



SACRED ORDER

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

Exodus 31:1-18

Eighth Message

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“How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord.” Israel was uniquely privileged to have God set his dwelling place among them. No other nation in the ancient world had this privilege. God’s presence in their midst in his dwelling place, first in the tabernacle, then in the temple, was the focal point of Israel’s life. The psalmist longed to be there, where God was: “Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool” (Ps 132:7).

The construction of the Lord’s first dwelling place is a major theme of the book of Exodus. Of the book’s 40 chapters, 24 or 40% are devoted to the tabernacle. We’ve been looking at the Lord’s instructions which cover seven chapters. The construction of the tabernacle was to be a group project for all Israel. The instructions began with a list of materials which Moses was to receive from the people: “From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me... 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 25:2, 8-9). The Lord then gave Moses detailed instructions: “You shall make...you shall make...” But how is Moses to make all of this? God provides for that as well.

The Tabernacle

The LORD said to Moses, “See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft. And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you: the tent of meeting, and the ark of the testimony, and the mercy seat that is on it, and all the furnishings of the tent, the table and its utensils, and the pure lampstand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand, and the finely worked garments, the holy garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons, for their service as priests, and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense for the Holy Place. According to all that I have commanded you, they shall do.” (Exod 31:1-11 ESV)

Moses himself will not actually build the tabernacle; the Lord provides others to do so. He has provided Bezalel to head up the project, calling him by name to this specific task. He has filled him with his Spirit, the first person in Scripture of whom this is said. God’s Spirit provides Bezalel with four qualities: ability, intelligence, knowledge and craftsmanship. These enable him to both conceive the design and execute the work, whether it be working with the precious metals of gold, silver and bronze, or cutting the precious stones, or shaping the wood, so that he can do all the work. The Lord

has provided assistants for the work. Firstly, he has given Oholiab as a personal assistant to Bezalel. Secondly, he has put ability within a whole company of able people so that they can make everything. So it’s to be a team effort on the part of Israel.

They are to make the tent and all its furnishings including the inner veil that divides it into two chambers. They are to make the seven pieces of furniture for the three zones of the tabernacle: the ark and the mercy seat for the Most Holy Place; the table for the bread of presence, the lampstand and the altar of incense for the Holy Place; and the altar of burnt offering and the basin for the courtyard. They are to make the sacred vestments for Aaron the high priest and for his sons the priests. They are to make the anointing oil which will be used to consecrate everything, and the fragrant incense to be burnt on the golden altar of incense in front of the veil.

The tabernacle was the Lord’s sanctuary; it was holy space. And it was his dwelling place, where he could dwell in the midst of his people. The presence of the tabernacle gave Israel a sacred geography. The Lord had delivered his people from harsh slavery in Egypt and brought them through the wilderness to Mt Sinai to meet with him. But Mt Sinai was not their final destination. That was Canaan, the land promised to Abram and his descendants four centuries earlier. When it would come time to leave Mt Sinai after nearly a year, the Lord wanted his people to go with his Presence not with his Absence. The tabernacle enabled God’s Presence to accompany them as they continued their journey to the Promised Land. His Presence was, as it were, transferred from the top of Mt Sinai to the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle. Eventually it would be transferred to the Most Holy Place in the temple in Jerusalem. The focal point of Israel’s sacred geography was this Presence in their midst. The one thing that King David asked of the Lord was “that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD” (Ps 27:4). The sons of Korah were envious of the sparrow and swallow which could build their nests in the Lord’s temple (Ps 84:3).

The language used for the tabernacle is similar to that used for creation in Genesis 1. Starting with an earth that was without form or content, God imposed order through his word, separating realms: light from darkness, day from night, waters above from waters below. In a similar way God imposed order through the tabernacle, separating different realms of holiness. As his Spirit hovered over the waters ready to execute God’s word, so his Spirit filled Bezalel, preparing him to execute God’s word to Moses. God brought his people out of the chaos of Egypt and he gave them order. He gave them a sacred geography centered on his Presence. He gave them ordered space.

