

God's powerful presence

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[0 : 0 0] The first reading this morning is taken from Numbers chapter 3. We're going to be in verses 1 to 15, and that's found on page 131 of the Church Bibles. So that's Numbers chapter 3, verses 1 to 15.

These are the generations of Aaron and Moses at the time when the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. These are the names of the sons of Aaron, Nadab the firstborn, and Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar.

These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the anointed priests, whom he ordained to serve as priests. But Nadab and Abihu died before the Lord when they offered unauthorised fire before the Lord in the wilderness of Sinai, and they had no children.

So Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests in the lifetime of Aaron their father. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him.

And they shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over all the people of Israel, as they minister at the tabernacle.

[1 : 1 5] And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons. They are wholly given to him from among the people of Israel. And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall guard their priesthood.

But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel, instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel.

The Levites shall be mine, for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast.

They shall be mine. I am the Lord. And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, saying, List the sons of Levi, by fathers' houses and by clans.

Every male from a month old and upward you shall list. The second reading is the last section of the same chapter. It's in Numbers chapter 3, beginning at verse 40 to verse 51, and it's on page 133.

[2 : 2 3] And the Lord said to Moses, List all the firstborn males of the people of Israel from a month old and upwards, taking the number of their names.

And you shall take the Levites for me. I am the Lord. Instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel and the cattle of the Levites, instead of all the firstborn among the cattle of the people of Israel.

So Moses listed all the firstborn among the people of Israel as the Lord commanded him. And all the firstborn males, according to the number of names, from a month old and upwards, as listed, were 22,273.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of their cattle.

The Levites shall be mine. I am the Lord. And as the redemption price for the 273 of the firstborn of the people of Israel, over and above the number of the male Levites, you shall take five shekels per head.

[3 : 34] You shall take them according to the shekel of the sanctuary, the shekel of 20 geras, and give the money to Aaron and his sons as the redemption price for those who are over.

So Moses took the redemption money from those who were over and above, those redeemed by the Levites. From the firstborn of the people of Israel, he took the money, 1,365 shekels, by the shekel of the sanctuary.

And Moses gave the redemption money to Aaron and his sons, according to the word of the Lord, as the Lord commanded Moses. Marcus, thanks very much indeed for reading.

Please do keep the book of Numbers open as we continue this series, which we started a couple of weeks ago. And let me pray for us as we begin. And the Lord said, Heavenly Father, we praise you that you are a God who speaks to us.

Thank you that your word, the Bible, is your word, the means by which you speak to us today. And we pray, therefore, please would you help us to be attentive to your voice.

[4 : 47] And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, my aim this morning is for us to see the enormous significance of Jesus Christ, of who he is, and what he's done for us.

And therefore, I want to begin by asking a question. How easy do you think it is to come into God's presence? How easy do you think it is, if you like, to approach God on a kind of scale of 1 to 10?

Perhaps you'd just give it a 1 or a 2. You can't really imagine being in God's presence. You can't imagine approaching God at all, either because you regard him as being kind of distant and remote, or perhaps because of your own sense of unworthiness, or perhaps because, if you're honest, you don't believe in God at all.

Or maybe you give it a 9 or a 10. Perhaps you're quick to come into God's presence. You're quick to pick up a Bible to read it. You send up a brief arrow prayer. You breeze into church.

You barely give it much thought. Or perhaps you're kind of somewhere in the middle of 5 or a 6 or something like that. Well, wherever you are on that scale, my aim this morning is that we see the enormous significance of Jesus and what he's done for us.

[6 : 03] It's something which, I guess, we pray that Immy will come to grasp for herself as she grows up. But it's important for all of us as well. But we're continuing this series of sermons in the book of Numbers, describing events 1,400 years before the birth of Jesus.

God's people, the Israelites, have been rescued from slavery in Egypt. God has brought them to himself to be his people. And yet it's going to be another 40 years before they reach the promised land.

And it's that journey of 40 years that this book of Numbers describes. Now, we've noticed over the last couple of weeks the parallels with the Christian life are striking.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul says that the events of that Numbers generation and their journey to the promised land are recorded for us as examples if we are followers of Jesus.

Because like them, we've been rescued not from slavery in Egypt but slaves to sin and yet we haven't yet reached our final destination which is heaven, the new creation.

[7 : 10] We said last week the first 10 chapters of Numbers are all about getting ready for the journey. The things they need to know before they set off. We saw in chapter 1 that God is faithful.

He speaks. He keeps his promises. We saw in chapter 2 he's present with his people. And now in chapters 3 and 4 we're going to see both the terrifying majesty of God and yet also the inviting holiness of God.

