

Sunday, December 7, 2014: 2 Peter 3:8-15a

## ***Holiness* is a murky word.**

by [Matthew Schlimm](#) in the [November 26, 2014](#) issue

As an Old Testament professor, I spend my days thinking about the religious lives of people 2,500 years ago. Sometimes I stop and wonder what people 2,500 years in the future will think of the church today.

My hunch is that they'll say we lost sight of holiness. They'll find very few sermons on this topic. They'll see how run-down our churches are, or how new ones resemble gymnasiums, and they'll conclude that our church buildings rarely communicated that God is actually worthy of worship. They'll say that Christians took their priorities from political parties, not from the Bible. They'll say that for our generation, holiness seemed like a rather abstract concept, nothing we tried to embody, hardly the first thing that came to our minds when we thought about God.

This week's text from 2 Peter presents a very different perspective. Like many Advent texts, it describes the day of the Lord, a time when "the elements will melt away with the flames" and "everything will be destroyed." The author then poses a question: "What sort of people ought you to be?" The answer makes no reference to being nice or loving: "You must live holy and godly lives" (CEB).

The Bible uses words like *holy* more than words like *love*. Yet *holiness* is a murky word. It evokes several ideas.

First, when something is holy, it belongs to God. The Old Testament calls the temple "the holy place" because it is God's home. Sacrifices were holy because they were God's food: meals shared between God and the people making the offering. People were holy when they acted like they belonged to God.

Second, when something is holy, it's complete. It has integrity; it's darn near perfect. It belongs to God—and God wants the very best. The cinnamon rolls that just came out of the oven, not the ones we forgot about in the back of the fridge. The crisp \$100 bills at the start of the month, not the tattered singles we still have at

the end of our pay period. The times when we're alert and full of life, not the glassy-eyed moments when we feel compelled to check our smartphones yet again.

Third, when something's holy, it's beautiful. If the ancient Israelites had worn socks, the temple would have knocked them off. It was a palace. When you entered, it was as if you were returning to the Garden of Eden, back in paradise. You were surrounded by pillars, colorful linens with rich embroidery, and decorations made with gold and silver and copper. The temple spoke loud and clear: God is here. God is holy. God is beautiful. God is greater than we ever could be. God is worthy of our worship.

Fourth, when something's holy, it's pure. People today associate purity with sexual matters, but biblical purity includes daily matters like cleanliness and food. For biblical Israelites, personal hygiene was a sacrament: you cleaned yourself before going to the temple as a reminder that God is pure and good, different from everyday clutter, dirt, and disease. Every meal was also a sacrament. You ate only those foods considered clean, as an act of devotion, a reminder to watch what you do with your body. The New Testament picks up on these ideas, associating purity with innocence.

Finally, when something's holy, it's set apart. People in the Bible set themselves apart by resisting the temptation to follow other gods. Most of us aren't tempted to bow down before literal idols. Yet we are called to work against the rampant forces of greed, lust, gluttony, and violence in our day. Why? Because as 2 Peter puts it, "We are waiting for a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness is at home."

The author here draws on one of my favorite passages, Isaiah 65:17-25, which talks of a time when God will change the world as we know it, bringing us back to Eden. Rejoicing will abound, while weeping will vanish. Homelessness will be a thing of the past. People will enjoy fresh fruit. Suffering will disappear. God will be at home with God's people, and all the animals of Eden will dwell together in safety.

To prepare ourselves for that happy day, we seek holiness now. Not the stuffy, self-righteous holiness that says, "Admire me and my religiosity." But the beautiful, dazzling holiness that makes us feel at home in God's presence.

It's hard to find people today who are even aware of holiness in this sense, much less people who order their lives around it. But I think of my friend Ellen. She gave

up her time to mentor me when she could have easily stuck to her own important projects. When I talk with her, I walk away feeling like a better person. I think that Ellen has figured out what holiness is all about. She lives like she belongs to God. She sacrifices good things to God and others. She surrounds herself with beauty. She has no problem going in a different direction from the rest of society.

Her holiness doesn't make me feel bad for my lack of holiness. It's contagious.