

Then the LORD said to Moses, ²⁴ “Say to the assembly, ‘Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’ ”

²⁵ Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. ²⁶ He warned the assembly, “Move back from the tents of these wicked men! Do not touch anything belonging to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins.” ²⁷ So they moved away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. Dathan and Abiram had come out and were standing with their wives, children and little ones at the entrances to their tents.

²⁸ Then Moses said, “This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: ²⁹ If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the LORD has not sent me. ³⁰ But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt.”

³¹ As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart ³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah’s men and all their possessions. ³³ They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community. ³⁴ At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, “The earth is going to swallow us too!”

³⁵ And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.

³⁶ The LORD said to Moses, ³⁷ “Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to take the censers out of the smoldering remains and scatter the coals some distance away, for the censers are holy—³⁸ the censers of the men who sinned at the cost of their lives. Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar, for they were presented before the LORD and have become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites.”

³⁹ So Eleazar the priest collected the bronze censers brought by those who had been burned up, and he had them hammered out to overlay the altar, ⁴⁰ as the LORD directed him through Moses. This was to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the LORD, or he would become like Korah and his followers. (Numbers 16:23-40)

Take God Seriously!

Did you see that news report this week about the man in Florida who was swallowed up by a sinkhole? He was in bed asleep and a sinkhole opened up under his house and swallowed his bedroom. He yelled for help and his brother came but he was gone. Doesn’t that sound a little like today’s Old Testament lesson? The ground opened up and swallowed people? Do you think we’re talking about the same thing? Probably not. Moses said that the ground opened and swallowed Korah, Dathan and Abiram and then it closed again. That’s not what a sinkhole does. And as dramatic as that event was, it wasn’t the only act of judgment in this reading. Fire came out from the Lord and killed another 250 men – almost certainly more people than died when the earth opened. And the deaths of these people are not really the point of this lesson. Rather, they are an illustration of the point. So what is the point? **Take God seriously.** The people of Israel forgot that point during the forty years they were in the desert. It’s a point that we need to remember, too.

I.

Take God seriously! Take his commands seriously! That’s always a challenge for us. In our culture, we prize individualism and thinking for yourself, so we tend to think that authority has to justify its commands before we’re willing to obey them. We even tend to demand that of God. Certainly, we demand it of our pastors and teachers and church leaders.

In a sense, that’s what happened in the wilderness. God led his people out of Egypt, first to Mt. Sinai where he gave them the Old Covenant. That’s where they got the rules about what they could eat and what they couldn’t. All those rules about being clean and unclean and worshipping on Saturday came with the Mt. Sinai covenant. There, God established the priesthood and the sacrifices and all the rules about worship that would apply until Jesus came fifteen centuries later. God named Aaron as the first high priest. From Mt. Sinai, God sent them to the Promised Land – to Israel – and he told them to conquer it. But they were afraid and refused to

try. So God told them they would have to wait until that entire generation of adults died out and their children would conquer the land. So forty years of wandering in the desert began.

This incident took place during those forty years. Three prominent men, Korah, Dathan and Abiram challenged Moses and Aaron. They were backed by 250 leaders of Israel. Their complaint was that Moses and Aaron were getting too high handed. They said, **“You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD’s assembly?”** Behind that complaint was growing anger that Moses had not led them to a land flowing with milk and honey like he promised. Instead, he had led them out into the desert to die. Of course, they conveniently forgot their role in that outcome.

A symbol of their complaint was the fact that only Aaron and his sons were allowed to offer sacrifices and to lead worship. But that was God’s command. So Moses set up a test. The 250 men who complained were to fill bronze censers with burning incense to offer before the Lord. Offering incense was one of the ways Israel worshipped God. Those men did that, but Korah, Dathan and Abiram refused to go along with any test Moses set up and they stayed in their tents. That’s where our reading begins.

God’s judgment was dramatic. The ground opened and swallowed those men and their families and all they had and the others burned alive. But recognize the basic issue God was dealing with. Moses and Aaron were his representatives. They were leading the people where God commanded them to. They were stuck with a very difficult job: taking a disobedient and stubborn people out into the desert to wait for decades until they all died off. These men simply did not want to spin their wheels in the desert until they died. They were sick of Moses and Aaron telling them what to do and acting like they were the only people that God was with.

I think we can understand their feelings. We may even share them, at times. Certainly, it’s possible for us to feel like pastors and teachers and other church leaders are acting in a high-handed and insensitive way. We can get very angry at them. Sometimes, we church leaders are guilty of that sin. But sometimes, what makes people angry is that they don’t want to do what the pastors or teachers or church leaders say we have to do to be faithful to God. I once got an e-mail from a very angry member about our fellowship practice. She said that she knew that WELS pastors were going to insist on doing certain things, even if it meant that we wouldn’t have any members left when we were done. In the context, she was attacking a principle that she disagreed with and thought was stupid and impractical in the real world..

But it was what God’s Word teaches. Sometimes, it’s hard for us to accept all that God says in his Word. When a pastor or a teacher or an elder insists on that Word, when they tell us what we are doing is wrong and we need to change, it’s very easy for us to attack that person. We accuse him or her of being loveless. We focus on the fact that we Christians may say the right thing in a way that feels harsh or unsympathetic and we use that failing of an imperfect sinner to avoid dealing with the real issue: what has God said?

