



GOD'S BUILDING MATERIALS

SERIES: THE TABERNACLE: GOD'S PRESENCE WITH HIS PEOPLE

Exodus 25:1-9

First Message

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January 31, 2016

On your way here this morning many of you drove by the new Apple campus that is being built just a half-mile away. Its main building, the so-called spaceship, is designed by some of the most creative, innovative and fastidious people in the world: Steve Jobs, the architect Norman Foster, and for interior design Apple's Chief Design Officer, Jony Ive. With these three as the designers, this is no ordinary building. When it is completed at the end of this year, we will have on our doorstep one of the most famous buildings in the world. Costing an estimated \$5 billion, it is being built with the finest materials and to the most exacting standards. The goal is that it have the same fit and finish as an iPhone, but on a vastly larger scale. Some of you will have the privilege of working there. As for me, I'm looking forward to going there for lunch with you!

Today we turn our attention to another structure that was to be built with the finest materials and to the design of the most creative of all, the great Creator himself. The tabernacle was not actually a building, but a tent that could be assembled and disassembled while on a journey. Both the plans and the construction of the tabernacle are described in great detail at the end of the book of Exodus: seven chapters for the plans, and six chapters for the construction. You may be vaguely aware that this is there at the end of Exodus, but you tend to hit the fast forward button when you get to that part—which takes you straight to Leviticus!

Some years ago (2003-2007) Brian preached through the first 24 chapters of Exodus. I am picking up where he left off and will continue through the end of the book, through these passages that are normally glossed over. Before I turn to chapter 25, let us review the story so far. The Book of Exodus has three main sections: the Exodus itself (chapters 1-19), the Ten Commandments and other rules (20-24), and the tabernacle (25-40). The themes of these three sections are salvation, ethics and God's presence.

In the first section (1-19) God delivered the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and brought them to Mt Sinai to meet him. The Lord sent Moses to command Pharaoh, "Let my people go, that they may serve (or worship) me" (7:16 etc.). Moses led the people out of Egypt to Mt Sinai, where they encamped at the base of the mountain, while Moses went up the mountain to meet with God. The Lord said, "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (19:4). Here at Sinai the Lord took them as his people: "you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:5-6). They used to belong to Pharaoh; now they belong to the Lord. They used to be slaves in Egypt, living bitter lives of harsh servitude. Now they are priests to the Lord, appointed to serve and worship him.

In the second section (20-24) God gave his people commandments by which to live. He gave them the Ten Commandments, his Ten Words (20:1-17). He gave them additional rules contained in the Book of the Covenant (21-23). "Now these are the rules..." he told

Moses (21:1). "Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules" (24:3). Confident that they could keep the rules, the people agreed to live by them: "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (24:7). Whereupon Moses threw the blood of sacrificial animals on the people, proclaiming, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words" (24:8).

This making of a covenant whereby God took Israel to be his people occurred at Mt Sinai, but this was not the end of their journey. Sinai was not the intended destiny for God's people. Nor is this the end of the Book of Exodus: 40% of the book remains. Sinai was a way station, but special nonetheless because God was there; it was where God brought his people to meet with him. But it was the land of Canaan, not the Sinai wilderness, that God had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and so it would come time to leave Sinai and journey on.

The Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared" (23:20). The big question is would God himself accompany the people on this journey, or would he stay on Mt Sinai? Would the Lord's people go with his Absence or with his Presence? This is what the third section of Exodus is about. We often wonder that same question: is it God's Presence or his Absence that accompanies us through life? How committed is God to being with us? Does he like us enough to go with us? At times we do delight in the sense of his Presence, but at other times it is his Absence which we feel.