Firstly, the terrifying majesty of God. Now, we haven't had all of these chapters read but the focus is on the Levites and in both chapters there's a census of their numbers together with their responsibilities.

If you were here last week you might remember this slide which is about to appear on the screen. There you go. The way in which the other 12 tribes were all arranged around the tabernacle.

There's the tabernacle, the place where symbolically God dwelt in the midst of his people. And then you can see the 12 tribes around the edge and then the Levites are sort of are between the tabernacle in the middle and the 12 tribes around the edge.

[8 : 31] And in chapter 3 verses 5 to 10 we're told that they had particular responsibilities. Let me read those verses for us. And as I do say, see if you can spot what is surprising.

chapter 3 verses 5 and 10 to 10. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, bring the tribe of Levi near and set them before Aaron and the priest that they may minister to him.

They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting as they minister at the tabernacle. They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister the tabernacle.

And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons. They are wholly given to him for among the people of Israel. And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons. And they shall guard their priesthood.

But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death. Now I don't know what you found surprising in those verses. But it seems to me it's the word guard, isn't it?

[9 : 37] It's repeated. It's there in verse 7. They shall keep guard. In verse 8 it comes twice. And it's there again in verse 10. Perhaps most surprising of all is the way in which verse 10 finishes.

But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death. Now, all these details, of course, they're very unfamiliar, aren't they, to us.

But the point is a simple one. It is that God isn't safe. God isn't safe. These people, the Israelites, they have the extraordinary privilege of belonging to God as his special people.

And yet they cannot come near. They need to be protected from him. It's the intimidating majesty of God such that actually no one can even approach the tabernacle lest they be killed.

Guard duty, I guess, can be for one of two purposes, can't it? So Harry and Meghan, having made their Netflix documentary, and Harry now having released his book, they now have armed guards to protect them from the crowds.

[10 : 52] That's one kind of guard duty. But go to London Zoo and you'll see a different kind of guarding. Go and see one of their magnificent Asiatic lions.

And it's rather different, isn't it? Because the lions are guarded, they're caged, but not to protect them from the crowds, but to protect the crowds from them.

Well, it's the same here with the guard duties of the Levites. It's not that God needs protecting from the people, but the people need protecting from God. It's a terrifying passage.

God's presence can be extremely dangerous because God is holy. He's perfectly pure. He's other. He's set apart, which none of us are.

We all naturally turn away from God. We naturally live life our way and not his way. It's what the Bible calls sin. By nature, we are not God's friends.

[11 : 55] By nature, we are God's enemies. We need protecting. We need protecting from his wrath. We need protecting from his righteous anger. The way into his presence is barred.

We can't simply wander into his presence. Hence, the need for the Levites to be on guard duty. In chapter 3, verses 14 to 39, there's the first census of every Levite over a month old.

They're numbered clan by clan. Have a look at verse 14 of chapter 3. And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, saying, List the sons of Levi by fathers' houses and by clans.

Every male from a month old and upwards you shall list. And then you can read all the details of the numbers in verses 16 to 38. And the summary comes in verse 39.

All those listed among the Levites who Moses and Aaron listed at the commandment of the Lord by clans, all the males from a month old and upwards were 22,000.

[13 : 04] In chapter 4, there's a second census, this time of Levites aged 30 to 50. Have a look and see how the chapter starts. Chapter 4, The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, Take a census of the sons of Kohath from among the sons of Levi by their clans and their fathers' houses from 30 years old to 50 years old, all who can come on duty to do the work in the tents of meeting.

Because, you see, as the Israelites embark on their journey to the promised land, each time they break camp, the tabernacle, this place where symbolically God dwelt with his people, would have to be dismantled, carried, and then set up again.

And if you've been on a camping holiday, then you will know that in theory, you can just kind of throw all your camping equipment in the back of the car, but in practice, it's much better to be organized and have a place where everything fits so that the next afternoon or the next evening when you arrive at your next campsite, you can easily get everything set up once again.

And therefore, these three tribes of Levites, they are given responsibilities to carry different parts of the tabernacle. But notice that again in chapter 4, just as in chapter 3, the whole emphasis is on the fact that God is unapproachable.

Chapter 4, verse 15. And when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary as the camp sets out, after that, the sons of Kohath shall come to carry these, but they must not touch the holy things, lest they die.

[14 : 49] What's more, when they come to the inner part of the tabernacle, to the very presence of God himself, why, they must not even look at the holy things. Verse 17.

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, let not the tribe of the clans of the Kohathites be destroyed from amongst the Levites, but thus deal with them, that they may live and not die when they come near to the most holy things.

