

The Tabernacle God's Presence with His People

Exodus 25–40

Sermons by

Bernard Bell



Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino
Cupertino, California
www.pbcc.org

© 2016–2019 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino

Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001, 2006, 2011 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Contents

	Text	Title	Cat.No.	Date	Page
1.	25:1-9	God's Building Materials		1.31.2016	5
2.	25:8-9	Does God Dwell in Houses Made by Hands?		2.07.2016	9
3.	25:10-22	Mercy and Truth Are Met Together		2.14.2016	13
4.	25:23-40	Bread and Light: Symbols of Presence		2.21.2016	17
5.	26:1-37; 27:9-19	Excluded and Embraced		2.05.2017	21
6.	28:1-43	Jesus, Our Great High Priest		2.12.2017	25
7.	29:1-46	Consecrated to God		2.19.2017	29
8.	31:1-18	Sacred Order		2.26.2017	33
9.	32:1-14	Prone to Wander		1.07.2018	37
10.	32:15-35	Satisfied in Him Alone		1.14.2018	41
11.	33:1-17	God's Face: Friend or Foe?		1.21.2018	45
12.	33:18-34:9	What's In a Name?		1.28.2018	49
13.	34:10-28	Passionate Presence		3.17.2019	53
14.	34:29-35	Transforming Presence		3.24.2019	57
15.	35:1-36:7	Bringing Our All and Even More		3.31.2019	61
16.	36:8-40:33	A Container for the Uncontainable		4.07.2019	65
17.	40:34-38	God's Gift of Himself		4.14.2019	69



GOD'S BUILDING MATERIALS

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

Exodus 25:1-9

First Message

Bernard Bell

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.

© 2016 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino



DOES GOD DWELL IN HOUSES MADE BY HANDS?

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

Exodus 25:8-9

Second Message

Bernard Bell

February 7, 2016

I spent a significant part of my childhood in Thailand. Among the familiar sights were spirit houses; they were everywhere, and still are prevalent throughout Thailand and adjacent countries. A spirit house is a little house or temple mounted on a pedestal, usually located in a corner of the yard. In rural areas these are simple, but for major businesses in Bangkok they are elaborate. A spirit house provides a home for the spirit of that place. The spirit needs a place to dwell, and the residents need the spirit to be happy if it is to play its protective and beneficent role.

Is the same true for God? Does he need a house made by human hands in which to dwell? Last week we started a new series looking at the tabernacle, the tent in which God dwelt in the midst of his people. But does God really need such a man-made residence?

We saw last week that the Lord instructed Moses to have the people bring him their freewill contributions: seven categories of materials. What are they to do with these materials?

“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 25:8-9 ESV)

“Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.” To us this seems a wonderful sentiment. Our call to worship started, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord” (Ps 84:1). Even the sparrow and the swallow find a home in God’s house. Several of our songs have echoed this theme. But it must have been a terrifying prospect for the Israelites at the time. It was only a few days prior that the Israelites had arrived at Mt Sinai, where they encamped at its base. Moses prepared the people to meet God: he consecrated them and they washed their garments. He set a security perimeter around the base of the mountain lest they venture onto the mountain and die.

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain... Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off. (Exod 19:16-20; 20:18)

Moses drew near and engaged in shuttle diplomacy between the Lord and the people, acting as mediator in the making of a covenant

between the two parties. With the Lord and his people now bound together in covenant, the Lord came down to dwell:

The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. (24:16-17)

Now this God whose presence is like a consuming fire wants to put his presence in the midst of the people! The top of Mt Sinai can scarce contain his glory; how will he be able to put that glory in the midst of his people? How will the people ever survive his presence among them?

And why does the Lord want to dwell with his people, to put his presence in their midst? Is the Lord lonely that he needs a people around him? No, the Lord isn’t lonely; he is fully relational and satisfied within the triune community of the Godhead. He didn’t make the world or humans out of loneliness; nor did he call Israel to be his people to meet any relational needs. He creates and redeems through the overflow of his love. But why does he want to dwell with a people so prone to grumbling?

“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 Lord did not need a man-made structure in which to dwell. It was Israel that required such a structure. It would be a visible sign to them so they would know. They would know that they were his people, that he was their God, and that he was the one who had brought them out of Egypt. Since Israel was to be a holy nation and a royal priesthood, it would also be a sign to the nations so that they would know that the Lord was in Israel’s midst. If Israel lived in a manner appropriate to this presence, then the nations would be drawn towards Israel and its God.

What man-made structure can possibly contain the Lord? The people are to make him a sanctuary, a tabernacle. In today’s language a sanctuary implies a refuge, a place of safety. But a sanctuary is really a holy place. The Lord is a holy God. Here there is a problem: how can a holy God put his presence in the midst of an unholy people?

What do we even mean by holy? Holy is that which is “other,” set aside from that which is common or ordinary. Rudolf Otto, in his classic book, *The Idea of the Holy*, describes the one who is holy as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery that causes trembling and fascination.¹ The holy God is a *mysterium*. Because there is such a gulf between us and God, because we are on opposite sides of the Creator/creature divide, God must necessarily be mysterious. We can know him only as he has chosen to reveal himself to us. And this revelation of himself to us is necessarily limited in the interests of our

own survival. But it is because God is mysterious that we worship him. If there were no mystery we would not worship.

He is a *mysterium tremendum*. Again because of the gulf between us and God we tremble in his presence; we don't take him lightly. But he is also a *mysterium fascinans*, a mystery that fascinates. Though we tremble when confronted with this Holy One who is mysterious, we are also fascinated and drawn to him.

In the children's book *The Wind in the Willows*, which like all good children's books is best read as an adult, Mole and Rat experience this mystery that both terrifies and fascinates when they are confronted with an august Presence:

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror—indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy—but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend, and saw him at his side cowed, stricken, and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew...

"Rat!" he found breath to whisper, shaking. "Are you afraid?"

"Afraid?" murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. "Afraid! Of HIM? O, never, never! And yet—and yet—O, Mole, I am afraid!"

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.²

Many of you are familiar with this dialog from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, as Mr Beaver tells the children about Aslan:

"But shall we see him?" asked Susan.

"Why, Daughter of Eve, that's what I brought you here for. I'm to lead you where you shall meet him," said Mr Beaver.

"Is—is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man!" said Mr Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."³

The Lord's presence among his people will be a compelling presence: it will be the focus of Israel's life. But it is not a safe presence. The Lord's holiness is constantly threatening to break out against his people. But they will learn that it is also a kind and gracious presence. Soon he will reveal himself as:

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. (34:6-7)

It is this God, who is not safe but who is merciful, good and kind, who comes to dwell in the midst of his people. To those who know him as a merciful and gracious God his presence will be good. But to those who take his presence for granted or who ignore the holy requirements of his presence he will burst forth in terrifying ways.

The Lord is a holy God. He will dwell amidst his people in a holy sanctuary. This sanctuary will be arranged in three degrees of holiness: the courtyard, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. Though he has called his people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, he will differentiate them into three degrees of increasing holiness: the people, the Levites and the priests with the high priest as the most holy. The degree of holiness determines how close they can approach the holy God, into what zone of holiness they can penetrate. The people will bring their sacrifices to the entrance of the tabernacle. The priests can enter the courtyard to serve at the altar and can enter the Holy Place. Only the high priest can enter the Most Holy Place and only on one day. The holy God can be approached, but only in a limited manner.

The Lord will dwell in his holy sanctuary in the midst of his people. What form will this holy sanctuary take? It is to be a *mishkan* (v. 9). The word simply means a dwelling place; it is cognate with the verb "dwell" (*shakan*) of the previous verse. Furthermore, it is a movable dwelling place, a nomad's tent rather than a permanent building. God's holy dwelling place among his people will be in the form of a tent (Lat. *tabernaculum*) amidst the people's tents.

Both the tent, the Dwelling Place, and its seven pieces of furniture are to be made exactly according to the pattern the Lord will show Moses on Mt Sinai. The need to conform to this divinely-revealed pattern will be reiterated several times in subsequent chapters.

And yet the tabernacle also follows an earthly pattern. The basic design of a tent with an inner and outer chamber, surrounded by a courtyard, erected in the midst of the people's camp, is found in surrounding cultures, especially in Egypt. It is not surprising that God should accommodate himself to the culture of the day; this is by no means the only example in Scripture. The uniqueness of the tabernacle lies not in its basic design of a tent but in its theology.

What is the pattern which the Lord shows Moses on Mt Sinai? And how many tabernacles are there? Clearly, one tabernacle is to be built on earth. Clearly, Moses is shown some pattern on Mt Sinai. Is this a scale model of the earthly tabernacle, or perhaps its blueprints? In which case the earthly tabernacle is the real and only tabernacle. Or is there a second tabernacle, a heavenly one? If so, is the pattern a model of this heavenly tabernacle, or its blueprints? Or does the Lord directly show Moses the real tabernacle in heaven? It is hard to know for sure. Biblical theology suggests that the tabernacle to be built at Sinai is the earthly pole of a heaven-earth axis. The earthly tabernacle corresponds to or mirrors a heavenly reality. This *axis mundi*, this world axis, connects the earthly residence of God and his heavenly residence, his earthly throne room and his heavenly throne room. There is much in Scripture that suggests this axis.

What does the earthly tabernacle represent?

The tabernacle is a new Eden. The language of Genesis 2 portrays Eden as a sanctuary, as the earthly footprint of the heavenly God. It was the earthly pole of the heaven-earth axis. Here God put the human to serve and keep his commandment, priestly language. Here he walked in the cool of the day, expecting to find the humans whom he had put there for his presence. Here he stationed cherubim to guard the sanctuary. Now for the first time since expelling Adam

and Eve from the garden sanctuary, the Lord is restoring a sanctuary to earth: the tabernacle where the Lord will walk among his people, and where the people, the Levites and the priests will serve him and keep their charge. Both Eden and the tabernacle are an intrusion of heaven onto earth.

The tabernacle goes even further back than Eden: it is a new creation. This is seen in multiple ways. The Lord's instructions to Moses (chap. 25–31) are given in seven speeches, with the seventh being about the Sabbath. The fulfilment of these instructions also features sets of seven with the seventh especially significant.

Bezalel will make the tent and its furniture, then the people make the priestly garments for ministering in the sanctuary. Seven times it is stated, "They made...as the LORD had commanded Moses" with the seventh being the gold plate for the high priest's turban, inscribed, "Holy to the LORD." "Thus all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was finished, and the people of Israel did according to all that the LORD had commanded Moses; so they did" (39:32). They brought all the components of the tabernacle to Moses.

According to all that the LORD had commanded Moses, so the people of Israel had done all the work. And Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had done it; as the LORD had commanded, so had they done it. Then Moses blessed them. (39:42-43)

Where God saw all he had made and behold it was very good (Gen 1:31), Moses saw all the people's work, and behold it was exactly as the Lord commanded.

