



MERCY AND TRUTH ARE MET TOGETHER

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

Exodus 25:10–22

Third Message

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Today is the First Sunday of Lent. Last week the world focused its attention on Tuesday, a day of indulgence and excess: Mardi Gras in New Orleans, the Carnival in Rio. But the church focused on Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. Around the world Christians recited or sang the *Miserere*, Psalm 51, one of the seven penitential psalms. *Miserere mei Deus*:

**Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions. (Ps 51:1 ESV)**

Ash Wednesday is a day when Christians are acutely aware of the gulf between a holy God and sinful humanity. Yet this holy God can be approached with the petition, “Have mercy on me, O God.” The grounds for making this petition are his loyal love and his abundant mercy. The Jewish calendar has a similar day: Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year. It, too, is a day of fasting, repentance and confession. On both Ash Wednesday and Yom Kippur sinful humanity comes humbly before a holy God. We come conscious of our mortality, frailty and sinfulness. We come confident of the goodness of a merciful God: “Thy mercy seat is open still,” as was just sung.¹

This encounter between sinful mortals and a holy God is built into the very structure of the tabernacle, specifically the two pieces of furniture that lie at its very heart, the ark of the covenant and its cover.

The Lord has instructed Moses to have the people bring him their freewill contributions for the Lord. They are to make for the Lord a sanctuary, a holy place, so he can dwell in their midst. This sanctuary is to be in the form of a tent, a tabernacle, to be built exactly according to the pattern the Lord will show Moses on the mountain.

We come now to the details of the tabernacle. The tabernacle will be a two-chambered tent, surrounded by a courtyard. This defines three levels of increasing holiness moving from the outside in: the courtyard, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. There are seven pieces of furniture: the ark of the covenant and the atonement cover in the Most Holy Place; the incense altar, the table, and the lampstand in the Holy Place; and the altar of burnt offering and the basin in the courtyard.

Across seven chapters (25–31) the Lord gives Moses detailed instructions for everything: the tabernacle, its furniture and the priests’ garments. Another six chapters (35–40) describe the fulfillment of these instructions, as everything is made exactly as the Lord commanded Moses. The devotion of thirteen chapters to the tabernacle shows its importance. The order is different between instruction and construction. The instructions are given from the inside out: the ark and cover, then the table and lampstand, then the tent. Construction follows a logical order: the tent first, then

the items of furniture working from the inside out. In between the seven chapters of instruction and six chapters of construction there are three chapters that are vitally important for understanding the significance of the tabernacle.

In the Lord’s instructions, 88 times he will tell Moses, “You shall make...” But Moses will not make anything. Instead, it is Bezalel, the first person in all Scripture whom the Lord fills with his Spirit, who makes the tabernacle and its furniture. The people will make the priests’ garments, then bring everything to Moses. His role is to evaluate it, seeing that it is all as the Lord had commanded, and then to assemble it.

Today we come to the instructions for the first two items, the two pieces of furniture for the Most Holy Place: the ark and its cover.

1. The Ark (25:10–16)

“They shall make an ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside shall you overlay it, and you shall make on it a molding of gold around it. You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it. You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark by them. The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. And you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give you.” (Exod 25:10–16)

First let me clear up a potential misunderstanding. This ark has no relation to Noah’s ark; a different Hebrew word is used for that. But both are translated with the Latin word *arca* (whence our English word “ark”), meaning a chest or coffer in which something is placed for safekeeping—which is actually a very good description of the function of Noah’s ark. Moses is to make a wooden chest, of acacia wood, covered inside and out with pure gold, either gold leaf, or, more likely, thin sheets of gold nailed onto the wood. Its size is to be $2\frac{1}{2} \times 1\frac{1}{2} \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ cubits. Since a cubit is the distance from the elbow to the finger-tip, about 18 inches, this is about $3\frac{3}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ ft. Wooden poles covered in gold are to be made so the ark can be carried; these are to be passed through gold rings on the feet of the ark. These poles are not to be removed.