We went to see the lion, the witch, and the wardrobe in the West End just before Christmas, having secured some cup-price last-minute tickets. I guess many of us will have perhaps seen the film or read the book.

It's set in the fictional land of Narnia, where it is always winter and never spring, under the control of the wicked white witch. It's an allegory of our world, each one by nature on the side of evil, on Satan's side, and not on God's side, in the grip of his power.

And then the children who have gone from our world into Narnia, they hear about Aslan, who is the Jesus figure in the book, a lion, portrayed as a lion. As Mr. Beaver explains, Aslan is a lion, the lion, the great lion.

[16 : 10] Ooh, said Susan, I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion. Safe, said Mr. Beaver.

Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you. Is God good?

Yes. Is he lord and king? Yes. Is he safe? No. He's not safe.

And he cannot be domesticated. Hence the role of the Levites to guard, to protect the people from God's presence, from God's wrath.

Now, of course, we might well be tempted to think or even to say, but surely, this is the God of the Old Testament. Surely, God isn't like this anymore. Surely, the God of the New Testament is rather different.

[17 : 14] And yet, if you're someone who's read through one of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, then actually you'll know how much Jesus speaks of the judgment to come. How many of his parables are focused on the judgment to come.

In fact, Jesus speaks more about the judgment than anyone else in the Bible. Our culture thinks and acts as if God is a tame God.

I guess you see it all over the place, but you see it at funerals, I think, so often, where so tragically there is the assumption that the deceased is now in a better place, a tame God.

Those of us who are Christians, I think we're often no better. We barely give thought to who God is before we open our Bible or come to church. In our conversations over coffee afterwards, we're quick to talk about our week and our holidays and our children and sport and so on.

Almost anything, really, as if the living God hasn't just spoken to us and addressed us through his words, the Bible. The Bible confronts us. It confronts those of us who believe in such a domesticated, tame God with the reality that God is a terrifying God.

[18 : 39] He is terrifying in his holiness. Secondly, the inviting mercy of God, the inviting mercy of God.

Because the extraordinary thing at all is that the tabernacle was actually there, God symbolically dwelling in the midst of his people.

Because, you see, what did that show? Well, it showed that God loved these people. He'd rescued them. He'd chosen them to be his. He'd promised to be with them as their shepherd, as their protector, as their guide.

In other words, the very existence of the tabernacle declared the mercy and love of God and that he dwells amongst his people. At the heart of the tabernacle was the mercy seat where the blood of animals was sprinkled as a sacrifice for sin.

A pardoning, merciful God inviting sinful people as we all are to receive the forgiveness of sins and belong to him as his people.

[19 : 52] Just think back to the Asiatic lions of London Zoo in their cage. Although the cage is there to guard the visitors from dangerous animals, the zoo itself is in the middle of London.

Bang in the middle of London. Now, surely, if you really wanted to keep people safe, you wouldn't build a zoo in London, would you? I mean, surely you'd kind of build it in Norfolk or Suffolk or somewhere like that where, you know, there aren't many people so there's less danger.

Do you see how the very fact that there's a zoo in the middle of London, it serves as an invitation. There's an invitation to come in. In other words, you see, the God of the Bible, the one true living God, he is both transcendent and he is imminent.

He's transcendent, he is high above us and yet wonderfully, he is also imminent, he is knowable. As such, Christianity is completely unique amongst the world's religions.

Some religions portray God as being transcendent, unknowable, far away, unapproachable, such as Islam for example. While in other religions, such as the pagan gods of Greece and Rome, they're imminent, you can know them, but actually they're just like us.

[21 : 23] Apart from their raw power, there's nothing transcendent about them at all. In other words, there are two mistakes we can make. We can either imagine that God is so lofty and so transcendent and exalted that he's unknowable, or we can think that he's so small that he becomes really little more than a mascot or a lucky charm, someone who is there to do our bidding.

And yet, of course, we still haven't answered the question, how, have we? How is it that God can dwell? This mighty transcendent God, how is it that he can dwell in the midst of his people?

Well, the Levites were visual aids of salvation. They were reminders of how God's people had been rescued from slavery in Egypt. And there are two key words which keep coming up in our passage which describe that rescue.

I put them there on the outline. They are redemption and substitution. Redemption is all about the transfer of ownership in the same way that you might pay a ransom price to redeem someone who's been taken hostage.

So God's people, they'd been enslaved in Egypt. God redeemed them for himself to be his people, no longer serving Egypt and Pharaoh but instead to serve him.