The Lord commanded Moses to erect the tabernacle; he did so in seven stages, each ending, "as the LORD had commanded Moses," with the seventh being the placing of the basin so the priests could ceremonially wash before entering the tent. "So Moses finished the work" (40:33), again echoing God finishing his work on the seventh day (Gen 2:2).

The tabernacle is thus the cosmos in microcosm. God made the world in six days as a temple in which to place his image, namely humanity. Now he will have his people make the tabernacle as a dwelling in which to place his presence. Just as God changed a formless and empty disorder into an ordered cosmos, so the tabernacle will be the center of an ordered sacred geography. It represents a repairing of the cosmos.

As well as looking back, the tabernacle also looks forward. It is a type of what is to come. When Israel is settled in the land, a permanent temple will be built to replace the portable tent. David gave Solomon the plan. In his prayer of dedication, Solomon acknowledged that God doesn't really dwell in a house made by human hands:

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet ... listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive." (1 Kgs 8:27, 30)

Despite the incongruity, God really will put his presence in the temple that Solomon built. Furthermore, Solomon understood that the man-made temple was a conduit between God in his heavenly dwelling place and his people on earth. As the people prayed towards the earthly sanctuary, so God in heaven would hear; his eye, ear and heart would be open. It would be a merciful presence: he would forgive. But it could also be a terrifying presence. The religious leaders of Jeremiah's day took God's presence for granted, treating it like

a lucky charm. "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD," they said (Jer 7:4), assuming that the Lord's presence in the temple guaranteed their safety, regardless of their behavior. God did the unthinkable: he removed his presence. The temple became just another man-made building, which he allowed to be destroyed. For centuries thereafter the Lord's presence did not dwell on earth among his people.

Until... "The word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us" (John 1:14). "Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made Man."⁴ The tabernacle points beyond the temple to Jesus. This presence of God in Jesus was not a safe presence. To those seeking mercy, it was a kind and gentle presence, a presence which welcomed sinners to the table. To the self-righteous leaders, fixated on the magnificent man-made building in their midst, this was a presence that caused trembling. The leaders killed this one who dared challenge their fine building, who dared tell them that they had turned a house of prayer for all peoples into a den of rebels.

Not long thereafter, Stephen gave a history lesson to the Sanhedrin, the same Jewish leadership which had condemned Jesus. Our Scripture reading (Acts 7:44-50) was the portion in which Stephen talks of the tabernacle and temple. He dared to point out that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands." This so enraged them that they killed him. The temple they prized was again ripe for destruction.

Meanwhile, God took his presence which had been mobile in Jesus and, through his Spirit, has placed it in the church, in his family made up of those who are in Christ. What does it mean to have God dwelling among us, not in a man-made building, but in a temple of living stones, built upon the cornerstone of the Living Stone who was rejected by men but chosen by God and precious? It is a holy presence: he is a holy God and we are called to holy living, for which he puts his Holy Spirit in us. It is an awesome presence: we bow in worship. It is a fascinating presence: we are drawn to him.

But there's yet a stage to come:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." (Rev 21:2-3)

The descent of the holy city from heaven to earth means that the dwelling place of God will be fully realized on earth. He will be fully present to his people, who will see him.

Does God dwell in houses made by human hands? For a season he graciously allowed his presence to fill a man-made structure, first the tabernacle and then the temple. Both tabernacle and temple pointed to greater things. They pointed up to heaven, God's realm. They pointed back to creation. They pointed ahead to Jesus, to the Spirit-filled church, and to the New Jerusalem.

God dwells in us, a spiritual house of living stones created and Spirit-gifted by himself. We may think of ourselves as chipped and cracked stones, but God is fitting us as living stones into a structure made by himself, one that is suitable for his presence. The church is part of his repairing of the cosmos; we are a new creation in whom he is speaking order back into the world. Sadly when people look at the church that's not what they see. They think of the church as being judgmental or focused on rule-keeping. But the church is where

God puts his presence, where he speaks order, where he is repairing broken people into living stones, where he is repairing the cosmos. God's presence among us is not a safe presence but it is a good presence. May we live in such a way that the world is attracted to this God who puts his presence among us.

1. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), chapters 4–6.
2. Kenneth Grahame, chapter 7, “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn,” *The Wind in the Willows* (1908).
3. C. S. Lewis, chapter 8, “What Happened after Dinner,” *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950).
4. Charles Wesley, “Let Earth and Heaven Combine” (1741).

© 2016 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino



MERCY AND TRUTH ARE MET TOGETHER

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

Exodus 25:10-22

Third Message

Bernard Bell

February 14, 2016

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 in-

struction 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).

© 2016 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino



BREAD AND LIGHT: SYMBOLS OF PRESENCE

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

Exodus 25:23-40

Fourth Message

Bernard Bell

February 21, 2016

I grew up in a land of temples: Thailand where there are over 40,000 Buddhist temples. Every village has one. In Bangkok the top tourist attractions are all temples. Most of the temples are in a distinctive Thai design, but there are also Chinese Buddhist temples and Hindu temples. And, as I mentioned two weeks ago, nearly every property has a spirit house.

The West has many church buildings, and the cathedrals of Western Europe are major tourist attractions. But a cathedral is quite different from a Buddhist or Hindu temple or a spirit house. A cathedral is built for a congregation to gather together to meet with God. A temple is built as a house for a god. This is certainly true of a Hindu temple; it is a shrine for a particular god. It is also somewhat true of a Buddhist temple. Though Buddhism has no gods, every temple has a statue of the Buddha. The most famous temples in Bangkok are famous because of the Buddha that they house: Wat Phra Kheo, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (this being the most sacred object in Thailand); Wat Pho with its reclining Buddha; Wat Traimit with its golden Buddha.

These Thai temples make beautiful photos, but Westerners see them as little more than tourist attractions. We don't share the mindset of Hindus or animists who build houses for their gods, and bring food because their gods need feeding. We are not like the Buddhists who devote enormous resources to making an image and building a house for it. Instead, we spend billions on building Levi Stadium or the new Apple campus. We sang, "Here I am to worship, here I am to bow down," but we didn't come here to bow before a statue or an idol.

These are the sights of my childhood. This familiarity with temples perhaps makes it a bit easier for me to understand the tabernacle; it doesn't seem quite so strange. But it does raise questions. Does God need a house in which to dwell? Does God need to be brought food? Was the tabernacle just an Israelite version of the temples and shrines of surrounding cultures? Though the tabernacle is to be built according to a divinely-revealed pattern, its form is similar to items in surrounding cultures, but the theology is different.

The tabernacle is indeed a dwelling place for God, where he puts his presence in the midst of his people. It is a holy place, separated by three curtains into three zones of increasing holiness: the courtyard, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies. In these three zones are seven pieces of furniture. Last week we looked at the two items of furniture to be made for the Most Holy Place: the ark and its cover. The Most Holy Place is God's earthly throne room. But unlike all other temples, here there was no image, idol or statue of God. Furthermore, access to this innermost chamber was very limited. Only the high priest had access to this chamber, and he only once a year, and then only waving a censer of incense so that the ark and its cover symbolizing the Lord's presence would be hidden within the cloud. He couldn't see the space where God was described as being present with his people.

Today we move outside the veil into the Holy Place with its three pieces of furniture: the table, the lampstand and the incense altar. The lampstand is to be of solid gold; the table and the altar are to be of acacia wood covered in gold. Though this chamber is less holy than the Most Holy Place, gold is still the metal appropriate to its level of sanctity. Into this chamber the priests can enter to attend to the furniture, to enable their cultic role.

1. The Table (25:23-30)

"You shall make a table of acacia wood. Two cubits shall be its length, a cubit its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. You shall overlay it with pure gold and make a molding of gold around it. And you shall make a rim around it a handbreadth wide, and a molding of gold around the rim. And you shall make for it four rings of gold, and fasten the rings to the four corners at its four legs. Close to the frame the rings shall lie, as holders for the poles to carry the table. You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold, and the table shall be carried with these. And you shall make its plates and dishes for incense, and its flagons and bowls with which to pour drink offerings; you shall make them of pure gold. And you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me regularly." (Exod 25:23-30 ESV)

Moses is to make a table of acacia wood and cover it with gold. It is to be two cubits long, a cubit wide, and a cubit and a half tall, so $3 \times 1\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ ft. Similar to the ark, it is to have four rings, and wooden poles covered in gold placed through those rings for carrying the table. Since this is a dining table, it needs dishes. Four types are mentioned, seemingly in two pairs: probably two types of dishes for solids and two types of pitchers for liquid (English versions differ in how these words are translated). As befits the sanctity of the place these are to be of pure gold.

Finally Moses is told what food to put on this dining table: "you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me regularly" (25:30). William Tyndale (1530) translated the term as "shewbread," again influenced, as with the "mercy seat," by Luther's translation *schaubrot*. This is bread that is put on public display, that is shown. It is shown before the Lord: he is the sole audience. The instructions for the bread are given in Leviticus:

"You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before the LORD. And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the LORD. Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the LORD's food offerings, a perpetual due." (Lev 24:5-9)

There are to be twelve loaves, suggesting that they represent the twelve tribes of Israel. These are a memorial and a food offering to the Lord. Each of the twelve tribes is present at the table, represented and remembered before the Lord, under his gaze. Each Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange the twelve loaves before the Lord; this evidently does not conflict with Sabbath being a day of rest. There they remain in the Lord's presence for a full week. For a full week Israel is present before the Lord, is shown before the Lord. The following Sabbath new loaves are placed, and the priests eat the old ones. Since the loaves have been sanctified by being in the Lord's presence, they can be eaten only by the holy priests in a holy place; indeed the loaves are most holy, they are holy of holies.

What is the significance of the table and its bread? They surely speak of God's provision and of dining at the Lord's table in his presence. Though it is a food offering from the people, the Lord does not need food. Instead, his presence sanctifies the food so it can be eaten by the priests. It is a weekly reenactment of the meal that Moses and the seventy elders had in the Lord's presence after the covenant was sealed with blood (Exod 24:11).

Each Sabbath the priests ate the bread in the holy place. Each Sabbath, outside the tent the people ate the manna which the Lord provided for them six days of the week. On the Sabbath they had to trust that the double portion of the previous day would be enough. The table and the bread were a symbol of the Lord's presence with his people and of the people present before the Lord continually. And they were a symbol of the Lord's provision at his table.

2. The Lampstand (25:31-40)

“You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. The lampstand shall be made of hammered work: its base, its stem, its cups, its calyxes, and its flowers shall be of one piece with it. And there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it; three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on one branch, and three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on the other branch—so for the six branches going out of the lampstand. And on the lampstand itself there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms, with their calyxes and flowers, and a calyx of one piece with it under each pair of the six branches going out from the lampstand. Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it a single piece of hammered work of pure gold. You shall make seven lamps for it. And the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it. Its tongs and their trays shall be of pure gold. It shall be made, with all these utensils, out of a talent of pure gold. And see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.” (Exod 25:31-40)

These instructions are given in intricate detail. The lampstand or *menorah* is fashioned after a botanical object, a small tree or bush. Verse 31 lists five components: a base, a single stem or shaft, then multiple cups, calyxes and flowers. A central stem puts forth three branches on each side. Each of these branches has three cups fashioned like almond blossoms, each with calyx and petals. The central shaft has four of these, for a total of 22 stylized flowers. The whole thing is shaped like a flowering almond tree. The almond is the first tree to flower, a herald of the new life of spring. The whole thing is to be made of one piece of gold. But this beautiful object is just the lampstand, an elaborate stand to support the lamps themselves.

