

St. Peter Lutheran Church + Modesto, California  
**The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**

*(Note: A written version of the August 17, 2003 sermon is unavailable. This sermon, based on the First Scripture Lesson from the August 17 service was originally delivered on August 20, 2000.)*

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Exodus 24:3-11

**<sup>3</sup> When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the LORD has said we will do." <sup>4</sup> Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.**

**He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>5</sup> Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. <sup>6</sup> Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. <sup>7</sup> Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey." <sup>8</sup> Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."**

**<sup>9</sup> Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up <sup>10</sup> and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. <sup>11</sup> But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank. (NIV)**

***Dining with God—Then and Now***

Brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus,

Have you noticed that when people gather together, there's usually food nearby?

Granted, people need food to survive, so where there are people, food will be near. But that's not what I mean. When people gather for special occasions and for social occasions, food is usually there, isn't it? People gather; people eat. I think that's because food has something to do with relationships.

Food is often present when relationships are beginning. A boy and a girl go out for dinner on their first date, and around the food they eat, they talk and get to know one another. A relationship is formed. Even here at church, when we welcome new people into our congregation, we have coffee and cookies or even a potluck.

Food is often present when relationships are being strengthened, too. At family reunions, people eat and catch up on each other's lives. We have church picnics, at which we get to know our brothers and sisters in faith better. Couples go out for dinner to celebrate their umpteenth wedding anniversary.

In Exodus 24 we're witness to a meal. Moses, the leader of the people of Israel, his brother, Aaron, and 72 Israelite men ascended Mt. Sinai and ate a meal in the presence of God! They glimpsed God himself, and they ate and drank.

We may ask, *Is it possible to dine with God today? Is it possible to have such a close relationship with God—one like those Israelite men had?* As we examine these words today, we'll find clues that tell us, Yes, we can dine with God, and we'll also learn how.

## Part One: Then

If we were to page back in our Bibles a few chapters in the book of Exodus, we'd never guess that a short time later some Israelites would be enjoying a meal in God's presence. God had brought his people out of slavery in Egypt and gathered them at the foot of Mt. Sinai. There he revealed his presence to them; he let them no in no uncertain terms that he was there. And how did they like being in the presence of God? They were terrified! But why?

Maybe I can explain why by telling you about something that happened to me a few years ago. Now, I've watched basketball games on TV for many years, and, especially when the playoffs are on, I try to watch some NBA—professional basketball—games. During a game, players' statistics are flashed on the screen, including their height. One player is 6'5", another is 6'9", another is 7' tall. Seeing basketball games on TV, then, I always knew the players were pretty tall. But then, a couple years ago, my brother-in-law got a couple tickets from his boss for a Milwaukee Bucks' game, and he took me along. Our seats were great; they were within a few rows of the court. And when the players walked out onto the court, when I saw them in person, I had to crane my neck to see the tops of their heads! These guys weren't just pretty big; they were huge! Their size hadn't made a strong impression on me until I got close to them.

When the people of Israel got close to God, they realized that he was very different from them. God appeared on Mt. Sinai in smoke and fire, with deafening blasts of rams' horns. When the people got a glimpse of God, they saw his majesty and his power. And when he spoke his laws to them, they realized that he was flawless and wouldn't settle for anything less than flawlessness from them. God was enormous; they were tiny. God was powerful; they were frail. God was holy; they were flawed, unholy creatures.

Could they ever be close to God and like it? Could they ever know joy in his presence? Something would have to happen first: the sinfulness of the people would have to be removed from them. Only then, with sin removed and considered holy in the sight of God, could they stand in his presence. And to remove sin, it would have to be paid for. The just penalty for guilt would have to be paid. And God declared that this price was blood. A life would have to be taken in order to make atonement.

That's what Moses was communicating when he constructed an altar in front of the Israelites and with it erected twelve stone pillars. The altar represented the presence of God. The pillars represented the twelve tribes of Israel. How could this altar (God) stand next to these pillars (people)? How could God and his people coexist when he was holy and they were not? Only through blood. Moses commanded animals to be sacrificed on the altar. And then he took their blood and sprinkled it on the altar. He turned around and again read God's words to the people. Then he sprinkled them with blood.

Do you see what Moses was doing? He was communicating that only through blood—the payment for sin—could God enter a covenant with people. Only with sin paid for could God adopt this people as his own. And only after the blood cleansed their souls could this people follow God and honor him as Lord. The blood connected the people to God.

You notice that only after this blood ritual did the meal take place. It was then that God invited the 74 Israelite men to the mountain. Moses notes for us that God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites, the implication being that it wouldn't be surprising if he had. No, in God's eyes their sin had been atoned for. They were his holy people. They could be in his presence and fellowship with him.

