

August 24 & 25, 2024

---

## Will You Go to

### Homecoming with Me? | A New Way

John 2:13-25, Zechariah 14:20-21

Pastor Paul Dean

---

If you've ever been in a deep relationship with someone where the words "I love you" are going to be said by someone in that relationship at some point, whoever is the bravest, to break out that three letter phrase, basically has only one hope – that the other would hear it and respond with "I love you too." Any other response is a tough one to hear.

In many ways the whole idea of worship is a love proclamation between God and us. A love fest, a gathering of love to give thanks. Or at least that is what God is calling us too. So, in order put today's text in perspective lets travel back about 3500 years ago – give or take. And start with how the earliest people of God worshipped and what it meant, which was centered around ritual animal sacrifice.

Ritual animal sacrifice, organ and fat burning and of course the splashing of blood on altars all in the name of worshiping God can be quite offensive to our modern imaginations. So much so that sometimes we are tempted to sanitize scripture. The further away we get from our own food sources, especially animal protein, the more bizarre and off putting the practice of animal sacrifice can be. Not to mention the sensibilities of our vegan or our vegetarian brothers and sisters.

So, let's start with the whole idea of animal sacrifice and the whole blood deal. If your world view is of a deity that is separate from creation, somehow controls it but is off in the distance somewhere then something must be given – sacrificed to keep this deity on your team, to keep this deity happy, to remind this deity to send rain when needed, to stop the rain when needed, to bring and sustain fertility in your tribe, nation and your crops and animals. The thought was the deity would get hungry and if you didn't feed it the deity would find some way of punishing you. The whole

practice was covered in guilt, shame, fear, appeasement and was purely transactional. But you never really knew if you were loved.

And what could you give to a deity that would be important enough for them to pay attention to – the most precious thing on earth – life itself – which is why blood was so important. Blood is the essence of life. It's why Jesus in his communion instructions says – "shed in my blood". Jesus is giving us his very self, his very essence. All that he has.

When the Israelites in the book of Exodus try to gain freedom from Egypt part of the motivation is go out and worship – animal sacrifice – to God. But when they are freed, they are essentially retrained on why, how and for what purpose worship exists. God takes a well-known worship practice, animal sacrifice, something that the Israelites would have known and been comfortable with and changes the whole deal. God uses worship not as a judging, condemning or appeasing exercise, but as a gift, a gift that removes any doubt about God's love for these people.

The first three chapters in the book of Leviticus outlines these instructions and begin with three different types of sacrifices. And these first three types of sacrifices are voluntary. That is correct – voluntary – it's a totally mind-blowing concept. Again – don't get sidetracked by the worship style of animal sacrifice – understand what God is trying to do with these people.

God gives these people a forum, a mechanism, a ritual to first know that they are one with God. They are not under the thumb of a wrathful God, but they can know for sure that they are loved because they can see it and smell it. There is no mistaking what is going on.

So, these first three types of sacrifices are voluntary, they assure the people that they are loved but these sacrifices also give the people a chance to express joy. God is training these former oppressed slaves how to express joy and God says this is for everyone. This is not for a small group of people, but for all. And for all it meant the wealthy

who would bring a bull, the middle class who would bring a goat or sheep, poor a bird and if you didn't have that, wheat flour. At the foot of God's altar, everyone was welcome.

And these sacrifices outlined in the book of Leviticus were rituals to bring people close to God, closer to one another and a way to express joy and thanksgiving. They were not to appease and angry God. We will dig more deeply into the book of Leviticus sometime next year.

However, just like with anything, human beings didn't trust the story of God's love and purpose for them and one another, and so the ritual of animal sacrifice – their worship style – began to become corrupt and controlled, becoming more consumeristic, transactional and twisted back to appeasement – and by the time 530 BC rolls around you have one of our last prophets, joining his voice with the prophets that came before him criticizing temple worship.

So, with that backdrop – which is only scratching the surface, let's begin with our scripture readings. The first is from the prophet Zechariah chapter 14:20-21. Zechariah was written about 530 years before the birth of Jesus. In this part of Jewish history, a group of Jews (called the remnant) have returned out of exile to resettle the land and rebuild the temple. Zechariah finds himself, in this time period, following a long line of prophets, criticizing disobedience but also points to a future time of what the temple will become.

*<sup>20</sup> On that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, "Holy to the LORD." And the cooking pots in the house of the LORD shall be as holy as the bowls in front of the altar; <sup>21</sup> and every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and use them to boil the flesh of the sacrifice. And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.*  
(Zechariah 14:20-21 NRS)

So, what is Zechariah saying about these cooking pots and bowls. He is proclaiming that there will be a day where the ordinary and the holy become

one. It's all holy. The sacred space of the temple expands to include all, and because of that, there will not be a need for traders who acted as "middlemen" in the temple. The space between God and humans will shrink. Bringing the focus back to prayer and healing and wholeness between God and one another. But Jesus was about to bring the prophet Zechariah words in focus. This is what reads in the gospel of John.

*<sup>13</sup> The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup> Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. <sup>16</sup> He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" <sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." <sup>18</sup> The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" <sup>19</sup> Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." <sup>20</sup> The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" <sup>21</sup> But he was speaking of the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup> After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. <sup>23</sup> When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. (John 2:13-23 NRS)*

In this one movement Jesus brings an end to transactional worship, transactional relationship between God and humanity that had built up over centuries of not trusting the story of God's abundant goodness. Jesus is going to do the work of it all. There will not be a need for money changers, no middlemen transactions here. Actually, that whole transactional cycle is over. In God in Jesus Christ does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. The Apostle Paul tries to capture this new reality.

<sup>6</sup> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person-- though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup> Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. (Romans 5:6-9 NRS)

God who sees us and calls us good. Do we trust the story, a story written by our God who sends out the first I love you and is waiting for us to say – I love you too.

Now we not only get caught up in the whole idea of blood, but we can also get caught up with the idea of God's wrath. We will dig more deeply when we get to the prophets next year as well but please, please do not think of wrath in human terms. God takes displeasure with injustice, on the sin of injustice and it's usually the injustices we bring upon each other. There is a difference – we are not talking about people either but the unjust actions or the unjust inactions of humanity. Paul is saying that while we were unworthy, while we were sinning, while we were unjust, while we were not good enough, Christ covers it all. We are ransomed back – and we are not ransomed from a wrathful, angry God but from sin, even evil itself.

You see, a sacrificial religious system, no matter how well intentioned, can be twisted into a system that tells us that we are not good enough. In that system it is up to us to ransom ourselves back, and not just from sin but from an angry God – which we can never do. And by the way God is not Santa Claus who is making lists and checking it to see who has been naughty or nice.

Brennan Manning Story – woman seeing visions of Jesus– arch bishop comes to investigate – next time you have visions ask Jesus what my sins were the last time I gave confession – she says ok – a little while passes and the woman has visions again so the arch bishop asks what did Jesus say – and the woman takes the arch bishop hand and says – Jesus exact words were – I don't remember.

This is good news. This is the gospel. This is what we are inviting people to here at Prince of Peace. That is our God – not angry – not petty – not vindictive – but a God who loves us – who sacrifices – who closes the gap – a God who knows us – a