This three-fold division of Exodus into salvation, ethics and presence I find to be a helpful paradigm for viewing the Christian life. God has saved us from our bondage to sin and death. Many people think that this is all the Christian life is about: to get people saved, to get them their ticket to heaven, to get them to say the sinner's prayer so that they can be a statistic in the reports. How we behave once saved doesn't matter so much. Or we can do what we want because God loves us and surely affirms our behavior. Others go a step further, recognizing that God calls us to changed behavior, but many stop here with the rules. Many, Christians and non-Christians alike, think this is what Christianity is about: rule-keeping with most of the rules being prohibitions: thou shalt not, thou shalt not... Christians have been very good at developing "thou shalt not" rules. God does call us to changed behavior, but it is not mere rule-keeping. He wants to transform us into the image of his beloved Son through the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. It's about life: this is a life of freedom, not a life of bondage to rules. There is a third stage beyond salvation and ethics: God saves us for his Presence. He saves us to bring us to himself. He saves us so that he can dwell among us. This desire of God to dwell among his people is the great theme of Scripture: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you."

With this background we turn now to the third section of Exodus, starting in chapter 25. The people are encamped at the bottom of the mountain, while Moses is atop the mountain with the Lord.

The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me. And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats’ hair, tanned rams’ skins, goatskins, acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, onyx stones, and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.” (Exod 25:1-9 ESV)

Thus begin seven chapters of instructions for the making of the tabernacle. Moses is to tell the people to bring to the Lord all the materials that are necessary for the building of a sanctuary, a tabernacle for him, so that he can dwell in their midst. It will be a sanctuary because it is holy space. It will be a tabernacle because it is a tent (Lat. *tabernaculum*). The people will leave Sinai and continue traveling through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The Lord will also leave Sinai and go with them. Since the people are in tents, he will be in a tent as well. His tent will be in the midst of their tents. God journeying with his people.

The tabernacle has three sections and seven pieces of furniture. The tent itself is divided into two sections: an inner chamber containing the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat or atonement cover; and an outer chamber containing the incense altar, the table and the lampstand. Around the tent is a courtyard with the altar of burnt offering and the basin of water. Moving from the outside to the inside these three zones are of increasing holiness: the courtyard, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy Place. The materials used in these three zones are increasingly precious.

Next week we’ll look at the concept of God’s dwelling place, and the following weeks at the design of the tabernacle itself. Today I want to focus on the contributions, the building materials which the Lord asks his people to bring in order to make this tabernacle.

The Lord does not command all the Israelites to bring a contribution. Instead he invites everyone whose heart moves him. A few chapters later he will announce a fixed levy to be imposed on all the Israelites, a half-shekel for everyone 20 and older, for the ongoing service or worship of the tabernacle (30:11-16). This half-shekel tax was still in effect in Jesus’ day; we read of it in the gospels. But this is not that half-shekel tax. Nor is this the tithe by which the Levites were sustained. This is a freewill contribution, over and above. This is to be given only by those of a generous heart, by everyone whose heart stirs him and whose spirit moves him. This is a grateful response to the greatness of God and his great deeds. When it came time for Moses to give the invitation, so many Israelites would be moved in their hearts to contribute that he would have to stop them.

What were the freewill contributions that the Israelites were to bring? There are seven categories of materials: three types of metal, three colors of dyed yarns and fine linen, fabric woven of goat’s hair and two types of leather, wood, olive oil, spices, and precious gemstones. These will be used to make the tabernacle and its furniture, and also the garments for the priests.

- Gold, silver and bronze were the three basic metals of antiquity before iron. Moving out from the inner chamber to the courtyard, the metal transitioned from gold to silver to bronze.
- The inner curtains of the tent, as well as the high priest’s garments, were made of finest Egyptian linen interwoven with blue, purple and scarlet yarns. These were the most precious colors of antiquity. Blue and purple were made from sea snails found in the eastern Mediterranean. Unlike other dyes made from plants, these dyes were colorfast. They were very expensive, since each snail yielded only one drop of dye. This purple would later be worn by Roman emperors and senators, and by Byzantine emperors. This blue is represented today in Israel’s flag. The scarlet was made from worms, similar to the crimson to which the Western church turned when the technique of manufacturing purple was lost—think of the crimson robes of the cardinals.
- The tent was covered by three further layers: goats’ hair curtains and two different types of leather.
- *Shittim* or acacia wood was hard, durable, and light-weight. It would be used for furniture and for the frames to hold up both the tent and the curtains around the courtyard.
- Fine olive oil was for the seven lamps on the lampstand.
- Spices would be mixed with olive oil to make the anointing oil for the consecration of the tabernacle, its furniture, and the priests. They would also be blended to make incense for burning on the incense altar.
- Onyx stones would be mounted on the shoulders of the high priest’s ephod, and twelve precious stones on his breast-piece.