Though a lot of detail is given for both the ark and its cover, it is insufficient to actually reconstruct these two items. Depictions vary considerably. The ark found in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* looks quite different from the ark depicted in the *ESV Study Bible*, which is different again from the ark portrayed in our tabernacle art installation. There are several uncertainties. Despite the text mentioning feet, not all depictions show feet. Are the poles installed along the long or the short sides? How big are the cherubim on the top and what do they look like?

Real archaeology, not that of Indiana Jones, provides some help. When the tomb of King Tutankhamun was discovered, among the objects found was a wooden chest, with four poles permanently mounted longitudinally by rings to the feet. Another wooden chest was lined inside and out with thin gold panels.

The ark is a chest, made to contain a most sacred object, the testimony, which the Lord had summoned Moses to receive: “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction” (24:12). When the Lord finishes giving the instructions to Moses, he will give him “the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God” (31:18). Inscribed on these two stone tablets were the ten commandments, which summarized the covenant treaty between God and his people. There were two tablets and ten commandments; how many commandments were on each tablet?

Jewish art portrays five on each tablet. Synagogues generally have a depiction of the ten commandments either inside or outside their buildings; these always show two tablets with five on each. But no theological significance is attached to distinguishing five and five. Reformed Protestants separate them into four and six: the first tablet containing the commandments pertaining to God, the second those pertaining to man. So, “the second tablet of the law” is shorthand for commandments 5–10, our duties to our fellow man. Lutherans separate them into three and seven, as depicted in our window—the stained glass artist had more familiarity with designing for Lutheran churches. To further complicate matters there are three different ways of numbering the ten commandments, so the Protestant 4+6 is actually the same as the Lutheran 3+7! Both divide the commandments at the same point into one set governing our behavior to God, the other our behavior to fellow humanity.

It is useful theologically to classify the commandments into two sets: we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. But I don’t think this reflects what was written on the tablets themselves. Again archaeology is helpful. In the Ancient Near East, when treaties were made between two rulers, whether between equal partners, or between a suzerain and a vassal, each side deposited a copy of the treaty in the temple of his god. For example, the oldest extant documented treaty is that made in 1259 BC between the Egyptians and the Hittites, the two superpowers of the day, after their inconclusive Battle of Kadesh. In Egypt the treaty was inscribed on the wall of the Temple of Amun in Karnak. A clay tablet of the treaty, found in the excavations of the Hittite capital, is now in the archeological museum in Istanbul.

So, I think it much more likely that each tablet contained all ten commandments; there were two complete copies. The Decalogue is the treaty document between God and his people, binding them to each other: “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt... You shall have no other gods before me” (20:2–3). Unlike all other ancient treaties, both copies of this treaty are deposited together in the same place. Both the Lord’s copy and Israel’s copy are put into the chest. These tablets are the testimony, the witnesses to the covenant between the Lord and his people. Both copies are enshrined at the very center of the Israelite camp. Both parties are to be loyal to the covenant. Because the ark contains these tablets, it is called the ark of the testimony, or the ark of the covenant of the Lord.

The ark is a chest open at the top. It needs a cover, which is described next.

2. The Cover (25:17–22)

“You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.” (25:17–22)

Moses is to make a *kapporet*, of the same length and width as the ark. What is a *kapporet*? The Hebrew verb *kpr* is used once literally for covering Noah’s ark with pitch. But it’s primarily used metaphorically for a covering that produces atonement for sin. The noun *kapporet* is used uniquely of this one item; it is an instrument of atonement. It does serve as a cover for the ark but its primary covering purpose concerns atonement. Though always included with the ark, this item has its own identity, so I count it as a separate piece of furniture. Martin Luther translated the Hebrew word *kapporet* into German as *gnadenstuhl*, stool of grace. Tyndale liked this and copied it into English as “mercy seat” in his translation of 1530. Most English versions still render it this way, but NIV has bucked the tradition with “atonement cover.”