There are seven lamps, one for the top of each branch and the central stem. Long before the development of candles, light was provided by oil lamps: a pottery bowl of olive oil with a wick dipped in it. The bowl would be pinched at one side to provide a support for the wick. These lamps are special: they are of gold. Two utensils are required for servicing these lamps: tongs for pulling out the spent wicks, and trays on which to place these spent wicks. Everything, the stand, the seven lamps, and the utensils, are to be of pure gold—one talent, about 75 pounds.

The purpose of the lampstand is obviously “to give light on the space in front of it.” But is there more to this lampstand? Why is it shaped like a tree? Remember that the tabernacle is a microcosm of the cosmos; it is a new creation, a restoration of order to the world. The lampstand is a representation of the tree of life from the garden of Eden, the tree which mediated life to mortal humans. Some see the lampstand as also a representation of the burning bush: the stand is ablaze but is not consumed. It stands on holy ground.

It is the lamps that provide the light, burning olive oil provided by the people, and tended by the priests:

“You shall command the people of Israel that they bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may regularly be set up to burn. In the tent of meeting, outside the veil that is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening to morning before the Lord. It shall be a statute forever to be observed throughout their generations by the people of Israel.” (Exod 27:20-21)

The people are to bring pure beaten olive oil, that is oil of the highest quality. The seven lamps produce a singular light. The only other use of this word “light” is for the lights that God made on the fourth day of creation: the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night, that is, the sun and the moon. Here we have another echo of creation in the tabernacle. The Lord brought order by speaking light into darkness on the first day, and by making the lights on the fourth day to regulate that order. In the tabernacle he was again bringing order through light, filling the holy place with light. Aaron and his sons, the first priests, are to arrange the light from evening to morning, perhaps a further echo of Genesis 1.

Here and elsewhere the Lord commands Aaron and his sons, that is the priests, to arrange the lamps and the light “before the Lord regularly” or continually. Both the bread and the light are to be before the Lord continually. They are perpetually in his presence. They are symbols of presence. Today the phrase “perpetual lamp” (*ner tamid*) designates a light that is permanently lit in every synagogue, in front of the ark containing the Torah scrolls; it is a reminder of both the light of the menorah and the flames of the altar of burnt offering. In Catholic and some other churches, a sanctuary light or chancel light is kept permanently lit in front of the tabernacle in which the blessed sacrament is reserved. The perpetual lamp in the tabernacle, though seen by the priests, is primarily for the Lord; it is before him regularly.

These two pieces of furniture will be placed either side of the Holy Place: the table on the north side, the lampstand on the south. As the priest enters the Holy Place, he sees on his right the table with the bread of Presence before the Lord continually, and on his left the lampstand and the light which is before the Lord continually. Straight ahead of him is a third piece of furniture: the golden incense altar. But instructions for this altar are not given here. They are delayed until after the instructions for the priests' garments and their

consecration. The incense altar is then treated as part of the divine service which the priests perform.

3. Light and Lampstands as Metaphors

The tabernacle was eventually replaced by the larger, more permanent temple. In the Holy Place were the golden incense altar, the golden table for the bread of the presence, and not one but ten lampstands of pure gold (1 Kgs 7:48-49). Some 350 years later the temple was destroyed and all its riches hauled off as booty. After the return from exile, a small temple was built in Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel. But it was not much compared to Solomon's temple.

But Zechariah, a prophet in Jerusalem at the time, was given a vision. He saw a golden lampstand, on which were seven lamps, each with not one but seven lips for wicks, for a total of 49 wicks. On either side of the lampstand was an olive tree, providing an inexhaustible supply of oil to the bowl on top of the lampstand. Zechariah was told the significance of what he saw: "This is the word of the Lord...: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts" (Zech 4:6). A familiar verse but in an unfamiliar context. The seven lamps are "the eyes of the Lord which range through the whole earth." The two trees are "the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth," probably referring to Zerubbabel, the governor of Jerusalem and grandson of Judah's last king, and Joshua the high priest; these were the political and religious leaders of the small community. Jerusalem and its little temple may not have been much to look at in comparison with the grandeur of the Persian Empire or even the past grandeur of Jerusalem. But the secret to greatness lay not in human might or power, but in the Lord's Spirit. Where the Lord's Spirit was at work there the light would shine.

The menorah continues to be a potent symbol within Judaism, a symbol of joy, of despair and of hope.

The menorah is a symbol of joy, commemorated at Hanukkah. In 167 BC the Syrian king, Antiochus IV, desecrated the temple in his bid to eradicate the distinctive identity of the Jews. One faithful Jewish priest resisted; his sons rose up in revolt, launching what would become known as the Maccabean Revolt. Three years later they had recaptured Jerusalem and its temple. They purified and rededicated the temple. There was enough oil for only one day, but the lamps on the menorah miraculously burned for eight days. This has been commemorated ever since in Hanukkah (meaning Dedication), the eight-day Festival of lights.

The menorah is a symbol of sadness. In AD 70 the Romans, under the leadership of Titus, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, brutally suppressing the First Jewish Revolt (66-73). They hauled away the temple treasures to Rome, commemorating this on the Arch of Titus, which is still in Rome today. This depicts the menorah and the table complete with its dishes.

The menorah is a symbol of hope. The emblem of the state of Israel is a menorah patterned on the one depicted on the Arch of Titus. A large bronze menorah stands outside the Knesset, Israel's parliament building. A solid gold menorah has already been made, in strict accordance with the instructions to Moses, in preparation for building a new temple.

But this is not the direction of the Bible. We're not awaiting another temple in which to put up a golden lampstand. The New Testament gives a different understanding of the significance of both the bread and the light. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35,

48), "the living bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:51). He is the heavenly manna, the eating of which gives eternal life. In the Lord's Prayer we petition our Father: "Give us this day our daily bread," trusting in his provision, just as Israel trusted in his provision in the wilderness.

Jesus also said "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). In Jesus God was tabernacling among his people. When Jesus spoke of being bread and light these were not empty metaphors; they had deep significance for the Jews. With Jesus declaring himself to be the bread of life and the light of the world, the bread and light in the temple no longer had meaning. Jesus was now the symbol of presence.

It is hard for us to imagine the significance of light. We flip a switch and the light comes on. At home we have some older LED lights (only four years old!) that take a second to come on; that's a frustrating delay. But in the ancient world, the coming of darkness was a fearful reality, and it took forethought and preparation to be ready. Oil lamps brought light to that darkness, and the lighting of these lamps was a significant moment. The early church took the opportunity of the evening lamplighting to praise God for the gift of light. One of the earliest hymns, dating to 200, is *Phos hilaron*, joyous light, rendered into modern English hymnody as "Hail, gladdening light," or "O, gladsome light." This attitude to light is reflected in the Book of Common Prayer, in the collect said daily at evening prayer: "Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night."

Light is a powerful metaphor. The lampstand supporting lamps that illuminate the darkness is a powerful Biblical metaphor. In the opening vision of Revelation, the vision that serves as John's call to prophetic ministry, he sees seven golden lampstands, in the midst of whom stands the risen and glorified Christ, holding seven stars. Jesus explains "the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches" (Rev 1:20). John's Revelation draws extensively from Zechariah's vision. The seven churches to whom John is to write are seven lampstands. Though they are small and most of them are beset with problems, they are light-bearers into the darkness of the Roman empire. They are present before God, and the risen Christ is present among them. The seven spirits who are before the very throne of God are sent out into all the earth; they are also eyes. They are sent to the churches, to whom they speak. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 2-3), which is the same as what Jesus, the risen Christ, is saying to the churches.

Understanding these churches as lampstands in the presence of God, we see that the axis between heaven and earth did not run through the throne room of the Caesar in Rome, who titled himself *pontifex maximus*, chief bridge-builder, that is the bridge between heaven and earth. No, the axis between heaven and earth ran through these seven little churches of the province of Asia, seven because representative of all churches. They may seem insignificant in Rome's eyes, but they are glorious in God's eyes. They are light shining into the darkness. But there is a warning: being a light-bearer is a responsibility. Jesus warned that if a church forgot that it was the church of the risen Christ, he would remove its lampstand. To the church that remains faithful Jesus promises "to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Rev 2:7).

There is no need of a golden lampstand today. The church is God's light in the world, before the Lord continually. We are continually in his presence, under his watchful gaze. Jesus walks among us, in solidarity with his people, his church. God's Spirit is his empowering presence among us, for it is not by power, nor by might, but by my Spirit, says the Lord. When the Spirit fills us our light will shine. We are a lampstand set here in Cupertino. We don't shine out of our own brilliance. We shine when Jesus is among us and we are filled with the Spirit. Such light cannot be put out.

There awaits a yet more glorious day. The sun and the moon, the greater and lesser lights, are temporary measures of order. The end of Revelation provides a vision of the world fully ordered, as John is shown the New Jerusalem:

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. (Rev 21:22-25)

And again,

And night will be no more. They [the servants of God and the Lamb] will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light. (Rev 22:5)

Light is a powerful Biblical metaphor. God began to bring order to the world by saying, "Let there be light" on the first day of creation. He regulated this light with the greater and lesser lights made on the fourth day. But these are ultimately only temporary regulators. Ultimately it is God himself who will be the radiance of the world, who will fill this world with his glory. Until that time it is the church through whom he is bringing order to the world, through whom he is shining light into darkness, speaking life into a hungry world. May God through his Spirit grant us grace and empowering to be a lampstand here in the midst of Cupertino, shining with his radiance.

© 2016 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino



EXCLUSION AND EMBRACE

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

Exodus 26:1-37; 27:9-19

Fifth Message

Bernard Bell

February 5, 2017

We return to the tabernacle after a break of eleven months. The Lord has delivered the Hebrews from their harsh slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt. He has brought them through the Red Sea in which he simultaneously delivered his people and defeated the enemy. This is the great act of salvation in the Old Testament: "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." He has brought them through the wilderness to Mt Sinai to meet with him. There at Mt Sinai he formally entered into covenant with them; he will be their God, they will be his people, and he will dwell with them. To this end he instructed Moses to have the people bring him their voluntary contributions,

"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 25:8-9 ESV)

The Lord gave Moses detailed instructions for the tabernacle and its furniture. The sanctuary was to consist of a tent set in an enclosure. There were to be seven pieces of furniture, five housed in the tent, two set in the enclosure. Last year we looked at the first four of these: the ark of the covenant, the mercy seat, the table, and the lampstand. We now consider the tent and its enclosure.