The tabernacle also served to make God known:

“I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.” (29:45-46)

The tabernacle was visible proof of the Lord and of his great deeds on behalf of Israel: “they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them.”

The Sabbath

The instructions that God gave Moses are divided into seven speeches. The seventh speech concerns not the tabernacle but the Sabbath:

And the LORD said to Moses, “You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.’” (31:12-17)

You might wonder what connection the Sabbath has to the tabernacle. They are connected through the idea of work. God’s Spirit has equipped Bezalel to do the work, but when can work be done? In Egypt God’s people had had no rest. Theirs had been a life of harsh slavery. The Lord delivered them from that misery and gave them rest. Six days were available for their work. But the seventh was different, it was holy. It was holy to the Lord and it was holy to Israel. The Lord set it aside for Israel as a day for himself. They were to keep the Sabbath as a sign and as a covenant; it was a sign of that covenant. Like the tabernacle, the Sabbath echoed creation. God had set the pattern in the beginning: in six days he did his work of making heaven and earth. On the seventh day he rested and was refreshed. He commanded Israel to imitate him on a weekly basis: six days of work followed by a day of rest. The Sabbath would be for them a sanctuary in time just as the tabernacle was a sanctuary in space. The Sabbath gave Israel a sacred calendar based on the week. To this was added a yearly calendar of festivals. The Sabbath gave Israel ordered time, a rhythm to time.

The Sabbath, like the tabernacle, also had an educational aspect. Keeping the Sabbath would be a sign “that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.” The Sabbath was visible proof of the Lord’s intent that his people be holy. Their whole life was structured around holiness: holy space, holy time, holy people.

The Two Tablets

And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. (31:18)

Finally the Lord finished speaking with Moses on top of Mt Sinai. Moses has been on top of the mountain in the Lord’s presence for forty days. It’s time for him to go down to the people to put into action all he has been commanded to do. But there is one final thing. The Lord had commanded Moses,

“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)

Written on these two tablets with the very finger of God were the ten commandments. Why two tablets? Because there wasn’t enough room on one tablet for all ten commandments? That’s how they are portrayed in art: whether the Lutheran 3+7 or the Protestant 4+6 or the Jewish 5+5. The Lutheran and Protestant depictions consider that the first tablet contains the laws pertaining to God and the second tablet contains the laws pertaining to mankind. It is more likely that each tablet was inscribed with the full set of commandments. There were two identical copies, one for God, one for the people, because this was the treaty document between God and his people. It was the document binding them together as God and people: “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.”

The Ten Commandments gave Israel a sacred ethic. They were a holy people belonging to a holy God. The Ten Commandments were augmented with many additional commandments; the Pharisees of Jesus’ day counted 613 in total. There were two basic principles of this ethic. Be holy as I am holy, says the Lord. And, don’t behave like other people, especially like the Egyptians from whose land you have come and like the Canaanites into whose land you are entering.

The tablets of the law gave Israel an ordered life after the chaos of Egypt. The Lord delivered Israel from disorder in Egypt, a life of darkness, of harsh slavery. He delivered them into a life of freedom. But that freedom is not to be equated with “anything goes.” This tends to lead to chaos and disorder. No, true freedom is generally found within order.

This is what God gave Israel: an ordered life. He gave them order in space, a sacred geography, centered on his Presence in their midst. He gave them order in time, a sacred calendar centered on the Sabbath in which they imitated him. He gave them order in lifestyle, a sacred ethics centered on the Ten Commandments, the treaty document binding him and his people together. The Lord gave Israel a sacred order. It was a new creation. It is no accident that this order uses creation language, that there are echoes of Genesis 1. The tabernacle was ordered space just as God ordered the cosmos in the beginning. The Sabbath was ordered time, just as God followed a seven-day order in creation. The law was ordered behavior. Israel was to serve the Lord and keep his commandments, to worship and obey, just as Adam in the garden was to serve and keep, to worship and obey in the garden. The same pair of verbs is used for Adam, for Israel, for the Levites and for the priests. This gift of order was a great gift indeed.

