Walking in the Ditch

*Leviticus 19:2, “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”*

 God the Father says, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Jesus says, “You must be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect!” Tall orders. Again, Jesus tells us to do the impossible. How can you be holy? Come to think of it, what does “holiness” even mean?!

 Isaiah once had a vision. And in that vision, God shows us what holiness looks like. Isaiah’s in the temple, but this doesn’t look like your average Sunday morning service. There are no donuts. There’s no handshaking. Isaiah walks into church. He passes through the narthex and into the sanctuary and God is seated on a throne right in front of Him. He’s so enormous that the hem of His robe floods out the building. And above Him stand two seraphim. Each have six wings: two to fly, two to cover their faces, and two to cover their feet.

 But it’s always struck me how odd it is that they cover themselves. Why cover their faces? Why hide their feet? They give us the answer. They call back and forth to one another in a terrifying liturgy. “Holy, Holy, Holy is YHWH, God of armies!” Even these holy, heavenly beings hide themselves from this God who is Holy, Holy, Holy. It’s amazing. In the whole Bible, *none* of God’s attributes are given so much weight. He isn’t called loving, loving, loving, or mighty, mighty, mighty. No, there’s only *one* attribute that’s given three-fold force. God isn’t just holy. He isn’t even holy, holy. He is Holy, Holy, Holy!

 Well, if the sinless angels cover themselves in God’s presence, how do you think you would react? I imagine you’d have the same response as Isaiah. He crumples. He falls on his face and cries out, “Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, YHWH of armies!” Never before has Isaiah seen his sin so clearly. Never before has he realized how *unholy*, how filthy he is. Now he’s in the presence of the God who is holy, holy, holy . . . and it almost kills him.

 But just when Isaiah starts to fear his death, God gives him a gift. One of those terrifying seraphs flies to him carrying a burning coal in a set of tongs. He presses the coal against Isaiah’s lips. And the angel thunders, “Your guilt is taken away. Your sin is forgiven.” Instantly, Isaiah is freed from his sin. He’s freed from the guilt that crushed him in God’s presence. He’s pure, spotless, blameless. Now *he* is holy and he can stand in the presence of the God who is Holy, Holy, Holy.

 Has not God done the same for you? Hasn’t that searing coal touched your lips in the absolution? Hasn’t He released your guilt in the Supper? Oh, He has cleansed you – not with a burning coal, but with the blood of His Son. You are *pure*. You are *holy*. And *you* may stand in the presence of the God who is Holy, Holy, Holy.

 A man was walking down the lonely road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jesus doesn’t tell us his name or his age. He doesn’t tell us his ethnicity. He doesn’t even tell us his religion. We know literally nothing about this man. Neither do the men who jump him, beat, rob, and strip him. They leave him near death in a muddy ditch.

 Along comes a priest. Now here is a truly holy man. We know more about him than we do about the guy dying on the side of the road. He sees the man. He pauses, wondering what he should do. His anxious mind races through the options and their consequences. His heart pulls him to have compassion. But he hardens his heart and looks away. He straightens his shoulders and walks on. Sometime later a Levite passes near the place too. Here is another holy man, a man from the tribe God had set aside to be priests for His people. The Levite does exactly the same thing as the priest. He crosses to the other side of the road.

 Good for them. The priest and the Levite always get a raw deal. Maybe they got it right. They know their God is Holy, Holy, Holy! They know from Isaiah that *nothing* unclean or impure can stand in His presence. So there’s no way they’re going to help this guy. They’d be stupid to risk it.

 They weren’t being jerks. They were simply trying to keep in good with God. They knew that they were God’s holy people. And if they wanted to remain God’s holy people, they would have to keep the Old Testament purity laws *to the letter*! They didn’t want to risk touching blood or, even worse, touching a corpse. Either of those two would make them “impure”, “unclean”. They’d be prohibited from entering the temple, unable to go before God’s presence.

 “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” So God spoke through His servant Moses. They were supposed to be holy, sinless, free from any spot, or wrinkle, or blemish, or stain, or mark of any kind. That was their calling – holiness.