Instructions for the tent are given in great detail in Exodus 26. Yet for all the detail there is not enough detail to accurately reconstruct the tabernacle; hence diagrams of the tabernacle look different.

"Moreover, you shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet yarns; you shall make them with cherubim skillfully worked into them." (26:1)

The word "tabernacle" is confusing. In English the word is most often used to refer to the whole assembly of the tent, the courtyard and the furniture. But in Exodus the "tabernacle" refers specifically to the tent. This tent would consist of four layers of material. The innermost layer was to be of the finest white linen, with blue, purple and scarlet yarns somehow worked into it. Cherubim were to be added, "the work of an artistic designer" (NET), of someone able to conceive and execute beautiful designs. These curtains were to be supported on upright frames of acacia wood, overlaid with gold and mounted in silver bases. The tent would be 30 cubits long, 10 cubit wide and 10 cubits high (45 × 15 × 15 ft). It was open on one end, the eastern end.

"You shall also make curtains of goats' hair for a tent over the tabernacle... And you shall make for the tent a covering of tanned rams' skins and a covering of goatskins on top." (26:7, 14)

Three additional layers were to be made. The goats' hair was perhaps black, much like the Bedouin still use for their tents. The outer two layers were of animal skins, providing protection against the weather. The identity of the topmost material is not clear; English translations vary widely.

"And you shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. It shall be made with cherubim skillfully worked into it... And the veil shall separate for you the Holy Place from the Most Holy." (26:31-33)

Two additional curtains were to be made, each to stretch across the full width of the tent. The veil would be of the same material as the innermost curtains: fine white linen, with blue, purple and scarlet yarns, and decorated with cherubim, the work of a designer. It was to divide the tent into two chambers: the Holy Place 20 cubits long, and the Most Holy Place 10 cubits long and thus a cube. Inside the Most Holy Place, within the veil, were placed the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat. Outside the veil, in the Holy Place, were placed the table, the lampstand and the incense altar. These were holy places, hence the cherubim, the symbolic throne attendants of God. The Most Holy Place was his earthly throne room, where he was enthroned atop the mercy seat between the two golden cherubim.

"You shall make a screen for the entrance of the tent, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, embroidered with needlework." (26:36)

The open end of the tent was to be covered by a screen of fine linen, again with blue, purple and scarlet, but without the cherubim, and hence the work of an embroiderer, not a designer.

The whole structure would have looked quite plain of the outside. But inside it was very beautiful: gilded frames supporting richly colored fabric. But few ever got to see the inside, because only priests could enter the tent.

The courtyard of the tabernacle is described in considerable detail in 27:9-19.

"You shall make the court of the tabernacle... the court shall have hangings of fine twined linen... For the gate of the court there shall be a screen twenty cubits long, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, embroidered with needlework." (27:9, 16)

This enclosure was 100 cubits long by 50 cubits wide (150 × 75 feet, slightly over a quarter-acre). It was surrounded by hangings of unadorned white linen, 5 cubits (7.5 ft) high. On the eastern side was an opening of 20 cubits, across which was to be hung a screen similar to that across the entrance to the tent: fine linen with blue, purple and scarlet, the work of an embroiderer. In the courtyard were placed the altar of burnt offering and the basin.

What was the significance of this tent and its enclosure? I want to focus particularly on the veil and the two screens: the veil that stretched across the interior of the tent so as to divide it into two chambers, the screen that stretched across the opening of the tent, and the screen that stretched across the opening of the courtyard. These subdivided the tabernacle into three realms of increasing holiness: the courtyard, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. This

gradation of holiness was reflected in the materials used: bronze in the courtyard, through silver to gold inside; plain white linen around the courtyard to richly-ornamented linen inside the tent. The screens and the veil were gateways. Though they did allow people to penetrate further into the tabernacle, they were primarily exclusionary and selective. They blocked the path for many people, allowing only a select group to enter. The further in the more exclusionary the curtain, the more it functioned as a blockage rather than an entrance.

Israel was centered on the tabernacle where God dwelt in their midst. Beyond the tabernacle was the camp where God's people dwelt in their tents. First the priests, outside the entrance to the courtyard. Next the Levites on the other three sides; they served as a protective barrier between the sanctuary and the tribes. Beyond the priests and Levites the other twelve tribes. Beyond them the wilderness. And far beyond that the nations, notably the Egyptians from whose land they had come and the Canaanites to whose land they were headed.

God wanted to dwell with his people, but it is a dangerous thing to have God dwell in your midst. God and his people needed protecting from each other. God chose to put his tent in the midst of his people's uncleanness, but his holiness needed protecting from their uncleanness. The people needed protecting from God's holiness, lest it consume them. In our call to worship (Isa 6:1-7), Isaiah saw the Lord in his throne room, and cried out, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips."

The veil and the two curtains formed barriers: barriers of protection, barriers which restricted access. Who could approach the tabernacle and these barriers? Who could gain access? There were many restrictions, many ways for people to find their way blocked. Though the Israelite camp was centered on God's presence among them, exclusion operated on many levels.

There was ethnic exclusion. God put his presence in the midst of the Israelite camp. Only Israel had God in their midst. Far beyond the camp lay the nations. They could not approach; they had no access to God.

Uncleanness was grounds for exclusion. By this is meant not physical dirtiness but ritual impurity or ceremonial uncleanness. There were many ways to contract uncleanness, especially if you were a woman. Each month they were unclean for seven days after menstruation. After childbirth they were unclean; for forty days after the birth of a boy, for eighty days after the birth of a girl. Contacting a dead body or even being in the vicinity of a dead body left one unclean for seven days. Anyone who was unclean could not approach the sanctuary until their days of impurity were completed. Worse was the condition of those who contracted a skin disease. Not only could they not approach the sanctuary, they couldn't even stay in the camp. They were sent outside the camp to live on their own.

Under what circumstances could Israelites come towards the sanctuary and approach the screen at the entrance to the courtyard? The reason for approaching was to bring an offering, usually a sacrificial animal. There were numerous reasons why they might need to bring such an animal, usually as a result of sin, guilt or impurity. Those who had sinned or incurred guilt needed to bring a burnt offering for atonement, or a sin offering, or a guilt offering. Those whose days of impurity were over needed to bring a purification offering. The offeror would place his hands on the sacrificial animal, slaughter it at the entrance to the court, then hand it over to a priest who would place it on the altar. That's as far as most Israelites ever got. They

could come only with sacrifice in hand, reminding them of their sinful or impure state.

Exclusion operated on the tribal level. Only one tribe was allowed to enter fully into the courtyard: the tribe of Levi, and then only in conjunction with their service.

Exclusion operated on the clan and family level, restricting access by tribe, by clan, by family and by birth order. Within the tribe of Levi only the family of Aaron were the priests. The other men of the tribe were the Levites who assisted the priests. The Levites could not approach the items of furniture. Only the priests could approach the altar; only they could place the offerings there. Only the priests could pass through the second curtain into the tent, and then only when on duty.

Exclusion operated on the gender level. Women, already disproportionately affected by the purity laws, could not serve as Levites or priests. No woman could enter the courtyard beyond the entrance; no woman could approach any of the furniture; no woman ever entered the sanctuary.

Exclusion operated on the level of physical perfection. Any priest with any sort of physical defect could not approach the sanctuary.

So there were multiple reasons for exclusion: the wrong ethnicity, the wrong family lineage (tribe, clan, family), gender, ritual impurity, physical disability. By the time all this filtering and exclusion was done, there was only one person who could enter through the veil into the Most Holy Place: the high priest, and he only once per year, carrying incense which filled the space with smoke so he couldn't see. These barriers were a matter of life and death: "lest you die" or "lest they die" is a frequent refrain in the instructions for the service of the tabernacle.

At the time of Jesus these barriers were intensified. The temple courtyard was subdivided into additional zones: the court of the Gentiles, the court of the women, the court of Israel (men only), the court of the priests, before ever getting to the temple itself. As it had been in the tabernacle, respecting these barriers was a matter of life and death. On the inner perimeter of the court of the Gentiles was a warning that any Gentile passing beyond the barrier would die. The Jews nearly lynched Paul because they saw him further in and assumed he had brought a Gentile with him, beyond the permissible boundary. They laid hands on him, crying out, "he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place" (Acts 21:27-29).

The tabernacle, followed by the temple, was exclusionary. Boundaries defined zones of increasing holiness. Entrances primarily kept people out, allowing in only a select few who met increasingly restrictive requirements. Many people couldn't possibly meet these requirements due to matters completely beyond their control: ethnicity, gender, family lineage, physical defect.

Why did God set things up this way? The Book of Hebrews tells us:

By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section [tent] is still standing. (Heb 9:8)

But Jesus has opened the way; again the Book of Hebrews tells us this several times. He did so in his life, in his death, in his resurrection, and in his ascension.

Jesus opened up the way in his life. He turned the system upside down. Remember that the tabernacle was the place where God dwelt

among his people. This was true also of Solomon's temple. But when the temple was rebuilt after the exile there is no mention of God taking up residence in it. God's presence was absent for 500 years until:

the word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John 1:14)

God's glory was not present in the temple; it was present in Jesus. He was a roving temple, moving through Galilee, Judea and Samaria. But he didn't place barriers around himself. He didn't surround himself with gatekeepers controlling access to his presence. Quite the opposite: he reached out to people and he invited people to come to him. He welcomed the presence of women, even allowing them to minister to him. He touched the unclean and allowed them to touch him. He reached out and touched the lepers. He was not offended when the woman hemorrhaging blood dared to reach out and touch him. He touched the defective people: the crippled, the blind, the dumb. He sat down to eat with tax collectors and sinners. He should have been defiled by these people, whether unclean or defective or sinners. They should have contaminated him leaving him excluded also. But they did not contaminate him. Instead, healing flowed from him into them. Jesus broke all the religious norms. In an environment accustomed to exclusion, he practiced embrace. Everyone wanted to approach him. Well not quite all. All those who had been on the receiving end of exclusion wanted to approach him. Those who were practicing the exclusion looked on in disgust and horror. Even the disciples were prone to exclusionary thinking; Jesus chided them for turning the little children away.

We see this dynamic of exclusion and embrace clearly in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. (Luke 15:1)

These excluded people realized that Jesus was different. Unable to approach the temple they knew that it was safe to approach Jesus, and they wanted to approach him. He extended hospitality to them, welcoming them into his presence. He sat down and ate with them. The Pharisees were not amused. They had exclusion down to a fine art. They had refined the exclusionary system of the Mosaic law by the addition of many more rules and regulations which they called a "fence," a boundary. They grumbled,

"This man receives sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:2)

Jesus responded with the parable of the Prodigal Son. When the wayward son in his desperation finally decided to return home he expected exclusion. He had practiced his speech:

I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. (15:18-21)

His father immediately called for a table to be prepared so his son could experience his lavish hospitality in a shared meal. But the older brother, who had been obedient to his father all these years, was still trapped in his exclusionary mindset. He refused to embrace his brother. He refused to embrace the hospitality which his father extended to him, and so he refused his father's embrace.

