

“Our God is a consuming fire!” 2 Sam 6:1-15

“David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim. And they carried the ark of God on a new cart and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. And Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart, with the ark of God, and Ahio went before the ark. And David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the LORD, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God. And David was angry because the LORD had broken out against Uzzah. And that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. And David was afraid of the LORD that day, and he said, “How can the ark of the LORD come to me?” So, David was not willing to take the ark of the LORD into the city of David. But David took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. And the ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months, and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household. And it was told King David, “The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God.” So, David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing. And when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six steps, he sacrificed an ox and a fattened animal. And David danced before the LORD with all his might. And David was wearing a linen ephod. So, David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the horn.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

There is something that we need to know, something that we tend to forget about our Triune God. What is that? “God struck Uzzah down ... because of his error, and he died ... beside the ark of God.” And when did that happen?

When the king David and all the house of Israel were gladly bringing the ark of the Lord to Jerusalem. “David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the Lord, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals...” ... and then it happened.

“Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down.” And ... dead he was. What do you make of this?

We think so much of ourselves, especially we, mighty and all-knowing people of the 21st century that we tend to forget who we are and who our God is. How often we hear the language of “Jesus is my buddy” or “my friend Jesus”. Doesn’t sound very respectful. But there is one description that is most often applied to our God in the Bible. Do you know what it is? Holy. Our God is holy. He is the Holy One.

Yes, but what does that mean and how does it matter for us today? These are two things that we will try to unpack today. **First**, what does this mean that our God is holy and, **second**, how does it matter for us today?

So, holy... what does this mean? How can we explain it? The answer is – we can't. There is nothing that is holy in entire creation. There is nothing that would help us to say... you know “holy” is like this or that.

Because our God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is the only One who is holy. Holiness is His divinity, His power, His very nature. “Holy, holy, holy...” as we sing together with angels and archangels and all the saints.

But what can we then know about God's holiness? There are a few things. Remember, where was our God in the very beginning as we read Genesis 1 to 3? Yes, He was together with the first human beings. And then, when they had turned away from their Creator, they were expelled from the garden.

Later, in the book of Exodus, God provides sort of explanation. He says that no one, meaning – no one sinful can see Him and live (Ex 33:20). Why? Because nothing sinful can stand in the presence of the Holy God... and live.

Think about the imagery of fire. This is, by the way, how our God describes Himself – He is a consuming fire. How to picture that? Remember the mount Sinai? Israel saw and heard their God when He revealed Himself to them.

Close your eyes, if you wish, and pray that the Holy Spirit would help you to imagine and experience what the Word of God retells us: “Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder...

... when people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” Terrifying account... the Jews still remembered it with trembling even 15 centuries later (Heb 12:18-21).

There are quite a few similar testimonies in the Bible that describe the presence of the Holy God as consuming fire, as terrifying and frightening experience where those who are privileged to witness those revelations lose their strength and fall on the ground like dead. Exposed to just a glimpse of God's holiness.

But our Holy God desires to be with us, with His people, He desires to bless us, He desires to share His holiness with us. And this is where the problem becomes obvious. He desires to be with us, but – no one can see our God and live.

This is where our Holy God Himself comes up with His solution. Have you ever wondered about the books of Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers, why do they spend so much time describing things which seem irrelevant to us?

Building of the tabernacle, the fine details of their worship practices and all the many instructions for sacrifices and so on and on. Why to spend so much space in the very central part of the five books of Moses, the Torah, why to delve in such details about something that simply doesn't make sense to us?

The answer is very simple. Our Holy God wanted to be with us and bless us. But His presence, His holiness is never neutral. The imagery of fire is indeed helpful. Fire can bring you warmth and light and purification, if used properly, or – it can bring terrible destruction if used carelessly and without understanding.

It is similarly also with God's holiness. It can either bring life and prosperity and well-being and abundant blessings if received according to God's instructions, or – God's wrath and destruction if we encounter it on our own terms.

This is why all the detailed instructions. So that the Holy God could dwell among His people and share His holiness with them in such a way that the power of His holiness doesn't destroy them, but bring them life and well-being.

Leviticus 10 describes another frightening testimony. The two sons of Aaron, the freshly chosen high priest, they also were consecrated to share God's holiness with His people. But they decided to encounter God's holiness on their own terms.

Next moment ... "fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord" (Lev 10:2). God's servants, the sons of the high priest... consumed and dead! These testimonies are written for our sake, so that we fear our Holy Lord and carefully listen and follow His instructions.

This, by the way was the main responsibility of Aaron and the priests – to teach people of God how to approach to the Holy God and how to share in His holiness in such a way that God's holiness would bring them blessings and prosperity.

What they taught should sound familiar to us. God's people would come to the place appointed by the Holy God. By His presence the Holy God would consecrate certain things, like the ark or altar and the holy meals and they would become holy. Then through these holy things He would communicate His holiness to His people.