We live in a society that doesn’t view the Bible as the final authority in matters of faith and life. But that is exactly what a community of faith must do. We have one source for what we believe and confess, one source for how we Christians are supposed to live. God expects us to listen to that source, even when it says things that we don’t understand or that seem ridiculous in the modern world or that tell us to stop doing things that we want to do or to start doing things that we don’t want to do. Our society tells us to think for ourselves. Don’t let pastors tell you what to think. Don’t let your church lock you into their value system. But God tells us to let his Word take captive our every thought. It’s not about what I say. It’s about what the Bible says.

That might seem like a very old fashioned way of thinking. But when Korah, Dathan and Abiram challenged God’s representatives on what sounds like a plausible spiritual basis – we’re all the people of God – God caused the earth to open and swallow them and their families and everything they owned. And then he closed the ground behind them so that it was like they had never been there. Then God caused fire to burn 250 of their supporters alive. Do you think God takes his word seriously? Do you think God considers us to be anything other than servants created to do his will?

It’s easy to come up with pious sounding justifications to set aside anything God says. And we’ve all done it. But do you know what God calls that in this section of his Word? Treating the LORD with contempt. The only attitude he accepts is one that humbly bows before the Lord and says, “Not my will, but your will be done.” Do we have that attitude? Truly, none of us does, not perfectly. There’s always a part of our heart that rebels against what God says. Every time we sin, we find a way around God’s Word. God’s judgment on these

men shows us how God feels about that. It reminds us of the even greater judgment that awaits all sinners in hell.

So what is the answer? Repentance. Repentance begins with confession. You admit to God that you are a sinner, that what you want is not what he commands. You have disobeyed the Word of God. You have treated the Lord with contempt. But that's only the beginning of repentance. The next step is critical: trusting that Christ has taken that sin away. As your pastor, I forgive you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Know that forgiveness is yours. Remember that in baptism, Jesus washed your sins away. Trust his promise! That's the heart of repentance. Then from that trust flows a real commitment to change your life, to change your attitude, to submit to what God says even when it goes against everything your heart and your society tell you. That is the fruit of repentance.

II.

What happened to the followers of Korah is really a warning to us. Now, it does not mean that the earth is going to open up under our feet. I don't think God was judging that man down in Florida who disappeared into the earth. I don't think that lightning will strike our church if we abandon the truths of God's Word or that God will send fire to consume us if we challenge those people in our congregation who insist on the truth. But God is warning us about the trifling with his holiness. **Take God seriously! Take his holiness seriously!**

We live in a society that doesn't understand what it means that God is holy. Americans believe that we're good people. In fact, we believe that we're the world's last, best hope. So we believe that we can pretty much sit next to God and have a conversation with him about what we think is right and wrong. That simply is not true. God is holy. All that he says is just and right. And the reason we can't see that is that we are sinners. We were born sinners. Nothing that we have from our natural birth is good. It's all sinful. God's holiness cannot stand sin. It must destroy sin. So no sinner can live in God's presence.

God taught his Old Testament people about holiness through the Mt. Sinai covenant. He built them a worship space that hid him from them. The Most Holy Place, where the Ark of the Covenant rested, was completely out of sight. Only the high priest could go there, and only once a year. Only a priest could offer incense or sacrifices. Only descendants of Aaron could be priests. And they had to be ceremonially clean to come before the Lord and offer any kind of religious service at all. No one could enter the house of God if they were unclean.

In all this, God was teaching his people that sin separates us from a holy God. So when these men claimed the right to approach God and offer their own sacrifices and incense, they were ignoring the holiness of God. And they died as a result. After the 250 men were burned alive, God made the son of Aaron collect their censors and pound them into sheets and nail them over the altar that stood in the courtyard. Forever after that, any time an Israelite entered that courtyard and saw that altar, they saw what sin does to us. It was a warning never to treat God's holiness with contempt again.

God is still holy. We are still sinners. So why don't we build our churches like Israel built theirs? Why isn't our altar covered at least with bronze to remind us of this incident? Because our altar represents something else: the sacrifice of Jesus. Our sin does separate us from God. Our sin should kill us and send us to hell. But Jesus had no sin. He had every right to enter into the presence of God. Jesus took that one holy life and he give it for us. On the cross, he offered the only sacrifice that can actually pay for our sins. His blood there washed away all the sins of all the world.

Our altar does not remind us that we cannot come into God's presence. Our altar reminds us that Jesus already went into God's presence for us. It reminds us that he gave his life there so that we will live. The day will come when we will appear before God. But it won't end like it did for those men who rebelled against God and demanded the right to come in to him. We won't suffer the fate of people today who believe that we're all basically good and God would never do something like this. We won't die for our sin. When we stand before God, he will invite us to come in to the heaven he prepared for us. He will invite us to spend all eternity with Jesus and to enjoy his love forever.

Because of Christ, our sin no longer separates us from God. Because of Christ, God now calls us holy in his sight. That is God's Word, too. To take God seriously means to take all his commands seriously. It means to take his holiness seriously. But it also means to take seriously his promises in Christ. We don't live in fear of the earth opening up and swallowing us. We don't live in fear of dying, even though we will all die, if Jesus

does not come back first. For us death is the doorway to life. For us judgment is over and God promises us a new and perfect world where we will see him every day. Take that seriously, too. Amen.