With these mindsets it is no surprise that the hitherto-excluded felt it safe to approach Jesus, and the exclusionary religious leaders felt their whole ordered world threatened. Jesus opened the way in his life, but his way of living led to his death.

Jesus opened the way in his death. At the moment that he died on the cross, the veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38).

Jesus opened up the way in his resurrection, passing from death to new life, entering the new age as the firstborn from the dead.

Jesus opened up the way in his ascension, passing through the veil into the Most Holy Place, into the very presence of God. He has opened up for us a new and living way through the veil. He is our great high priest who is permanently in the presence of God, the Holy One. Therefore we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus.

All the former boundaries have been abolished, boundaries imposed by ethnicity, gender, social status, family lineage, ceremonial purity, physical defects. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

We live in a world accustomed to exclusion. Children suffer exclusion in school, all the way from kindergarten to college. Exclusion is cruel. Last weekend people who boarded planes with valid paperwork to pass through the immigration barrier into the US, landed to find the door suddenly shut in their face. They were excluded. Some of them were coerced into signing away their access documents. I'm a green card holder, former H1 visa holder, and have witnessed the horror of having the person in front of me in the immigration line have her green card taken away. So I found this deeply disturbing. 60,000 visas were revoked. Those who anticipated embrace and inclusion found themselves suddenly excluded.

Every US coin carries the motto *e pluribus unum*, "out of many, one." It is included on the Great Seal of the United States. Originally adopted to signify that out of thirteen states was formed one nation, it has continued to be a defining idea, extending far beyond the original colonies. This country has been a melting pot, absorbing immigrants from all over the world, many of them refugees. But now the country has shut its doors to refugees.

If *e pluribus unum* has characterized the US for much of its history, it should be even more true of the church. Since we are all one in Christ, the church should be the most egalitarian of societies. We all have access to God through Christ; we're all of equal standing.

And yet when the world looks at the church that's not what they see. If you ask non-Christians what they think of the church they will typically say it's a place with boundaries, where those boundaries are carefully patrolled, where they don't want you in.

I experienced the hospitality of the church vividly as a child. My parents were missionaries in Thailand, and both worked with lepers. When my mother was single, she and other lady missionaries would cycle out to rural villages, set up under a tree, and invite the lepers to come to them. They would touch them, clean their wounds, and tell them of a God who loved them in Christ. Many of them came to faith. Two churches were formed, the well church and the leper church. It took a long time for the well church to fully accept the leper church. My father ran a Bible school for the lepers. Later my father worked primarily with poor farmers who at the most had received four years of elementary education. These were the fledgling

leaders of the small churches that emerged amid the rice fields. Vivid illustrations of “Out of many, one.”

The ancient Israelites faced many impediments in approaching the tabernacle. Those who had contracted ritual impurity had to wait out the days of their impurity. Then they and all other Israelites had to approach with sacrifice in hand. But now that exclusion has turned to embrace; we don't approach that way. We come to Jesus in our sin, guilt, impurity, deformity, brokenness, disadvantage, whatever. The only impediment is thinking that you do not need to approach Jesus, or that he cannot be approached unless we clean ourselves up first.

Would that non-Christians be able to look at churches and see that it is safe to approach and find Jesus. When they read the gospels they fall in love with Jesus when they see how he reached out to the untouchables, how he broke down all the barriers. We come to Jesus in our brokenness. He welcomes us into his embrace. And then his Spirit gets to work, transforming us bit by bit so we become who God really intends us to be. We come to Jesus first, and then he starts to put us right.

Instead of the metaphor of the temple with its walls and barriers, the New Testament gives us the metaphor of the table. Jesus sat down to eat with tax collectors and sinners. We are invited to the table to sit and eat in fellowship with God. It is fitting that we should come to the communion table now as a vivid illustration of the hospitality of God in Christ.

The title of this message is taken from a book: Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

© 2017 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino



JESUS, OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

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

Exodus 28:1-43

Sixth Message

Bernard Bell

February 12, 2017

God's desire is to dwell with his people: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." So he instructs Moses to have the people build him a dwelling place in their midst:

"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 25:8-9 ESV)

The tabernacle is a sanctuary; it is holy space for a holy God. But how can a holy God live in the presence of a sinful, unclean people? They need protecting from each other, lest God's holiness consume his people in their sin and uncleanness, or their sin and uncleanness defile his sanctuary, his holy space. Last week we saw that the two screens and the veil that guarded the way into the courtyard, into the tent, and into the Most Holy Place served more as barriers than as entrances. They kept out more people than they allowed in. But there was a group who could enter into the courtyard, who could approach the altar of burnt offering, and who could enter into the tent itself. Of this group there was one person who could enter all the way into the Most Holy Place. These people were the priests, set aside to minister in the sanctuary. A priest is a mediator, someone who comes between the holy and the unholy. God appointed the priests to be intermediaries between him and his people, between his holy presence and their uncleanness and sin.

"Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests— Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar." (28:1)

God chose Moses' brother Aaron and his four sons to be set aside to serve him as priests in his sanctuary. They alone would be able to approach the altar of burnt offering, there to offer up the sacrifices of the people. They alone would be able to enter the tent, there to tend to the lampstand and to the bread of presence on the table. Aaron alone as high priest would be able to enter the Most Holy Place, once a year. When the tabernacle was set up not even Moses was able to enter the sanctuary; he was not a priest.

The priests were mediators between God and his people. In one direction they served the Lord as priests in his sanctuary. Handling the sacrifices and tending to the furniture in the Holy Place was their service to the Lord. All Israel was called to serve the Lord, but this was the particular service of the priests: to attend to the holy things in the holy place. In the other direction they served the people as their representatives within the sanctuary, so that the people in their sin and uncleanness not enter the sanctuary and defile its holiness. The people would bring their sacrificial offerings to the entrance of the courtyard and hand them over to the priests who would sacrifice them on their behalf. The people themselves could not offer sacrifices. When Israel later had a king, not even the king could offer sacrifices; Saul did so and it cost him the throne.

To perform this priestly service within the sanctuary, this holy work within the holy space, both Aaron and his sons would need special garments:

"And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. You shall speak to all the skillful, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, that they make Aaron's garments to consecrate him for my priesthood. These are the garments that they shall make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a coat of checker work, a turban, and a sash. They shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons to serve me as priests. They shall receive gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen." (28:2-5)

These were no ordinary garments. They were holy garments, sacred vestments. They were to be worn only within the holy space of the sanctuary. These vestments visually distinguished the priests from the people, the priests inside the sanctuary from the laity outside the sanctuary. These vestments required special manufacture. They were to be made by skilled artisans whom God himself had filled with wisdom.

As high priest Aaron would have a unique set of vestments, distinct from the other priests. His high-priestly vestments comprised eight items: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a tunic, a turban, and a sash (v. 3), a gold plate (v. 36) and underwear (v. 42). Four of these items are worn also by the priests: the tunic, sash, cap (instead of a turban), and underwear. The other four items are unique to the high priest's vestments: the ephod, breastpiece, robe and gold plate. The instructions for these special four items are given in great detail. Yet again, as for the tabernacle, the extensive instructions are not sufficiently detailed to accurately reconstruct the vestments. Therefore illustrations in Bible dictionaries and study Bibles of the high priest in his sacred vestments differ. I am very grateful to Robin Haney who has made a full set of high-priestly garments so that we have a real, life-size illustration.

The first item is the ephod (vv. 6-14). It is like a bib with front and back portions, joined together at the shoulders. It's not clear what the ephod was but its importance to the high priest's vestments is indicated by its position first in the list, and by the special material. It is to be made of even more dazzling and precious material than the inner layer of the tent: not only blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine linen, but also gold. Gold is added because the high priest will be able to enter the Most Holy Place, where everything is gold or gold-plated. On the shoulders of the ephod are to be mounted two onyx stones in gold settings. On these stones are engraved the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, six on each stone, in birth order.

The second item is a breastpiece of judgment (vv. 15-30), to be made in the same style as the ephod, of the same five precious materials: fine white linen with blue, purple, scarlet and gold. It is attached to the front of the ephod by gold chains and a blue cord, so as to rest against the high priest's chest. The fabric is to be doubled

over to make a square of one span (9 in.), open at the top to create a pouch. On the breastpiece are mounted twelve precious stones in four rows of three, each stone engraved with the name of a tribe. In the pouch are placed the Urim and the Thummim. There is much mystery about what these were, probably two stones, and about how they worked. They would somehow be used by the high priest to determine God's will for his people. Perhaps a question would be posed to the Lord requiring a "yes" or "no" answer, then the high priest would throw down the two stones to somehow receive the answer.

The third item is the robe of the ephod (vv. 31-35), worn under the ephod. It is all of blue, the most precious color. On its hem are pomegranates of the three precious colors (blue, purple and red), alternating with golden bells. These bells rang as the high priest moved about in the sanctuary, so that their sound was heard.

The fourth item is a small plate of pure gold (vv. 36-38), to be mounted on the turban with a blue cord, so it is positioned on Aaron's forehead. Engraved on the plate are the words, "Holy to the LORD."

The ephod, the breastpiece, the robe and the gold plate: these are the four unique items of the sacred vestments for Aaron the high priest. These are the special vestments that he is to wear when he goes into the presence of the Lord. Three remaining items are briefly listed (v. 39): a white tunic of fine linen, worn under the blue robe, a white turban of fine linen on which is mounted the gold plate, and an embroidered sash.

The vestments for the priests are described very briefly (v. 40), because they are similar to the three items of the high priest's vestments that have just been mentioned. The priests shall wear tunics, sashes and caps. One final item is commanded for both Aaron and his sons: linen undergarments to cover their loins and hide their nakedness (vv. 42-43).

These are the vestments that Aaron and his sons shall wear to serve as priests in the sanctuary. Four of them are unique to the high priest; four are shared by him and the priests. What is the significance of these vestments? What, especially, is the significance of the four special items of the high priest's vestments? Two features stand out: the holiness of the sanctuary that requires these sacred vestments, and Aaron's role as the representative of the people when he serves as high priest.

God's holiness

God is holy. Therefore he cannot be casually approached by sinful people. God has called Aaron and his sons to serve him as priests (vv. 1, 3, 4, 41). To serve in this capacity they must be consecrated, set apart as holy. And so must their vestments be consecrated, making them sacred vestments. The vestments for both the high priest and the priests are to be made "for glory and for beauty" (vv. 2, 40). They are to confer dignity on the ones who alone can approach God's presence; it is a weighty matter to approach the holy God. Their beauty is to match the beauty of God's sanctuary in which they serve. This is true for the priests, and true all the more so for the high priest with his four special vestments.

The high priest bears upon his forehead the inscription, "Holy to the LORD" (v. 36). The Lord had called Israel out of the nations to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). From the tribes of Israel he set aside the tribe of Levi in holy service to him. From the tribe of Levi he set aside Aaron and his sons to serve him as his holy priests. From the priests he set aside Aaron to be high

priest. The high priest was the pinnacle of a hierarchy of holiness. As the one "Holy to the LORD," only Aaron the high priest could enter before the Lord.