 It’s ours too, isn’t it? Aren’t you and I called to be holy? Jesus has forgiven your sins. You can stand in the presence of the mighty God whose glory fills the temple! And now you are to live a holy life. That’s what Jesus has been telling us to do throughout His Sermon on the Mount. God is Holy, Holy, Holy and we are supposed to reflect that holiness.

 So the woman who supports abortion, or even worse, has *had* an abortion . . . I can’t be friends with her. The guy who sleeps around . . . Oh, I shouldn’t talk with him. The alcoholic . . . I don’t want that influence on my life. I don’t want anything to do with the Atheist, the Muslim, the homeless guy, the transsexual. I won’t risk it. I don’t want to lose my purity. I don’t want to lose my holiness.

 The man is still lying in the ditch. He’ll die in a few hours if someone doesn’t stop the bleeding. Then along comes a Samaritan. He doesn’t hesitate. He climbs down in the mud. He touches the man’s cuts and lacerations. He cleans and binds the wounds. He takes him to an inn and pays for all the medical bills. What a fool. It cost him too much – time, money, even reputation. What a fool. The priest and the Levite – they’re still clean. They don’t get dirty. They don’t lose their purity or dignity. They hold onto their money and their time. They’re much more reasonable about it all.

 But Jesus doesn’t praise the priest or the Levite. He doesn’t commend them for maintaining their cleanliness or reasonableness. He doesn’t praise their efforts to stay pristine. Jesus praises the Samaritan. He praises the fool. He praises the one guy who got down into the ditch. He praises the one who loved his neighbor as much as he loved himself.

 “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Some believe that the highest call of the Christian is to avoid sin at all cost. We think that’s all God really requires of us – that we don’t do unholy things. But that falls so far short of what Jesus actually calls us to do.

 Jesus never said that if someone hits you, you have the right to hit them back. Jesus never said that if someone persecutes you, you should shout back at him and try to belittle him too. That would be just, wouldn’t it? You’d have the right do get even, wouldn’t you? An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But Jesus says that pure justice isn’t enough. Jesus says that if someone hits you, expose your other cheek too. Jesus says that if someone robs you, offer him more. Jesus says if someone persecutes you, love him and pray for him. The call to holiness isn’t just a call to cleanliness. It’s not simply a call to live a sterile and pristine life.

 Perhaps, then, we need to rethink what the word “holy” actually means. Perhaps it has far greater depth than Jesus’ audience realized. Apparently, the call to holiness isn’t just a call to sterility, purity, cleanness. It isn’t just a call to live a bleached life. Apparently, in God’s eyes, true holiness is purity and *mercy*.

 After all, wasn’t Jesus holy in exactly this way? Jesus was pure. He was sinless, the spotless Lamb of God. But He didn’t shun sinners. He ate with them. He was pure but He didn’t avoid outcasts. He made them His disciples. Jesus turned His cheek to those who hit Him. He prayed for those who killed Him. Jesus jumped into the ditch to save dying people. He jumped into the ditch to save *you*. What a fool. It cost Him far too much – His dignity, His reputation, power, wealth, even His life. What a fool. Yet that is how He saved you. That’s how He made you holy.

 When you see Jesus, when you look at the cross, you see that God is truly Holy, Holy, Holy. When you see Jesus, when you look at the cross, you see that God is truly mercy, mercy, mercy. That’s the life He calls you to. He has called you to show mercy. It could be to your spouse. It could be to a stranger. It doesn’t matter. God has called you to a life of mercy. Not just reasoned or carefully calculated mercy. Not just painless mercy. Jesus calls you to be a fool like Him. He calls you to reckless, careless mercy, costly mercy. He calls you to climb down into ditches to show mercy to your neighbor. That is the full meaning of holiness.

 “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” This was as much a statement of fact as it was a command. You *are* holy. Jesus had mercy on you. He didn’t leave you to die. He jumped into the ditch with you. He died on the cross for you. He forgives your every sin. He erases your guilt. This is how we know what holiness truly entails. The call to holiness is more than a call to cleanliness. It is also a call to deep and profound mercy. It is a call to be a fool like Jesus, whose mercy to you endures forever. Amen.