

Holy Lord ... Holy Gifts ... Holy People

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"Then God said, 'Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground' (Exodus 3:5).

Moses was in wilderness watching over his father-in-law's sheep. There was nothing extraordinary about that. But as Moses tended to that very ordinary task something extraordinary took place. Before his very eyes, the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire that burned from a bush without consuming the bush. Moses was caught off guard, taken by surprise. How could this bush burn without being reduced to ashes? He turns to gaze at this wondrous sight. Out of that flame the Lord spoke, calling Moses by name. God says to Moses, "Do not draw near...take off your shoes for you are standing on holy ground." Holy ground. It is God's ground; His space. "Our God is a consuming fire," says the Letter to the Hebrews, yet the bush is not consumed. The fire is the manifestation of the Lord's presence, that is, of His holiness.

God alone is holy. Regin Prenter writes "God is holy. This statement is the starting point for any thing of man's sanctity. God has manifested His holiness among men in Jesus Christ, His only Son, made man" (Man's Concern With Holiness, 124). Thus we sing in the Gloria in Excelsis: "For Thou only art holy." Likewise the Sanctus confesses the Holy God who comes to us in the body and blood of His Son to cleanse us from our sins: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth; Heav'n and earth are full of Thy glory." It was for this reason, incidentally, that Luther placed the Sanctus after the Consecration in his German Mass to confess the real presence of the holy God with sinners.

The liturgy simply echoes the Scripture as over and over again the Scriptures tell us that God is holy. Old Testament scholar John Kleinig notes: "The Lord alone was inherently and permanently holy. His holiness was in a sense the essence of His being. It was inseparable from Him and His presence. It followed then that all other holiness derived from Him, and was available only by way of contact with Him, like electricity from a battery" ("Sharing in God's Holiness" Lutheran Theological Review, Fall/Winter 1995, 107).

God reveals His holiness to Moses in the fire of the burning bush. This gives us an insight into the nature of God's holiness. It is the nature of fire to be either beneficial or destructive. Take for example, that great mass of flame, the sun. The sun can scorch the earth, causing plants to wither and die. Or the sun can radiate warmth causing plants to grow and be fruitful. It all depends on the on occupying the right position in relationship to the sun. So also with God and His holiness. If one is positioned in unbelief and sin over against the holiness of God, His holiness is a fire that destroys. But if one stands before God on His own terms, that is, in faith, God's holiness is flame that generates the warmth of mercy, bestowing light and life.

In his book, *The Trivalization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*, Donald McCullough writes "God is not safe, but God is good, very good. For the dangerous otherness is

a transcendent, loving commitment not to be separate- a threat to our egos that establishes our true selves, a danger that is our only safety. 'Our God is a consuming fire' (Hebrews 12:29). As children we were told not to play with matches, and as adults we treat fire with caution. We must. Fire demands respect for its regal estate: it will not be touched, it will be approached with care, and it wields its scepter for ill or for good. With one spark it can condemn a forest to ashes and a home to memory as ghostly as the smoke rising from the charred remains of the family album. Or with a single flame it can crown a candle with power to warm a romance and set to dancing a fireplace blaze that defends against the cold. Fire is dangerous to be sure, but we cannot live without it; fire destroys but it also sustains life" (The Trivialization of God, 68). So also the holiness of the God who is to be feared, loved, and trusted above all things.

For many, even the word "holy" is a red flag kind of word. Many people confuse holiness with morality or a particularly strict and dour lifestyle like that espoused by the Pietists of the 17th century, the Methodists of the 18th century, and the so-called Pentecostal Holiness Churches in our own day. Holiness is then seen as something we do or achieve, like the self-appointed evangelist who claimed not to have sinned in over ten years. But I suspect there is another reason that we may have trouble with the biblical language of holiness. Perhaps we have been influenced the cultural secularism that maintains nothing is holy, that is, nothing really belongs to God. Not the unborn baby in its mother's womb who is granted life only if the mother so chooses. Marriage is being redefined so as to ignore the fact that God established it as a life-long union of fidelity between one man and one woman. Men and women are encouraged to view their bodies as toys rather than as temples of the Holy Spirit. And we have Dr. Kevorkian to take care of those toys once they break.

Now this is not detached from what we see happening in many churches. Church buildings in their very design were once built to reflect the fact that here we come into the presence of Holy God. The chancel was lifted up giving prominence to the altar as the symbol of the Lord's presence. An altar rail draws a line between God and the world. The Baptismal font was given a prominent place, often near the door of the church reminding worshipers that we have access to God only through the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism. Stained glass windows illustrated the holy history of our salvation. Nowadays church buildings are designed that look very secular, like auditoriums. And it is no wonder that the things which transpire within them have little connection with heavenly realities. Ministers act as though they were talk show hosts, not stewards of the mysteries of God. Homemade liturgies tell us more about the creativity of those who devised them than they do about the Triune God. The practice of closed communion is dismissed as downright unfriendly as in some churches all are invited to belly up to the altar without regard to catechesis, confession, and pastoral care. Indeed we may say, "Is nothing holy any more?"