But to enter the Lord's holy presence is a risky thing. It is dangerous for a mere mortal to come before God. There is always the risk of death. Thus the golden bells on the hem of the blue robe. When Aaron ministers, their "sound shall be heard when he goes into the Holy Place before the LORD, and when he comes out, so that he does not die" (v. 35). The ongoing sound of the bells would indicate that he was still alive in the Lord's holy presence. Both Aaron and his sons were to wear the undergarments to cover their nakedness when they entered the tent or approached the altar, "lest they bear guilt and die" (v. 43). It is a dangerous thing to enter into the Lord's holy presence.

Representation

Although only the high priest could pass through the veil and enter the Lord's presence, he did not go alone. Physically he was alone, but symbolically he carried all Israel with him when he entered in before the Lord. On his shoulders were the two onyx stones with the names of the twelve tribes as stones of remembrance.

And Aaron shall bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders for remembrance. (28:12)

On his chest were the twelve precious stones of the breastpiece, each inscribed with the name of a tribe.

So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to regular remembrance before the LORD. (28:29)

When the high priest entered the Most Holy Place to come before the Lord, all Israel was present in him, represented by him. When the Lord looked on the high priest he looked on all Israel as present in him, represented by him. They were all remembered before him. This is part of the high priest's role as the mediator between heaven and earth, between God and his people, between the holy and the unholy.

In the pouch of the breastpiece were the Urim and the Thummim:

they shall be on Aaron's heart, when he goes in before the LORD. Thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the LORD regularly. (28:30)

However the Urim and the Thummim worked, these instruments for revealing the Lord's will to his people were present when the high priest entered the sanctuary and came before the Lord. The high priest, as it were, presented these instruments before the Lord so that the Lord could place his decisions into them.

On his forehead was the inscription "Holy to the LORD."

Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD. (28:38)

This probably means that Aaron brought before the Lord all the holy intentions of the people. They brought their offerings to the entrance to the courtyard: sacrificial animals and other offerings. They brought these with good intentions. Though they may have inadvertently incurred guilt in bringing their holy gifts, consecration was their intent. Aaron brought that intent, under the inscription

“Holy to the LORD,” into the Lord’s presence, so that their gifts win acceptance before the Lord, so that the Lord might be pleased with what his people bring him.

In these four ways the high priest, wearing these four special items of his sacred vestments, bore all Israel with him into the Lord’s presence. He represented them before the Lord.

The one day when the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On this most holy day of the year, the most holy person in Israel entered the most holy space. It was the high point of Israel’s year, its most sacred and solemn moment. The high priest was not to enter inside the veil at any other time lest he die (Lev 16:2). On this day he presented a bull as a sin offering for himself and a goat as a sin offering for the people. He brought the blood of both animals inside the veil and sprinkled it on the mercy seat to make atonement. He made atonement for the sanctuary, for the tent, for the altar of burnt offering, for himself, for the priests and for the people. But having entered within the veil he had to come back out again. The process had to be repeated the next year to refresh the atonement. Why? Because “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:4). God graciously allowed the high priest to take the blood of bulls and goats behind the veil. He graciously granted atonement for the sanctuary and for his people. But in the end this blood could never take away sins. The Day of Atonement had to be repeated again and again. The sacrificial system and the priests who administered it were an elaborate picture of what was to come.

Jesus, Our Great High Priest

But now “we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus” (Heb 4:14). He “entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12). The priests stood daily at their service, “offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (Heb 10:11). “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb 10:12). He didn’t have to come back out of the sanctuary. He has offered up the one full and sufficient sacrifice.

But though Jesus sat down, his ministry as high priest continues: “we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places” (Heb 8:1-2). Jesus still serves in God’s presence. He is a minister, a liturgist. His ministry is analogous to that of the high priest in the tabernacle. But whereas the high priest could only serve periodically in the holy places, Jesus serves permanently as a minister in the very presence of God, in the heavenly sanctuary of which the earthly sanctuary was a copy. What is his high priestly ministry? His ministry of offering sacrifices is over; there is no need for him to offer up any further sacrifice. The priestly ministry of mediating sacrifices is over. Jesus the great high priest has done that once and for all. But he remains our mediator. He carries our names into God’s presence.

What does this high priestly ministry of Jesus mean for us? What does it mean for us that we have one present there in the heavenly sanctuary, in the very presence of God, before the throne of grace, ministering on our behalf? He is there as our Advocate. He is there on our behalf.

What this means for sinners is that the one full and sufficient sacrifice has been offered. This sacrifice is able to atone for all sin.

Therefore all sinners can come. There is no sin that this sacrifice cannot atone for. All are welcome to boldly approach the throne of grace in the name of the Lord Jesus and there find forgiveness of sin.

For sinful Christians, we too can approach the throne of grace, for Jesus is our Advocate still. We come in his name, confess our sins and seek forgiveness. Let me remind you of the prayer of confession we prayed earlier:

Gracious God, our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. Forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can no longer bear, and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment. Set us free from a past that we cannot change.¹

I imagine that one way or another that includes all of us here. All of us carry burdens that are too heavy for us to carry. The Lord Jesus invites us to bring them to him, to confess our sins, to find forgiveness, to find mercy at the throne of grace. He is our Advocate, our Friend, our Mediator with God.

When we face any sort of weakness we can pray to him. When our faith wavers we can look to him: our salvation does not depend upon our faith but upon his faithfulness, and he is faithful. When we’re in despair or feeling discouraged, we can pray to him in our hour of need, and find grace to help. Unfortunately after a few hundred years the early church so elevated Jesus, viewing him as the Pantocrator, the ruler over all, high and lifted up, that he ceased to be approachable. The church had to look elsewhere for intermediaries, to Mary or the saints. Instead of going straight to Jesus, they went to Mary, asking her to intercede before Jesus. No, we can go straight to Jesus, our mediator, advocate, great high priest, the one who appears on our behalf before the throne of grace.

Another view is that Jesus is a friendly face who hides us from the angry face of God. No, God beams with pleasure upon his Son, and when he looks on his Son he sees his people, represented in his Son. He sees us. He looks with pleasure on us.

When we need guidance we can approach our great high priest. Just as Aaron carried the Urim and the Thummim into God’s presence, so now we can ask Jesus for guidance. He beseeches his Father and they send the Spirit. The Son prays to the Father; he has his Father’s ear. He “is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25).

When we offer service to the Lord, this too is done in Jesus’ name. Jesus then, as it were, offers it in his name to the Father, so that it be acceptable, just as the high priest brought the people’s intent into the sanctuary under the inscription, “Holy to the LORD.” However feeble and faltering our acts of service done in Jesus’ name, God looks on them with pleasure.

Finally, Jesus is our forerunner. He has entered into the inner place behind the veil, “as a forerunner on our behalf” (Heb 6:20). He is our pioneer, the one who has gone first, our elder brother who has gone on ahead. We too will follow into the very presence of God. Meanwhile he is there on our behalf.

We have no more priests. We need no more priests. We have Jesus our Great High Priest who continues to minister in God’s presence on our behalf. Our names are engraved on him; he carries us into the very presence of God.

This is Jesus, our Great High Priest. Greater far than Aaron the high priest. As Aaron represented Israel before the Lord in the earth-

ly tabernacle, so in a much greater way does Jesus represent us in the heavenly sanctuary. He has his Father's ear. The Father looks on his Son with pleasure, and he looks on us with pleasure in his Son. We are welcome in God's presence. Therefore, as the book of Hebrews says again and again, we have confidence to boldly approach the throne of grace.

1. *PCUSA Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 88.

© 2017 *Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino*



CONSECRATED TO GOD

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

Exodus 29:1-46

Seventh Message

Bernard Bell

February 19, 2017

It has been one month since Donald Trump took office as the 45th President of the United States. In front of the Capitol, in the presence of family and dignitaries—members of Congress, Supreme Court justices, former Presidents—and observed by the crowds on the Mall, Chief Justice Roberts administered to him the presidential oath of office. As for any modern president, it had been a long road to the White House. Over the course of 19 months Trump went from candidate to nominee to President-elect. In the end it was the clock which made him President: at noon on January 20. The oath is the first act of a new President, necessary before he can exercise the other functions of office.

One of these functions is to assemble a Cabinet. We've seen the process multiple times during these weeks: nomination by the President, hearings before the relevant Senate committee, confirmation by the full Senate, and finally swearing-in, usually by Vice-President Pence. This last act of swearing-in is usually quickly arranged without much pomp or audience so that the Secretary can immediately get to work.

In the UK, transfer of political power happens much more quickly, as we saw last July. Hours after losing the Brexit vote last June, David Cameron announced that he would resign by October. But 19 days later he was gone, and without an election. He went to see the Queen and submitted his resignation. A half-hour later Theresa May went to see the Queen, who invited her to form Her Majesty's Government. Mrs May curtsied and that was it: she was Prime Minister.

Other installation ceremonies are largely that: ceremonial. During last week's services the elders commissioned a new elder. Though it was important for the elders to lay hands on him and pray for him, that did not make him an elder. He had joined the board a few weeks earlier.

Two weeks ago Queen Elizabeth II celebrated her Sapphire Jubilee, the 65th anniversary of her accession to the throne. On the death of her father King George VI in 1952, she immediately ascended the throne as Queen, and was proclaimed as such the same day. But the coronation was not until 16 months later. This was a lavish and richly symbolic ceremony in Westminster Abbey, officiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Elizabeth was anointed, robed, seated on the Coronation Chair which is over 700 years old, given the regalia of office, and crowned. The crucial moment was when the crown touched her head, but this did not make her Queen; she had been Queen already for 16 months.

These are some examples of how people are installed into office. Sometimes the ceremony itself confers office; sometimes it is just a ceremony, however richly symbolic.

In our series on the tabernacle, we come today to the instructions for the formal installation of the priests so that they can commence their service. The Lord had instructed Moses, "bring near to you

Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests" (Exod 28:1). The rest of chapter 28, which we looked at last week, contains instructions for the sacred vestments that Aaron and his sons would wear in their priestly service. Moving on, chapter 29 contains the Lord's instructions to Moses for the consecration and ordination of Aaron and his sons, for their installation into the office of priesthood.

"Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests. Take one bull of the herd and two rams without blemish, and unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers smeared with oil. You shall make them of fine wheat flour. You shall put them in one basket and bring them in the basket, and bring the bull and the two rams. You shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting and wash them with water. Then you shall take the garments, and put on Aaron the coat and the robe of the ephod, and the ephod, and the breastpiece, and gird him with the skillfully woven band of the ephod. And you shall set the turban on his head and put the holy crown on the turban. You shall take the anointing oil and pour it on his head and anoint him. Then you shall bring his sons and put coats on them, and you shall gird Aaron and his sons with sashes and bind caps on them. And the priesthood shall be theirs by a statute forever. Thus you shall ordain Aaron and his sons." (Exod 29:1-9 ESV)

These are the instructions; the actual ceremony is described in Leviticus 8. The ceremony is elaborate with multiple stages; each stage is necessary for the priests to commence their service. Moses is the officiant. He is to present, wash, clothe, anoint and ordain Aaron and his sons.