It is to be made of solid gold, pure gold of the finest quality. It is to be adorned with two cherubim, fashioned of one piece with the lid. Biblical cherubim bear no resemblance to Raphael’s whimsical cherubs. Cherubim were symbolic creatures. They were hybrids: with wings, human heads and animal bodies, usually a lion or a bull. Cherubim served as symbolic throne attendants. More cherubim were to be embroidered into the curtains that formed the innermost layer of the tent. These two golden cherubim are to be fashioned with their wings spread out, overshadowing the lid with a protective covering. After expelling Adam and Eve from the garden, the Lord stationed cherubim at the entrance to guard the way to the tree of life, to guard his sanctuary (Gen 3:24). The notion of guardian cherubs is Biblical, but, again, these are nothing like Raphael’s who look incapable of protecting against anything.

3. God’s Throne Room

What is the meaning of the ark and its lid? A common approach is to allegorize: the wood represents Christ’s humanity, the gold represents his deity, the three three-fold structure of courtyard, Holy Place and Most Holy Place represents man’s tripartite composition as body, soul and spirit, and so on. We don’t need to resort to allegory to understand the meaning; the Scriptures tell us. The Most Holy Place with its two pieces of furniture is the Lord’s earthly throne room; hence the gold and the cherubim. This is where he put his presence. He is described as being enthroned on the cherubim, with the ark as his footstool. Again archaeology helps us. A footstool was a

common accessory to a royal throne. Six fine chairs or thrones were found in King Tut's tomb, several of them with footstools.

The Most Holy Place was an intrusion of heaven onto earth. But in reality God could not be contained within this space. Elsewhere he says, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool" (Isa 66:1). Yet it is here, enthroned on the cherubim, that the Lord puts his presence while he dwells among his people. Here, above the mercy seat, between the cherubim, he will meet with Moses and speak with him.

The Lord was enthroned on the wings of the cherubim which protectively overshadowed the ark. The psalmist longed to take refuge in the shadow of those protective wings. David showed his appetite for the Lord when he asked, "Let me dwell in your tent forever! Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings!" (Ps 61:4). Here he asks to be hidden (Ps 17:8). Here he will sing for joy (Ps 63:7).

Here the Lord is enthroned; here his glory cloud takes up residence. Yet, in another sense, the throne is vacant. Here he is enthroned, but neither he nor any representation of himself is ever seen. There is no idol or image representing God. There is nothing to be worshiped or venerated. Though Israel is to serve the Lord, he is not to be reduced to an object made of wood, stone or metal, materials which he created anyway. He is not to be worshiped as the pagans worship their idols and statues. The high priest will enter the space once each year, but he will bring a censer of incense, so that the cloud of incense cover the mercy seat; he will not even be able to see the space where the Lord is said to be enthroned. In 63 BC, the Roman general Pompey captured Jerusalem and its temple. He strode into the Holy of Holies, and to his astonishment found it empty. He had never heard of a temple without an image. He couldn't conceive of such a thing. This was so extraordinary that the Roman historian Tacitus recorded it.

The ark and the cover are two separate but closely related pieces of furniture. The ark is the chest where the treaty documents of the covenant between God and his people are placed for safekeeping. They testify to God's loyal love and faithfulness; he will be loyal to his covenant. They testify to truth. They also testify to Israel's acceptance, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (24:7). But moments after the Lord gives the two tablets to Moses on top of the mountain, they lie shattered on the ground at the foot of the mountain. The people have lost faith and asked Aaron to make them a visible form that they can see and worship; they wanted something tangible. They have broken covenant within just forty days. What will happen to the detailed instructions for making the tabernacle in which those tablets can be placed for safekeeping, now that the tablets have been broken? The three chapters between the instructions and the construction describe the process whereby the Lord agrees to maintain his Presence with this stiff-necked people. These are holy chapters. He renews the covenant with his people and writes a new set of tablets for Moses. He graciously allows the tabernacle to be built as a repository for these tablets and as a dwelling place for his presence.

But how will this holy God be able to live in the midst of an unholy people? The tabernacle is built, occupied by God's glory, consecrated and the sacrifices begun. Once a year, on the most holy day of the year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the most holy person in Israel, the high priest, enters into the most holy space, the Holy of Holies. Israel's three dimensions of holiness—time, space

and person—meet at this moment. The high priest shall enter with the blood of a bull killed as a sin offering for himself and his house; this he will sprinkle in front of the mercy seat. Then he shall do the same with the blood of a goat killed as a sin offering for the people. Thus he shall make atonement for himself and for the people.