This all may seem kind of primitive—blood rituals and atoning for sins and the like. It seems like something you might see on a National Geographic special, like something some isolated primitive tribe might do. But is it really so strange to think that sins must be forgiven before a relationship is restored?

Imagine a husband and wife getting into an argument. The husband lets his temper get the better of him and he says some very hurtful things to his wife. Can he say to her, “C’mon, honey, let’s go out to dinner,” and expect everything to suddenly be okay between them? I don’t think so! First he must apologize for what he’s said, then she must forgive him. Then going out to dinner might be a possibility.

It’s similar with God. Anytime we speak or act at variance with his wishes, we offend him. We hurt God with our sin. And before our relationship with him can be restored, those wrongs need to be dealt with. So God calls us to turn away from our sins. He forgives us, proclaiming that our sins have been atoned for in blood. And then our relationship with him is restored.

You see, God doesn’t just ask us to be nice. He doesn’t say, “Be a pretty good person, and if you’re nice enough, you’re my kind of person.” No, God doesn’t ask us to be nice. He demands that we be holy. But we’re not. That’s why we need our sin and guilt taken away.

But is it barbaric to require a price of blood for the removal of guilt in order to be with God? It would be barbaric, except for one thing: God himself provided the blood payment he required from us.

## Part Two: Now

Can we dine with God?

We, too, should be afraid to be in God’s presence. We find ourselves in the same predicament as the Israelites at the foot of Mt. Sinai. The differences between God and us are dramatic. He is holy; we aren’t. And—in spite of the claims of many today—God’s standards have not changed since Mt. Sinai.

A price is still needed for us, too, if we want to be close to God. Like the Israelites, our sins have to be paid for. And they have to be paid for in blood.

But we don’t have to despair, for God himself provided the payment that was needed to bring us to him. God’s only son, Jesus, took on human flesh and blood and then let his blood be shed to pay for our sins. On the cross of Calvary, the price of blood was paid for all people of all time. Through the atoning blood of Jesus, our sins have been paid for. We are absolved of our unrighteousness and declared holy in the sight of God! That means that we can be near God without being afraid. The writer to the Hebrew Christians put it this way: ...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:22) And the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian Christians, But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. (2:13)

Jesus knew that this is what he would achieve by his suffering on the cross. We know this because of something Jesus did on the night before he died: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is *the new covenant in my blood*; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me. (1 Corinthians 11:23-25) God has made a covenant with us, a covenant sealed in blood. He promises to be our God. He promises to

adopt us as dear children. He promises, through the blood of Christ, to remember our sins no more. In the Lord's Supper we are given the blood that brings us close to God by forgiving our sins. And we dine in the presence of the Almighty.

The fact that God provided the blood that was needed to draw us to him makes all this not a barbaric tale, but a story of unparalleled love. When Moses sprinkled that blood on the altar and on the people, God knew that that animal blood was merely a shadow of the blood of his only Son. Yet God did not hesitate to shed that blood for you and me.

*But pastor, we know about this already. We know about Jesus and his blood. Why do we have to hear about it again and again?*

We need to hear about Jesus time after time because we're continually adding tension to our relationship with God. Whenever we sin, we're really pushing God away from us. Therefore, we continually need the blood of Christ to wipe away those sins and draw us back to our Father. Is there ever a day that goes by when we can say as we go to bed, *I don't need the blood of Christ today?* Is there ever a week when we can say, *I don't need the Lord's body and blood this week, since my slate is clean since the last time I received Communion?* We sin all the time, and therefore we need the benefits of Christ's blood all the time.

And there's another reason we need the blood of Christ all the time. Our love tends to grow cold. Tell me, could our country use a dose of love? Jesus Christ is the epitome of selfless love. Is there a marriage out there that couldn't use the love of Christ? Every husband and wife needs forgiveness and a model of perfect love. Is there a single person out there who couldn't use the blood of Christ? Jesus wants all to know that he wants no one to be alone. That's why he shed his blood—to make us his friends forever. Are there parents and children who couldn't use the blood of Christ? All parents and children need the blood which brings forgiveness for mistakes and conflicts. And again, Christ provides the perfect example of love that cares.

People want to dine with God. They want to be with him. Problem is, they often want to set the terms on which they dine with God: *God, I'm inviting myself over tonight. I want you to give me whatever I want to eat, and then I'll leave whenever I choose.* The bad news is that God himself sets the terms on which we can be with him: we must have our sins forgiven first.

But the good news is that God met his own terms. He shed his blood to take away our sins. By the blood of Christ, we can and we do have fellowship with God. We have a personal relationship with the Almighty.

Come, then. Come and enjoy this intimate meal, as you and other people cleansed by the blood receive the body and the blood of the one who cleansed you. Believe in the blood of Christ, and dine with God. Amen.