The ceremony begins with the presentation at the entrance to the tent of meeting. Moses is to present two types of offerings: three animals and three types of bread. The animals are to be *blameless* and the bread products are to be *unleavened*, indicating ceremonial cleanness and fitness for offering to God. Both types of offerings will be used in the final ordination stage of the ceremony. Moses is also to present Aaron and his sons. There at the entrance Moses will have already assembled the whole congregation of Israel (Lev 8:3-4), so they witness the proceedings.

The second stage is washing. In the courtyard of the tabernacle there are two items of furniture: the bronze altar (27:1-8) and the bronze basin (30:17-21). Once the priests are in office, they must wash their hands and feet in this basin whenever they approach the altar or enter the tent, "lest they die" (30:20). For this consecration ceremony a more thorough washing is required, and it is Moses who washes them. I assume Aaron and his sons are wearing only their linen underwear.

The third stage is vesting. Moses is to clothe Aaron with the high-priestly vestments: the white tunic, the blue robe, the multi-colored ephod, the breastpiece, and the sash; and on his head the turban and

on that the golden plate inscribed “Holy to the LORD.” He is also to clothe Aaron’s sons with their priestly vestments: white tunics, sashes and caps.

The fourth stage is anointing. The special anointing oil is made of the finest spices including myrrh and cinnamon blended with olive oil, the work of a perfumer (30:22-26). This oil will be used to anoint not only the priests but also the tent, the furniture and the utensils. This is sacred anointing oil, the Lord’s holy anointing oil. Anointing with this oil consecrates; it makes holy. Therefore it is not to be used for any profane purpose, lest one die.

The final stage is ordination. This is by far the longest stage (9b-37). It requires the sacrifice of the three animals, the bull and the two rams. For each sacrifice something is done with the blood and something with the body. Aaron and his sons are the offerers: they lay their hands on each animal (10, 15, 19), signifying their identification with the animal. It is being killed instead of them. It is a vicarious substitute in their place. Moses is the sacrificer: he kills each animal, manipulates the blood, and handles the body. This is the only time that Moses will play this priestly role, serving at the bronze altar. After Aaron and his sons are installed as priests, it is they who will do all the sacrificing.

The bull is sacrificed as a sin offering (10-14), for purification from uncleanness and expiation of sin. Moses is to daub some of the blood on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and pour the rest at the base of the altar. The choicest fattiest parts are burnt on the altar so that they go up in smoke towards God. The rest is burnt outside the camp.

The first ram is sacrificed as a burnt offering (15-18). Moses is to throw its blood against the altar, and burn the entire body so it all goes up in smoke to the Lord. This is what a burnt offering is: an ascension offering, where the entire animal ascends in smoke to heaven as an offering to God. It is “a pleasing aroma...to the Lord” (18), accepted by him.

The second ram is sacrificed as the ordination offering (19-34). The first two sacrifices have already been messy with the throwing of blood. Now it gets messier still. Moses is to do three things with the blood (20-21). First, he is to daub blood on the right ear lobes, on the right thumbs, and on the right big toes of Aaron and his sons. This consecrates these body parts to the Lord’s service: the ears to hear the word of the Lord, the hands to handle the sacrifices and the other sacred duties, and the feet to walk on the holy ground of the sanctuary. Moses is to throw the rest of the blood against the altar. Then he takes some of this blood from the altar and some anointing oil and sprinkles it on Aaron and his sons and on their garments. “He and his garments shall be holy, and his sons and his sons’ garments with him” (21). Aaron and his sons become sacred. Their garments become sacred vestments.

The handling of the body is also complicated (22-28). There is mention of “the breast of the wave offering...which is waved” and “the shoulder of the heave offering...which is heaved up” (27 KJV). What are wave and heave offerings, and what is special about the breast and the shoulder? The ram of ordination belongs to the larger category of peace or fellowship offerings (28). These are sacrifices of *shalom*, of well-being, in which all participate in eating: the Lord, the priests, and the offerer. The best parts are given to the Lord: the fatty parts are burnt on the altar so that they rise up in smoke. The breast and the right thigh are the next best parts; they are given to the priests. The breast is “waved” before the Lord, offered to him in

presentation, but then received back and given to the priests as their portion. The right thigh is raised up in presentation before the Lord then given to the sacrificing priest. The rest of the animal is eaten by the offerer. In this, the first fellowship offering, the right thigh is given to the Lord: it is burnt with the fatty portions. The breast is given to Moses. Aaron and his sons as the offerers eat the rest of the meat and the bread inside the courtyard as a fellowship meal in the Lord’s sanctuary.

There is an order to these three sacrifices: Aaron and his sons must first be purified from their sin and uncleanness in the sin offering. The burnt offering represents their complete dedication to the Lord; the whole animal goes up to God. The fellowship offering represents well-being (*shalom*) between God, sacrificer (Moses), and offerers.

After washing, robing, anointing, and seven days of ordination sacrifices, Aaron and his sons are finally consecrated as priests. They can now enter service handling the holy things of God in his holy sanctuary. And so the chapter ends with a description of the regular priestly duty of Aaron and his sons:

“Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs a year old day by day regularly. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight... It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD.” (38-42)

The priests are to offer a year-old lamb as a burnt offering: the whole animal goes up in smoke to heaven. They are to offer such a lamb every morning and every evening, every day, every year, in perpetuity.

The chapter ends with a reminder of the purpose of the tabernacle:

“...the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory. I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. 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.” (42-46)

This end of the main block of instructions for the tabernacle echoes the beginning (25:8-9): the tabernacle is where God dwells with his people as per his oft-repeated statement, “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” God graciously meets his people here at this place of sacrifice.

At the time of Jesus, priests were still offering up the daily sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem, morning and evening, day after day, year after year. Forty years later in AD 70 the temple was destroyed, the priesthood was disbanded and the sacrifices ceased. Judaism would have to figure out how to carry on without a temple, without a priesthood, and without daily sacrifices. The sacrifices were replaced with prayer. The foundation for this had already been laid. The Jews already had three daily times of prayer; the morning and afternoon prayers coincided with the daily sacrifices.

Meanwhile the New Testament church had already transitioned to life without a temple, without priests and without daily sacrifices. The followers of Jesus quickly came to a radical understanding about these three elements that were so crucial to Jewish life. Though the temple still stood in Jerusalem, it was no longer the dwelling place

of God: the church was. Though Jewish priests still served in the temple, the church was the new priesthood. Though daily sacrifices were still offered in the temple, all followers of Jesus were offering a different sacrifice: they were offering themselves.

Temple, priesthood, sacrifices: all three terms are used in our Scripture reading:

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... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession. (1 Pet 2:4-5, 11)

The New Testament church had no professionals. There was no special class of people consecrated to the Lord's service on behalf of the others. There was a radical equality: ethnic equality, gender equality, socioeconomic equality. They were all priests. We call this the priesthood of all believers. They had all been washed, clothed, anointed and ordained. They had all been washed: washed in the blood of Jesus which cleanses from all sin and uncleanness. They had all been clothed. We often talk of being clothed in Christ's righteousness, but it's more profound than that. We put off the old self, and we put on the new self. What is this new self? We put on Christ himself! As we are clothed in Christ we actually become like him. They had been anointed: filled with the Holy Spirit. They had been ordained: given spiritual gifts for ministry.

Unfortunately, the early church quickly reintroduced priests. Priests would become necessary for the Eucharist. Only a consecrated priest could consecrate the bread and the wine so that they become the body and blood of Jesus. A major divide developed between the laity and the ordained clergy; ordination to holy orders became a sacrament. Daily prayer developed into the divine office, the liturgy of the hours, performed by the monks. The laity had less and less to do with the life of the church.

This is 500th anniversary of Reformation, dated to October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Luther recovered many Biblical truths that had been lost by the church in the previous thousand years. Among these was the idea of the priesthood of all believers. He gave up his holy orders as a monk, married a nun and started a family. He recovered the significance of regular work. He wrote hymns in German so the laity could sing. He recovered "ordinary" life and the priestly nature of ordinary life.

The priesthood of all believers, or the ministry of the saints, is important to us at PBCC. None of us on the pastoral staff is ordained; none of us is a Reverend. None of us has a professional ministerial degree. We are not clergy. We are like you; we're not a special class. Each one of us has been part of you; we've all come from the PBCC body. When we're not up here, we're sitting there with you. I have been part of various churches in different parts of the world; PBC has narrowest gap between the staff and the body of any church I've ever been in.

Foundational to our understanding of the ministry of saints are these two verses:

he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. (Eph 4:11-12)

This is often understood as Christ giving pastor-teachers to the church to do three things: equip the saints, do the work of ministry, and build up the body of Christ. The pastors are paid to do all the work. But we read it as Christ giving pastor-teachers to do one thing: equip the saints. Then we all do the work of ministry towards the building up of the church. This has been a foundational text since the earliest days of PBC. The ministry of the saints is one of our core values.

What initiates you to ministry to serve as a priest? Do you have to go through special courses or get degrees? No, there are two basic qualifications: you must be in Christ and you must have the Spirit in you. In Christ: you have been washed. Filled by his Spirit: you are in the process of putting on Christ, transformed in your very being; you are anointed as saints; and you are ordained, given spiritual gifts.

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. (1 Cor 12:4-6)

All of us have spiritual gifts, all of us have service and activity to do. What does it look like when the saints all work together like a fine-tuned machine? We're not a fine-tuned machine! We're just ordinary people with foibles, weaknesses and failure. Instead we have a fine-tuned engine: it is the triune God who drives all this. The Spirit gives the gifts, the Lord receives the service, and God makes it all happen. Our goal is not to be a fine-tuned machine but to have God at work in and among us. What then happens?

for building up the body of Christ...we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph 4:15-16)

Rooted in Christ, the body makes the body grow!

What does it mean for us to be priests today? We have a priestly role within the temple, within the church body. We've each been given spiritual gifts to serve within the body. There are many things we can do to help each other with love, care, encouragement and practical helps. And we can eat together! The New Testament church ate together: both communion and the love feast.

We are also priests to the world outside. Priests are mediators between the life-giving God and the world which needs to encounter that life. We have many things to offer: our time, interest in people, love and compassion, especially for the weak, vulnerable and at-risk. And we can eat: sharing a meal breaks down barriers.

We are citizens of heaven. Many Christians understand this as meaning we don't really belong here, we're on our way to heaven. But this misunderstands what it means to be a colony. The point of a colony is to extend the influence of the homeland. The church is a colony of heaven to extend the influence of heaven on earth. Our primary identity is in heaven not on earth. Our primary identity is not national or ethnic or political or gender or generational or socio-economic. Our primary identity is that we are in Christ. But we are present on earth to be a blessing to all those around us. God intends the church to be good for the world.