How did the Israelites, who had shortly before been impoverished slaves in Egypt, come to have all these precious materials? Through Moses, the Lord told the Israelites to ask their Egyptian neighbors for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing. When they asked, the Lord gave them “favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so they let them have what they asked. So they plundered the Egyptians” (12:35-36; cf. 3:21-22).

The production and use of these materials would require the work of many craftsmen. The Lord would fill Bezalel with his Spirit—the first person in Scripture to be so filled—so he could conceive designs and work in every craft. He would be assisted by many skilled workers. Several of these skills are mentioned: the work of a designer, of a weaver, of an embroiderer, of a jeweler, and of a perfumer. These were all people in whom the Lord put “skill and intelligence to know how to do any work in the construction of the sanctuary...everyone whose heart stirred him to come to do the work” (36:1-2). The Lord wanted a beautiful structure to be built for his dwelling place, and he gave his people all the skills necessary for the making of this beautiful tabernacle. This project involved the whole community.

We have some skilled people among us who have worked creatively to turn this auditorium into a tabernacle. On either side is blue fabric, with panels depicting materials and furniture. On the north side: a ram for the rams’ skin tent covering, the bronze altar of burnt offering, acacia wood, a mortar and pestle for crushing olives for oil, and the golden incense altar. On the south side: the bronze basin, a goat for the goats’ hair tent covering, the tabernacle tent, the ark of the covenant, and the pillars supporting the courtyard curtains. At the front is scarlet fabric adorned with golden bells and pomegranates which decorated the hem of the high priest’s robe.

At the back, purple fabric as a backdrop for four models: the high priest's incense burner, his breastpiece, the lampstand, and the bread of the Presence. Great thanks to Beverly Novak for her design and to the skilled workers, all whose hearts have been moved to contribute. At the back are brochures describing this art installation.

Later, when Israel was settled in the land, the tabernacle would be replaced by a permanent building, the temple. It would be built under Solomon's kingship, but it was David who led in providing the materials. He contributed gold, silver and bronze, and precious stones, as well as his own personal treasure of yet more gold and silver. Then he asked, "Who then will offer willingly, consecrating himself today to the Lord?" (5). The leaders of Israel's tribes and clans brought their freewill offerings, and "the people rejoiced because they had given willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to the Lord. David the king also rejoiced greatly" (9). Then David prayed his famous prayer:

Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all... But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. (1 Chr 29:11, 14)

Many use these verses to urge Christians to contribute towards the cost of church buildings. Now it is convenient for churches to have buildings, and both buildings and staff require money, but the church is the people not the building. The NT uses a variety of metaphors to portray God's people and their relationship to Christ. Bryan Jeffery Leech's beautiful hymn, *We Are God's People*, which we sang earlier, presents four metaphors of the Church in its four verses. For each metaphor there is a corresponding metaphor for Christ. We are God's people, his family, with Christ as our elder brother. We are the bride, with Christ as the bridegroom. We are the body, with Christ as the head. And we are the temple, a building, with Christ as the cornerstone.

Our Scripture reading, 1 Cor 12, develops this metaphor of the body, beginning with these words:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor 12:4-7)

God gifts each one of us through his Spirit, for service unto our Lord, energized by our empowering God, and all is to be for the common good, for the building up of the whole body. Each one of us is a different body part, all working together as "the body of Christ and individually members of it" (12:27).