What has happened? David Wells, professor of systematic theology at Gordon Conwell Seminary has authored three immensely insightful books on the church and culture: *No Place for the Truth* (1993), *God in the Wastelands* (1994), and just this year, *Losing Our Virtue :Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* in which he helps us understand the loss of the holy in contemporary American churches. In *God in the Wastelands*, Wells notes that holiness has become irrelevant in many of our churches. Wells writes "The church has succumbed to the seductions of our therapeutic culture, and in that context it seems quite natural to favor the relational dimensions over the moral dimensions, mysticism over cognitive conviction, self-fulfillment over personal surrender, self-image over character, pluralistic religious equality over

the uniqueness of the Christian faith. When all is said and done, modernity dispatches the God who is outside, and all that remains is the God who is inside" (136). This culture then shapes the life of the church. In his most recent book, Wells provides this analysis: "The wisdom common to many of our marketers is that, if it wants to attract customers, the Church should stick to a positive and uplifting message. It should avoid speaking of negative matters like sin. Not only so, but what has distinguished the Church in its appearance and functions should now be abandoned. In order to be attractive to people today, church buildings should not look that different from corporate headquarters, malls, or country clubs. Crosses and robes should go; dress should be casual; hymns should be contemporary and empty of the theological substance by which previous generations lived, because this is incomprehensible today; pews should be replaced by cinema-grade seats, organs by synthesizers and drums, solemnity by levity, reflection by humor, and sermons by light dialogues or catchy readings. The theory is that people will buy Christianity if they don't have to deal with what the Church has traditionally been" (201).

Entertainment is a poor substitute for reverence. Neil Postman worries over how the entertainment industry has influenced education, politics, and religion in North America. Cornelius Plantinga Jr draws on Postman's analysis and describes what happens when church services seek to entertain rather than lead worshipers to stand on the holy ground of God's saving presence: "Naturally services of this kind give an impression of a religion somewhat different from historic Christianity. One could imagine a visitor walking away from such a service and saying to himself: 'I had it all wrong. I had thought Christianity included a shadow side-confession, self-denial, rebuke of sin, concern with heresy, willingness to lose one's life for the sake of Jesus Christ. Not so, apparently. The Christian religion isn't about lament or repentance or humbling oneself before God to receive God's favor. It's not about the hard, disciplined work of mortifying our sinful self and learning to make God's purposes our own. It's not about the inevitable failures in this project and the persistent grace of Jesus Christ that comes so that we might begin again. Not at all! I had it all wrong! The Christian faith is mainly about celebration and fun and personal growth and five ways to boost my self-esteem. And especially, it's about entertainment" (Not the Way Its Suppose to Be :A Breviary of Sin, 193).

God is not present to entertain or amuse us but to save us. There is a Holy God and He calls us to stand on holy ground. Our sin and God's holiness is a deadly combination. When God's holiness and man's sin mix there you have an explosion and it is not God who gets burned. Or does He? A Holy God whose passion it is to have a holy people stand in His presence for all eternity sent His Son into this world to take on all of our sin, all that makes us unholy, all that alienates us from His holy presence, to take all of that on Himself. As the sacrifices were consumed by fire in the Old Testament Temple, so the Lord Jesus Christ offers Himself in our place. He is the Lamb of God basted with the juices of our sin and roasted over the flames of God's wrath in our stead. He becomes the holocaust - the whole burnt offering that takes away our sin. His holy blood shed on the cross of Calvary cleanses us from all sin and makes us holy people, a "holy nation" as Peter calls us in his first Epistle. In His flesh, Jesus is the very Temple of God and those who are joined to Him in Holy Baptism are made members of His royal priesthood, sanctified by His blood to offer spiritual sacrifices.

Holy people live holy lives. Luther's doctrine of vocation begs to be rediscovered in our church. That doctrine is the setting and the context for both the doctrine of the royal priesthood and the doctrine of sanctification. This can be seen from Luther's treatise of 1520, On the Freedom of the Christian. Wilhelm Maurer called this writing "the most perfect expression of Luther's

Reformation understanding of the mystery of Christ" (quoted in E. Juengel, *The Freedom of a Christian: Luther's Significance for Contemporary Theology*, 20). In this treatise, Luther defends dual propositions: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (AE 31:344). Faith lives in the freedom of Christ Jesus. Love lives a life of service to the neighbor.

Yet faith and works of love must be distinguished. Listen to Luther "Good words do not make a good man, but a good man does good works; evil works do not make a wicked man, but a wicked man does evil works. Consequently it is always necessary that the substance or person himself be good before there can be any good works, and that good works follow and proceed from the good person, as Christ also says 'A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit' (Matt. 7:18). It is clear that fruits do not bear the tree and that the tree does not grow on the fruits, also on the contrary, the trees bear fruits and the fruits grow on the trees"(AE 31:361).