Atonement both expiates and propitiates. It expiates, removing the guilt of sin. It propitiates, averting the wrath of God and restoring favor and peace. Both expiation and propitiation are accomplished through a vicarious sacrifice: the blood of bulls and goats is shed instead of the blood of sinful humans. God graciously accepts this substitution as atoning. The high priest had to enter every year, seeking atonement both for himself and his household and for the people. Ultimately "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Heb 10:3). But the tabernacle and its sacrificial cult pointed forward; it was a type of what was to come.

The Lord Jesus Christ passed through the veil, entering once for all into the true sanctuary, the heavenly sanctuary, the Most Holy Place indeed, where God dwells. Being without sin, he had no need to make atonement for himself. And by offering up the perfect sacrifice once and for all, he had no need to come back out again. He remains inside the veil as the true liturgist, the true minister: "a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man" (Heb 8:2). In Jesus, the ark and its cover are fulfilled. God has been faithful to his covenant, by sending his Son to be both the perfect offerer and the perfect offering, whose blood accomplishes atonement.

The ark and its cover were a collision point between God's faithfulness and the people's sinfulness. The tablets of the testimony testified to God's loyal love. But the annual entrance of the high priest to sprinkle blood on the cover reminded of Israel's sin and need for atonement.

Our Scripture reading (Matt 9:9–12) was a story from the life of Jesus illustrating this collision. Jesus saw Matthew sitting at his tax booth and called him, "Follow me." As a tax collector, an agent of the Roman occupation, Matthew was despised by his countrymen, and especially by the Pharisees who viewed him as unclean, defiled, excluded. Matthew heeded Jesus's call and followed him. He then threw a big party so other tax collectors and sinners could meet this Jesus and his disciples over a feast. The Pharisees, ever watchful of Jesus, asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" The Pharisees were very careful about their dinner companions. They had table fellowship only with those in a similar state of purity to themselves, lest they be defiled and rendered unclean. They couldn't understand how Jesus, who in some respects seemed to be like them as a rabbi with his disciples, could be so lax about his table fellowship. It was Jesus himself who responded, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt 9:12).

Here he was quoting Hosea 6:6, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." It is not that the Lord didn't desire sacrifice and burnt offerings; he had given extensive instructions for such in Leviticus. This is an example of Hebrew logic: "A not B" means "A much more than B." Yes, the Lord did require sacrifice and burnt offerings, but what he really wanted was steadfast love and the knowledge of himself. "Steadfast love" is the Hebrew word *hesed*, loyal love, love that is faithful to covenant. The Pharisees thought they were being loyal to the Lord's

covenant in their preoccupation with the minutiae of the law. They thought they were being loyal by keeping the riffraff away from their tables, by excluding. But they completely misunderstood God. They did not grasp his concept of loyal love. Jesus was showing God's loyal love by welcoming tax collectors and sinners to the table. Where the Pharisees excluded them, Jesus embraced them.

The Pharisees had failed to learn an important lesson about the character of God. It is a lesson found in the three chapters between the instructions for the tabernacle and its construction, where God is dealing with the aftermath of the people's sin, when the tablets of the testimony lie shattered on the ground. Moses asked God, "Please show me now your ways, that I may know you" (Exod 33:13). At the Lord's command, Moses cut two new stone tablets and climbed back up the mountain. The Lord descended in the cloud, stood with him there, and proclaimed his name:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. (Exod 34:6–7)

God is loyal to his covenant when he forgives. He has purposed to redeem a people for himself, a purpose to which he will be faithful. It is in accord with his faithfulness, not against it, that he forgives iniquity, transgression and sin. In the ark and its cover, mercy and truth are met together. The ark containing the ten commandments speaks of truth. Its cover speaks of mercy. God is a merciful and compassionate God; by being so he does not deny his steadfast love and faithfulness, but affirms and exercises it. At this season of Lent, when we are conscious of the collision between our sinfulness and God's holiness, may we be confident that it is intrinsic to God's character to be merciful, and that by being merciful he is not denying his truth and his covenant purposes.

1. Anne Steele, "Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul" (1760).

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