The text on the cover of our worship folder is "You are God's building" (1 Cor 3:10). A few verses later Paul writes, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you" (3:16). All too often we read these verses individualistically, thinking that each one of us individually is God's temple. But the verbs "you are" are plural; the metaphor is corporate. We all of us together are God's singular building, his one temple in which he dwells through his Spirit. To the Ephesians Paul writes,

you are...members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being

the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph 2:19-22)

In the OT God dwelt among his people first in a tent, then in a temple. These were constructed of the most precious materials, freely and lovingly contributed by God's people. Now the building is us. We are each building blocks in the Lord's house. We are both the contributors and the contributions. We present ourselves to the Lord. You may not feel like much a building block. You may not feel as precious as silver and gold. You may not see yourself as being as exquisite as the most expensive blue and purple. You may not think of yourself as precious gemstones. But in the Lord's sight we are all more precious than any of these. He is pleased to assemble us into a temple in which he is pleased to dwell. After all, the One whom he has laid as the cornerstone was himself rejected and regarded as nothing. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This cornerstone binds the whole building into one, as we sang earlier in the translation of a 7th-century Latin hymn:

Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the head and cornerstone,
Chosen of the Lord and precious,
Binding all the church in one.

Peter writes,

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 2:4-5)

The tabernacle was a magnificent structure—beautiful. The temple was even better. But now God is pleased to take each one of us, chipped and cracked as we are, to place us on the cornerstone of Christ, and to assemble us into a yet more glorious building for his Presence. He is pleased to call us his home. You are more beautiful to him than the grandest of cathedrals, finer than the purest gold, more dazzling than the most expensive blue or purple. We all of us are building blocks in God's house. We all of us are the materials which he uses to build a house for his presence. Through his Spirit he gives us willing hearts to be both the contributors and the contributions, presenting ourselves to him so he can fit us into his dwelling place.

We have a new Art in the Auditorium installation, "Picturing Grace," featuring the work of Kathy Self and Karen Wong. I have asked them to speak about art as their contribution to the Lord.

Kathy Self

Thank you so much for this opportunity to share my art with you today. I am especially grateful for how this community is celebrating creative beauty by studying the making of the Tabernacle in the wilderness in the book of Exodus.

This account of scriptural creativity has been a source of artistic inspiration for me for many years. In Exodus 31 we read that God has chosen and called a man called Bezalel to make the Tabernacle, and to teach others to assist him. His name means, "In the shadow of God." What a wonderful place for an artist to be! It is my prayer that every painting I create, would start from this holy place of being in God's shadow.

It is interesting to me that God chose the making of the Tabernacle as the first activity for His people after He gave them the 10 Commandments, and His Law. One would perhaps expect that the Israelites would have needed a special Torah school, so that they would all learn and understand what God had said to them. Or perhaps a military training session, a type of bootcamp would have been appropriate, to prepare them for entering the Promised Land. And yet, the Lord chose this; a giant community art project!

Researchers in the field of art therapy have discovered that traumatic experiences are stored in the amygdala, a part of the brain that does not use language, and is often referred to as the primitive or reptile brain. They have learned that when a person that has experienced severe trauma is involved in the arts, such as painting, singing, dancing, writing, or drama, the painful memories can surface and healing can take place. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why God instructed His people to make the Tabernacle; consider the trauma of 400 years of slavery, followed by witnessing the 10 plagues, then escaping from Egypt only to be followed by the most powerful army in the world. It is totally possible that the Israelites were having a significant case of post-traumatic stress disorder, and since the Lord designed the intricacies of the human brain, He knew the deep value of creating beauty together.

In the book of Exodus we also learn about the materials used for the Tabernacle; there was fine linen, beautiful dyes of blue, purple and scarlet, embroidery, precious metals and gemstones. People brought the very best of what they had, what they had plundered from the Egyptians. The Tabernacle was a portable structure that could be carried on the journey. This was the opposite of the monuments and buildings the Israelites had built for the Egyptians; those buildings were of bricks, heavy burdens on the backs of slaves. God's people are called to create with beauty that comes from a freewill offering, the opposite of slavery.