Two weeks ago David Brooks preached at the National Cathedral, and quoted Tim Keller: “In many areas of life, freedom is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones, the liberating restrictions.”¹ To most people “liberating restrictions” is an oxymoron. Surely liberation means freedom from all restrictions, throwing off all restraints. Life is free when we live within order, especially the order for which we were created. God gave Israel order in space, in time, and in ethics, so that they could have true freedom. The same is true for us today. God has called us to himself, “whose service is perfect freedom.”²

By giving Israel this gift of order, God gave it a sense of belonging. Israel belonged to God; this belonging was expressed in space, time and ethics. His people knew where they belonged in space: God’s Presence in the sanctuary was their focal point. They knew where

they belonged in time, repeating the rhythm of the Sabbath in which they imitated God. And they knew where they belonged in ethics, keeping Torah. Beyond were the surrounding nations in their chaos and disorder. But here was Israel called out of the chaos to live an ordered life.

In this gift of order God also made himself known. That's who he is: a God who makes himself known. He made himself known in the tabernacle. He made himself known in the Sabbath. He made himself known in the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Out of disorder and chaos into a life of order and freedom.

But this order generated an "us-them" mentality in Israel. They had the Lord's presence in the temple. They had the Sabbath, a temple in time. And they had the Torah. The other nations did not. Israel had order; the other nations had disorder. But God intended that Israel be a witness to the other nations, that they would look on Israel and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (Deut 4:6). Israel was to be a light to the nations. Israel's ordered life was supposed to be attractive to the surrounding nations. "Us" was supposed to attract "them."

By the time of Jesus this "us-them" divide was set in stone. It applied not only between Jews and Gentiles but also among the Jews: those who kept all the laws versus those who did not, the clean versus the unclean. But Jesus broke all their rules. He ventured into the territory of "them." He loved "them." He embraced "them." He ate with the tax collectors and sinners. He touched the defective: the lame, the deaf, the dumb. He touched the unclean: the hemorrhaging woman and the lepers. And he expected his disciples to do likewise. To his core of Galilean fishermen he added a tax collector and a zealot, as opposite as you could possibly get. He called them to follow him. Somehow they all had to get along; the only way to do so was to be centered on Jesus. This was a new sacred geography, one centered not on a place, the temple, but on a person, Jesus himself. Matthew's immediate response was to throw a party so all his other tax collector friends could meet Jesus: "many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples" (Matt 9:10). Imagine the disciples: they were having enough trouble accommodating one tax collector in their number; now they had to dine with a whole table full of tax collectors. No wonder the Pharisees, the gatekeepers of that time, were upset. Jesus redefined the sacred geography around himself. Many of "them" found themselves included. Many who considered themselves "us" found themselves excluded.

Jesus also redefined the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for mankind not mankind for the Sabbath. It was a day for showing mercy, a day for healing, a day for bringing unwell people into a state of *shalom*, of well-being.

And Jesus redefined, or perhaps better re-focused, Torah, the Law: "you have heard that it was said...but I say unto you," he said six times in the Sermon on the Mount. "'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:43-44). What can produce this sort of ethic that goes beyond the written commandment to the heart attitude behind it?

For this Jesus was killed. The Jewish leaders took offense at his attitude to sacred geography, to sacred time, and to the sacred ethic. He redefined sacred geography around himself not the temple. He saw a different purpose for sacred time: a time for bringing people into a state of *shalom*, a state of flourishing, rather than a time for

ceasing from all that religious powers had deemed to be work. He redefined the sacred ethic to be loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself not only in outward actions but, more importantly, in innermost thoughts and attitudes. This was a new sacred order, an order centered on Jesus. Those with disordered lives responded: they flocked to Jesus. Those who thought their lives were already ordered took offense and ultimately got rid of Jesus. He upset their sense of order.