People would need to prepare themselves properly. Proper preparation involved repentance and then forgiveness. Once forgiven and purified of their sins, they were allowed into God's presence.

Sacrificial animals would be placed on the holy altar and then they would become holy meals. By partaking in these holy meals in God's presence, the Holy God would communicate to His people His holiness and thus would bless them.

Disregard or ignore God's instructions and instead of blessings came wrath and death. As in case of Aaron's sons. As in case with Uzzah. If you read the first chapters on the book of Numbers, especially chapter 4, you will see how carefully and repeatedly God instructed how the ark of the covenant had to be treated so that no one would suffer. But... Uzzah disregarded God's instructions.

He treated God's holy things on his terms, He came in contact with God's holiness and ... the Lord struck him dead. This much about God's holiness. We will do well to remember, that He is a consuming fire and nothing good can come to us if we encounter His holiness disregarding His instructions.

Fine, you may say, all of that happened in the OT times. **What has this to do with us?** Everything. Everything, dear brothers and sisters. In the OT times the glory of the Lord descended on the Mount Sinai. Then He indwelt in the Tabernacle. Then in the Temple built by Solomon, again – according to God's careful instructions.

But then the fullness of God indwelt in His Son, in Jesus Christ. The Holy God, the Holy One came to us as one of us. On the last evening, before His death and resurrection, He gave us a gift. He gave us something holy.

Yes, the Holy Communion. He gave us this holy meal through which He promised to be with us and to bless us, and to share His holiness with us. What was foreshadowed in the OT holy meals, now is given much more powerfully to us in the Holy Communion. It is the Holy God with us and in us.

The Holy One became human with flesh and blood. True God and true man at the same time. Jesus' body was the body of the Holy God. Jesus' blood was the blood of the Holy God. Now He has returned to the Father and according to His divine nature He is present everywhere.

Now He comes to us in His Holy Meal, in the Holy Communion. The Holy God Himself shares His holiness with us. With you. What does this mean? We needed to be reminded of what Paul wrote to Corinthians.

In their arrogance they had ignored the Lord's instructions, they had tried to receive the Holy Communion on their own terms. So, Paul sent them this scary warning: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.

Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died." Many are weak, and ill and some have died...

Because they had received the Lord's body and blood according to their own ideas. God's holiness is never neutral. It either brings us life and blessings, or wrath and judgment. You see, our motivation doesn't matter much. As didn't Uzzah's...

This is why our Lutheran Church practices what is called "closed communion" or as we have it written in our Grace constitution "Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants". This is how we lovingly care for others, for we don't want to carelessly expose people to God's holiness in such a way that would harm them.

Our motivation doesn't matter much, neither does the motivation of those who may want to commune with us ... as we saw with Uzzah. What matters is that we

humbly follow the instructions of our Lord. That we come to share in His holiness with repentant hearts, forgiven and with good conscience. That we know what exactly we receive in the Holy Communion – the very holy body and the very holy blood of our Holy God Jesus Christ.

That we know why exactly we receive this divine gift – for the forgiveness of all our sins. And that we come to His meal in unity of faith, sharing in the same confession. We don't want to be guilty against the body and blood of Jesus. We want to receive every good gift that our Holy Lord has prepared for us.

And they are many. Blessed you are, brothers and sisters, to come to this table in a worthy manner. Blessed you are! Just listen to what wonderful divine and eternal gifts our Holy Lord brings to you in this holy meal.

He is true God and He has life in Himself. Now He gives you this life, that is, true and eternal life to eat and drink in this meal and so He Himself remains present with you. His holy and precious blood now sprinkles your hearts and you can lead your lives with good consciences, washed clean and beautiful (Heb 9:13-14).

In Jesus' blood there is redemption and forgiveness (Eph 1:7, Matt 26:28). By partaking in this holy meal, your sins are forgiven, and you are rescued and redeemed from the domain of darkness. For where there is light, there is no place for darkness anymore.

Jesus' blood justifies you before the Father (Rom 5:9). As Jesus is just and perfect and holy, so are you made the same by the blood of Jesus. He cleanses you from all impurity (1 John 1:7). As you are united with Jesus, as He indwells in you, His holiness purifies and transforms making you more and more like Jesus. And as our Lord is united with you and indwell in you, His holiness protects you against every evil and forces of darkness (Rev 12:11).

In words of our own great theologian Dr John Kleinig: "There is therefore great power in the life-giving blood of the Lamb, His cleansing, sanctifying blood is our most precious possession, for by it we have access to heavenly sanctuary [even now when we are] here on earth." (CC, Leviticus, 371). Beautiful!

Our God is the Holy One. We are His people. But don't be like Uzzah! Let us never forget who we are and who He is – a consuming fire, for only when we come to our Holy Lord in our humble obedience, as beggars, then all the divine treasures and riches are ours.

Then His holiness fills us with new life, and joy and peace and blessedness and so He brings us to our eternal home, where we will see our Holy God as He is and where we will reign with Him.

Amen.