What does all this mean to me today, as an artist who follows Jesus? My journey with the Lord has taken me to so many different places; some beautiful, and some painful, some extraordinary moments, and lots of very ordinary times; the stuff of life, of being a wife, a mother of 3, a servant of the Lord. In Exodus it is recorded that the Lord stirred the hearts of His people to donate beautiful and valuable items, and He also stirred the hearts of those who worked to create with those materials. As I go through my life, I feel the Lord stirring my heart to bring beauty to those around me. This process of creativity, rooted in my walk with the Lord, starts as prayer, and ends as a painting.

My art is a response to what the Lord is teaching me, His fingerprint on my life in all situations and circumstances. And back to Bezalel... In Exodus 31 we learn that Bezalel is the first person in scripture that God says "I have filled him with the Spirit of God," for the express purpose of creating a place of worship for God's people. How much more can we, who carry God's breath in our lives bring our unique beauty together to worship Him, and carry His light to others!

Karen Wong: How God has worked through art in my life

I began with a simple watercolor class copying photographs because I didn't think I had enough creativity to do anything else. But the class taught me to see differently, to notice the color in shadows and to try to figure out how to paint some of the beautiful flowers and trees. I quickly came to the conclusion that what I saw with my mind's eye

and wanted to bring into the painting was far beyond the level of skill that I had at the time. I had two choices: quit, or acquire some skills. So I set out to acquire the skills and made a huge discovery along the way.

I took a class that had several parameters. We were required to paint two very large paintings every week, a seemingly impossible task. All 20 paintings had to be of the same subject arranged in the same way within the rectangle. How could this be possible? After you have painted 2 or 3 or maybe 4 paintings of the same subject, what can you do next? An interesting thing happened. The very restriction of the format, the limits of the format, forced a venture into unknown territory, to relinquish fear and to trust the process.

The first time I took this class, I chose as my theme, The Pianist. I had a photograph of the hands of my daughter's piano teacher on the keys of the piano. After a few paintings of the basic subject, I ran out of ideas, but still had 16 paintings to go. As I looked at the fingers on the keys, I remembered one musician who said that it is the placement of the finger on the key and the correct amount of pressure that determines the beauty of the tone. That seemed so much how God had worked in my life. He touched my life in exactly the right places with exactly the right amount of pressure to produce a deep knowledge of my need of Him and to lead me into worshipping Him.

So I painted a picture in which the hands could also be seen as mountains in a landscape with a sunset and the keys became the edges of a waterfall splashing into the ocean below. It didn't turn out the way I wanted it to. The idea was there, but the execution was lacking. It wasn't perfect. Once again, my vision had exceeded my skill. For the class, we had to stand up front with our paintings each week and hear input from the class members. I stood there with my painting, ashamed, and prepared for criticism of its failure and instead was met with silence and weeping. In spite of my inadequacy, the idea itself had communicated truth.

Then I realized that what was important was to enter into the process, to reflect on God's truth, to make the attempt, to relinquish fear in favor of faith. Once that wall was broken down, out came tumbling limitless possibilities. Future paintings showed the way that my daughter's hands flew like birds across the keys, another, the way the strings of the piano carry the sound from deep within soaring up to the heights of the cathedral ceiling, and one with the hands holding a bouquet of musical notes as an offering of worship to the King. Within those limits, anything became possible.

After that, I ended up taking the class 7 more times. One later series took a look at the Living Water of God's love poured out for us which culminated in the 20th painting which you see over there called The Bridge, reflecting on Jesus' ascension, and the way He holds back the darkness and brings us into the light.

After that, I did a series called Identity which followed my own path of first rejecting the Savior and then yielding to Him, moving from rejection to repentance, then trust and finally resting in Him.

The paintings are not perfect but the process provides a place for my heart to ponder and to heal.

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