[22 : 53] The second word substitution I guess more familiar to us is the language of the football pitch and it explains how this great redemption happened. God's judgment on the nation of Egypt was that every first born son would die except amongst God's people because in those households a lamb was killed as a substitute, the blood was then adored around the front door and on the night when God came in judgment he passed over those households and the first born were spared.

Now again if you're familiar with the lion, the witch and the wardrobe you'll know that that's just what happens towards the end of the story. Edmund, one of the children has been taken captive by the white witch who represents the power of evil and Satan.

He is very much serving her and very much in her power. The central part of the story is when Aslan, the lion, the Jesus figure, is taken by the witch and killed as a substitute in the place of Edmund.

One life substituted for another. A redemption price is paid and Edmund is free no longer to serve the white witch but instead to serve Aslan which he then does.

Well in the same way after the Exodus rescue, the firstborn sons were set apart to serve God in a special way. But that is now going to change.

[24 : 26] Have a look at Numbers chapter 3 verse 12. That is going to change. 3.12 Behold I've taken the Levites for among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel.

The Levites shall be mine. That is then unpacked in that second section which we had read verses 40 to 51 and the summary comes verse 44 and the Lord spoke to Moses saying take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel.

Once again there's the principle of substitution that the Levites will take the place of the firstborn but there's also the principle of redemption and that principle is highlighted by the fact there's a problem.

So in verse 39 we're told the total number of the Levites is 22,000 in verse 43 that the total number of the firstborn males is 22,273 and therefore in verses 46 to 51 a redemption price has to be paid for those additional 273 because it makes the point that each one individually has to be redeemed.

I wonder if you can see how the Levites are living symbols of salvation. Visual aids of the fact that God's people have been redeemed.

[25 : 57] They now belong to him to serve him. How have they been redeemed? Through substitution. Well we might ask this all happened such a long time ago and what on earth has it got to do with us today in 2023.

Well actually it's something to get very excited about because these two words substitution and redemption they point so clearly and so wonderfully to the far greater rescue that Jesus Christ would accomplish.

His rescue from sin his rescue from judgment through his death on the cross. He died as a substitute dying in our place bearing the wrath of God for our sin.

He died to redeem us such that those who trust in God who trust in Jesus now live to serve him to belong to him as his people.

So let's come back to that question we started with. How easy is it to approach God? Where are you on that scale now of one to ten?

[27 : 09] Because the truth is that God is both unapproachable and approachable. He's unapproachable, he's terrifying his majesty, none of us are good enough for God and yet he is wonderfully approachable.

The death of the Lord Jesus on the cross means we can know God not because of our own merits, not through the work of priests and temples but because Jesus issues an invitation.

An invitation to be redeemed by him, an invitation to follow him, to be forgiven. In fact, an invitation as we'll see next week to enjoy a face-to-face relationship with him.

Wonderful. Do come and chat afterwards if you'd like to know more about that and how that can be yours and I'd love to give you one of these little booklets as well so do come and ask for one of those afterwards also.

What about those of us who are followers of Jesus? Why do we need to know this? Well for the simple reason the Christian life is a journey just as the Israelites were about to set out on their journey.

[28 : 24] And the danger is that just as they forgot what God is like, the danger surely is that we also will forget what God is like. We'll either be too casual with God or treat him lightly, we'll presume on his grace, we'll presume on his kindness, we'll regard it as a small thing that we belong to him and as a consequence other things perhaps work or perhaps family or friends will be of far more importance to us than he is.

God as a kind of God as an insurance policy, so to speak, rather than the one true living God, God who is there to serve us rather than we serve him.

I guess those are the kinds of dangers we might face when life is going well, the danger of being too casual, treating him too lightly. me. I guess when life is hard, why the danger is we forget how approachable God is.

That actually every day is lived in his presence, that we can confess our sin to him, that there is abundant mercy with him, that we belong to him, that regardless of what is going on in our lives, we are secure in him.

that to know Jesus is indeed to know the living God as our heavenly father. And therefore there is no greater privilege and no deeper joy than that.

[30 : 01] Let's have a few moments in quiet and then I shall lead us in prayer. They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting as they minister at the tabernacle.

Heavenly Father, thank you so much that you reveal to us and show us what you are like. We praise you that you are the one true living God, that you are both unapproachable, terrifying in your majesty, and yet approachable and inviting in your mercy.

mercy. And we pray, Heavenly Father, you'd please help us to hold on to these things and help us to keep rejoicing in the Lord Jesus on the journey that is the Christian life.

Rejoicing in what it is to know the one true God, to be able to serve him in every aspect of our lives.

and we ask it in his name. Amen.