not only allows us to come before the throne of God, but invites us to do so. His blood was shed so that ours is not demanded of us.

Praise be to God, who not only calls us to holiness, but sent his Son to die that we might receive it. Praise be to God, who leads us through our journeys in the wilderness and uses those times to teach, sharpen, and strengthen us for the tasks he has prepared in advance for us to do. Praise be to God. Amen.