This Jesus-centered focus carried over into the New Testament church. Jesus said to his disciples, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The Book of Acts begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome. The family of Jesus-followers steadily expanded, embracing the Samaritans, the hated half-breeds; the Ethiopian eunuch who as a foreigner and a defective person had been excluded; the Roman centurion Cornelius who was a God-fearer; and even a Roman governor, Sergius Paulus in Cyprus. The church expanded to include more and more of "them." The church was highly focused: all its members were "in Christ." But it was also highly distributed. It was locally-focused. Barnabas and Saul went out from the church in Antioch. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, the church in Rome, the church in Ephesus, the church in Philippi, and so on. The sacred geography of the New Testament church was both universal and local. It comprised "all those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:2).

This is true for us today. We have a sacred geography. On the one hand it is centered on the Lord Jesus Christ who transcends geography. We belong with those who in every place call upon the Lord Jesus. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). This geography is not restricted to ethnicity, nationality, gender, socioeconomic class, or the many other ways of defining "us" and "them." Yet we also have a local sacred geography. We are part of a family of Jesus-followers here in Cupertino. God wants us to love him and love our neighbors right here. He wants us to love the family next door, to love the work colleague at the next desk, to love the person we encounter in the grocery store. He wants us to love "them" whoever "they" may be.

We also have a new sacred calendar. Paul wrote, "let no one pass judgment on you...with regard to a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col 2:16-17). Paul encourages both the Ephesians and the Colossians to redeem or make the best use of the time (Eph 5:16; Col 4:5). The root meaning of the verb here (*exagorazō*) is to buy something from the marketplace. Greek has two words for time: *chronos* which is simply clock time, and *kairos* which is a significant moment of time. I think of this as an invitation to go shopping at the marketplace of *chronos* time. We can redeem those minutes and hours of clock time and make them *kairos* time, significant time. How? By talking with your neighbor. By having lunch with your work colleague. Perhaps, or in this environment probably, he or she is quite different from you: different ethnicity, different nationality. Redeeming the time is what Matthew was doing when he invited his tax collector friends to a dinner party with Jesus. He was turning *chronos* time into *kairos* time, clock-time into significant-moment time.

We also have a new ethic. The law, written by the finger of God on tablets of stone, was a temporary measure. It was a custodian, leading Israel to Christ. Written on stone it did not have the power to

transform hearts, otherwise there would have been no need for Jesus to say, “You have heard it was said...but I say unto you.” But now God puts his Spirit inside us to transform our hearts so that we are actually able to follow his ethic. What is this ethic? It is summarized in the two commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. God’s Spirit inside us gives us freedom to do that within order. So Augustine could dare to say, “Love God and do what you want.”³ Empowered by the Spirit we are invited to imitate Christ himself. We love God first and then whatever flows from that will be pleasing to him.

God gave Israel a sacred order: a sacred geography centered on his Presence among his people, a sacred calendar centered on the Sabbath in which they imitated him, and a sacred ethic centered on the Ten Commandments. He gives us a sacred order. A sacred geography that is both global and rooted to this place where we are. A sacred calendar in which we are invited to make any moment a sacred moment. And a sacred ethic enabled by the Spirit in us so we can love God and love our neighbor. God gives us the great gift of an ordered life, centered in Christ and enabled by his Spirit. And therein lies our freedom.

So, does your life have order today? Is there an order that sets you free? We have this great gift of order and freedom to offer the chaotic, disordered world around us: your next-door neighbor, your work colleague, the parents of your children’s classmates. We can invite them to find order and freedom in Jesus. This precious gift that God gave Israel in the tabernacle he gives us in Jesus. It’s ours to share with a world that desperately needs order.

I close with the Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo:

Lord God, the light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the hearts that serve you: Help us... so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

1. Timothy J. Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 46.

2. Morning Prayer: The second Collect, for Peace, *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662).

3. *Dilige et quod vis fac*; Augustine, *Ep. Io.* tr. 7.8 (*Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, Homily 7, para. 8; on 1 John 4:9).