In other words the vocation or calling of the Christian faith is a double calling. It is first of all, the call to faith. It is the calling of the third article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord or come to him but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel..." It is also a calling to live the holy life of love within the creational structures of this world. Thus Luther places the "Table of Duties" as an appendix to the six chief parts of the Small Catechism to demonstrate where it is that the Christian empties himself to live a life of love, not for the sake of salvation but for the sake of the neighbor.

There is no better summary of this understanding than in the conclusion of Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian*: "We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor" (AE 31:371). Now Luther gives this theological insight liturgical expression in the post-communion collect which he prepared for the 1526 German Mass and which has found a place in nearly every Lutheran order:

We give thanks to you, almighty God, that you have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore you that of your mercy you would strengthen us through the same in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever (LW, 153)

The holy gifts -the forgiveness of sins, the life, and the salvation-which we receive in the Divine Service hallow us for they are the fruits of Christ's redeeming sacrifice. Here we see the heart of the Lutheran understanding of liturgy. Liturgy is not our response to God. It is not the "work of the people" as the Second Vatican Council defined. Liturgy is divine service, God's service, Gottesdienst. Faith receives all that Christ gives in and through His words and supper. The liturgy, in fact, draws us outside of ourselves to live in Christ by faith alone.

Our vocation in the world is an extension of Divine Service. The Lord's gifts bear fruit in lives which are lived in fervent love for the neighbor. The Introduction to Lutheran Worship puts it like this, "Finally his blessing moves us out into our calling, where his gifts have their fruition" (LW, 6). Carter Lindberg has noted that Luther re-located the sacrifice, moving it from the chancel and putting it in the world. This is in keeping with Romans 12:1 where the Apostle

writes "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."

Anyone who would have read or heard these apostolic words in their original setting in the first century would have been jolted. Paul writes of a "living sacrifice" and everybody in the ancient world knew that sacrifices were dead! Jerusalem's temple resembled a slaughter house more than a church and the priest looked more like a butcher than a proper clergyman. Paul writes that Christians are to present their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God because the death has already taken place. Christ has died as the one atoning sacrifice. His blood is the propitiation for the sin of the world (Rom. 3:24-25). His death was a death for sin. In Holy Baptism we have been joined to that death. Baptism is not a death for sin but a death to sin. Listen to the Apostle in Romans 6 "Or do you not know that as many of us were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in the newness of life."

This understanding of vocation is grounded in the liturgy where our holy God first serves us with His holy gifts. Here God bends down to us sinners to bestow on us the righteousness won for us by the obedient life and atoning blood of His Son. Salvation was accomplished on the cross but it is distributed to us in the preaching of the Holy Gospel, Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and the Holy Supper. It is only through these holy gifts which are received in faith that we have access to the holiness of God.

When we come to church we set foot on holy ground. Not in a magical sense, but because here in this place the same God who appeared to Moses on Horeb in the burning bush is coming to us in His Word and Supper and where He makes Himself present, there is holy ground. We come with the Prayer which the Holy Son of God Himself has taught us to pray: "Hallowed by Thy name," knowing that "God's name is indeed holy in itself; but we pray in this petition that it may be holy among us also." And then remember the Catechism goes on to answer the question "How is this done?" saying: "When the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we as the children of God, also lead a holy life according to it. This grant us, dear Father in heaven. But he that teaches and lives otherwise than God's Word teaches, profanes the name of God among us. From this preserve us, Heavenly Father."

Moses took off His shoes to stand in the presence of God. We do not take off our shoes, but we do lay aside our sin. And laying aside our sin, we come to this Holy Communion to receive the holy body and holy blood of the Lamb of God who makes us holy people. We are standing on holy ground in the companionship of angels, archangels, and the whole company of heaven. We conclude with a pastoral word from Hermann Sasse: "We can desire nothing more beautiful and greater for our parishioners than that they be present when the Holy Supper is celebrated according to the institution of Jesus Christ; when a believing congregation gathers around the altar to receive the true body and blood of our Lord. Only then will the Church, the Gospel, the Church of the pure doctrine remain among us, and only then. But the Church will then remain and the gates of hell shall not overcome her. And especially then, when a congregation is gathered around her altar in the deepest faith in the One who is her Lord and head-because He is her Redeemer-when she begins to sing the Kyrie and the Gloria and lifts up her heart to heaven, and with all angels and archangels and the entire hosts of the heavenly multitude she sings 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' then will the Church truly be a house of God, a place of the real presence of Christ

in the midst of a boisterous and unholy world. And then the words will apply to her, "The Lord is in His Holy Temple! Let all the world be still before Him" (Lutherische Kircke, 1939 -Vol.21, Number 5).

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