We are consecrated to God to be his priests. One of our priestly activities is to pray, so let us close with the prayer attributed to St Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.

© 2017 *Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino*



SACRED ORDER

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

Exodus 31:1-18

Eighth Message

Bernard Bell

February 26, 2017

"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).

© 2017 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino



PRONE TO WANDER

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

Exodus 32:1-14

Ninth Message

Bernard Bell

January 7, 2018

Maybe some of you have made New Year's resolutions. You've embarked on the year with renewed resolve to be different, to be better, to try harder, to achieve some goal. But how long do such resolutions last? If you have made any, are they still intact at the end of this first week? What happens when our resolve hits up against the hard realities of life? Israel was full of resolve when it entered into covenant with God at Mt Sinai. Today we'll see what happens to that resolve as days stretch into weeks.

We return to our series on the tabernacle. The Lord has delivered the Israelites from harsh slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt, has brought them to Mount Sinai to meet with himself, and has entered into covenant with them: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." He has given them his commandments, to which the people confidently replied, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (24:7). The people have pledged their allegiance, promising to be loyal. The Lord then called Moses to ascend Mt Sinai to receive the stone tablets inscribed by him with the Ten Commandments. Here, atop the mountain, Moses has been in the Lord's Presence, receiving instructions for how God would put his Presence among the people: "Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (25:8). Our attention now turns to the foot of the mountain where the people are waiting for Moses to return.

The Golden Calf (32:1-6)

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. (Exod 32:1-6 ESV)

Moses on top of the mountain has been enjoying God's Presence, but at the bottom of the mountain the people have been getting increasingly anxious. It is Absence not Presence that they are feeling: absence of God and absence of Moses. Finally they reach breaking point and gather against Aaron, a hostile crowd making demands on Moses's brother. "As for this Moses...we do not know what has become of him." But "this Moses" has been doing what they asked

him to do, protecting them from God's Presence. So terrified were they by God's appearance atop Mt Sinai that they had asked Moses to act as mediator, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die" (20:19). And so Moses has engaged in shuttle diplomacy, up and down the mountain again and again, mediating between God atop Mt Sinai and the people encamped at the bottom.

Moses had not told the people how long he would be gone on this particular mission; he had told the leaders to simply wait. But waiting is hard. When we wait we have to live by faith not by sight. Waiting is a time of testing, and so it should not surprise us that Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights (24:18), forty being the number associated with testing. In his absence Israel was being tested in its resolve to obey the Lord, to live by faith in his word, and to maintain loyalty and allegiance.

Waiting is hard. The people didn't know how long they had to wait, but they knew they had to wait. If only they had waited just a little longer. The Lord has finished speaking with Moses, and has given him the two stone tablets. Moses is just about to come down. But they couldn't wait! They jumped the gun. They felt they had to do something. A little episode from King Saul's life illustrates how hard it is to wait. Samuel had told Saul to go down to Gilgal and wait for him there seven days until he came to offer sacrifices (1 Sam 10:8). But as the deadline approached Samuel hadn't shown up, the Philistines had come up to fight, and the Israelites had begun to scatter. Saul saw this, he was afraid and he panicked. He could wait no longer; he needed to do something. He offered the sacrifices himself, and just as he finished Samuel arrived (1 Sam 13:8-10). This test revealed Saul's heart: he lived by sight not by faith, by what he saw not by what he had heard. He was therefore unsuitable to be Israel's king.

Waiting brings out our fears. The Israelites had plenty of fears. They were convinced that God and Moses had brought them out of Egypt only to kill them in the wilderness. They were constantly worried about food and drink. They romanticized the past, remembering "the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full" (16:3). Later, driven by a strong craving, they would "remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic" (Num 11:5). Their revisionist history would get so bad that eventually they would blame Moses, "you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey" (Num 16:13). They wanted immediate gratification; they wanted food and drink. They wanted their comfort.

And they wanted a leader, someone to go before them, someone to lead them out of this uncomfortable place of waiting. Forget God to whom they had pledged their allegiance just forty days earlier. Forget Moses whom they had asked to stand between them and God. They wanted a leader they could see—here, right now!

“Up, make us gods who shall go before us,” they demanded of Aaron. “Make us gods.” What an oxymoron: how can mere mortals make gods? But alas we do. In a quip attributed to many different people, “In the beginning God made man in his own image, and man has been returning the compliment ever since.” When we make gods, we make them like us, and we inevitably become like them; after all, they are in our image.

Aaron should have put an immediate stop to this. He has been closely associated with Moses. He was Moses’s spokesman before Pharaoh. He was present for the fellowship meal with God after the covenant was sealed. Moses had left him in charge when he went up the mountain. But instead of rebuking the people, Aaron capitulated to them. He offered no resistance at all. Far from it; he was only too happy to oblige. And so he asked for their gold earrings. This gold had been given them by the Egyptians in a move orchestrated by God (12:35-36), and the Lord intended that it be used for the tabernacle (25:3). But Aaron melted it down and fashioned a golden calf. The people joyfully exclaimed, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

When Aaron saw that the golden calf went over so well with the people, he built an altar in front of it. But there already was an altar at the foot of the mountain, on which Moses had sealed the covenant and at which the people had pledged their allegiance. Building an alternate altar in front of the golden calf was an implicit rejection of all that had happened at that first altar; it was the construction of an alternative narrative.

Under Aaron’s leadership, or lack thereof, the people have broken allegiance with God. They have denied the opening premise of the Ten Commandments, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” It is because of this that they belong to God! But they reject this identity. They have broken the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” They have broken the second commandment, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (20:2-4). Their resolve to live a life of faithful obedience has collapsed in just forty days. But this is worse than just breaking a resolution. This is treason, a breach of allegiance.

But Aaron was untroubled; he was on a roll. Next he proclaimed “a feast to the LORD” for the morrow. The people rose early the next morning; they were eager, excited, rejuvenated. They were caught up in the excitement of what was happening. They sacrificed offerings at this treasonous altar, again rejecting the sacrifices that had been offered at the legitimate altar; the blood of those sacrifices was the blood of the covenant, binding God and his people together.

Then the people partied in front of the golden calf. They “sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” Later verses describe singing and dancing. The people are happy. Life has returned. They’ve forgotten all their fears and worries. They have full stomachs and happy partying. Their carnal desires have been gratified. They are living in the realm of sight, and that’s all that matters to them. But they have been far too easily pleased. C. S. Lewis writes,

our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹

How different this meal in the presence of the golden calf was from the meal that followed the covenant, when God invited Moses, Aaron and seventy elders to come up to him: “they beheld God, and ate and drank” (24:11). That fellowship meal with God was about much more than satisfying physical appetites; they were spiritually nourished by the beatific vision, by gazing upon God. He was their food and drink.

The Israelites have reduced God. Aaron may claim that this is still a feast to the Lord, but the Lord would not have seen it that way. He would have seen it as entirely a human creation. On top of Mt Sinai the Lord has been giving Moses detailed instructions on how his Presence will be among his people, and how he is to be worshiped. But Aaron and the people have reduced God’s presence and God’s worship to their own imagination. They have trivialized him to a golden calf and a party, things of their own creation.

The people have reduced God by fitting him into their plans rather than seeing how they fit into God’s plans. Driven by sight not by faith, they want a god who will meet their need for immediate gratification.

I’ve lived in countries where people do prostrate themselves before man-made statues in man-made temples. The Western world is too enlightened, too rational, too sophisticated to do that. But we are still very good at creating idols. We too easily give our devotion to that which has not created us. But more subtly, we align God to our programs rather than aligning ourselves to God’s program. We fit God into our plan rather than seeing how we fit into God’s plan. This is what happens when our thinking begins with self not with God. We co-opt God whenever we make him God of our cause, whether that cause be our comfort, our success, our nation, or *our* whatever. This is to trivialize and reduce God. He is up to things far grander than *my* comfort, *my* success, *my* nation. He doesn’t promise me life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He invites me into his love, to be part of his people over whom he spreads his glory. He invites us all to participate in Christ Jesus as full members of his family.

The Israelites have found life, meaning and hope in a golden calf and a party, but it is all ill-founded. What is God’s reaction to this blatant act of treason, this rejection of what he is doing? We return to the top of the mountain to find out.

God’s Displeasure (32:7-10)

And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.” (32:7-10)

Enough, says God. The people have disowned him and so he disowns them, saying to Moses, “*your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt.” They’re no longer *my* people. The people have corrupted themselves; they have gone to ruin, no longer able to serve the purposes that God intended for them. He considers them ruined beyond the point of repair. God said a similar thing of all humanity at the time of the Flood: “God saw the earth, and behold it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth”

(Gen 6:12). Both the earth and humanity had gone to ruin. God responded by completing the ruin, destroying both earth and humanity. He wiped the earth clean with the Flood, and started over again with Noah. He intends to do the same thing to Israel. He has seen “this people” and it is a stiff-necked people. This stiff-necked nature is grounds for the most extreme judgment. “Let me alone,” he says to Moses, so I can finish them off. Don’t act as mediator anymore; don’t try to intercede; don’t speak up for Israel.

Moses alone continues to find favor in God’s sight: God proposes to begin again with him, making him into a great nation. This is exactly what God had promised Abraham. Israel was supposed to be the fulfillment of that promise. But Israel has gone to ruin, beyond recovery. So God will wipe the slate clean and start over with Moses, just as he had started over with Noah and Abraham.

Imagine how Moses might receive this. The people have caused him nothing but trouble, grumbling and murmuring the whole time. They’ve made incessant demands on him. They’ve questioned his leadership and his motives. They’ve shown no gratitude. Wouldn’t it be nice to be rid of them! God is promising a greatly enhanced role for himself as the progenitor of a new humanity. How that must appeal to one’s ego! How does Moses reply?

Moses’s Intercession (32:11-14)

But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth?’ Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’” And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. (32:11-14)

No, Moses will not leave God alone. And he does not take him up on his invitation to be a new Abraham. Moses intercedes for the Israelites, the first of four intercessions we’ll see him make in chapters 32–34. He “implored” the Lord *his* God. “Implored” is an interesting word, meaning to soften by caressing the face. This is a daring way of conceiving of the relationship between the Lord and Moses. Such is the intimacy that Moses enjoys in God’s Presence, that he is pictured as reaching up and stroking God’s face to calm him down.

Moses marshals a powerful set of arguments as to why God should back down from his anger, why he should reverse course. Firstly, he refuses to accept God’s rejection of his people: they’re “*your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt.” Secondly, the redemption of Israel from Egypt was a display of God’s great power and mighty hand. How can he deny that? Thirdly, what about God’s reputation among the nations? The Egyptians will say that God brought the Israelites out only to kill them, which is of course what the Israelites are repeatedly afraid of. Israel’s god would thus be seen to be a capricious, unreliable god, of whom one should be afraid—just like most people are afraid of their man-conceived gods. But the Lord had told Moses that one of the purposes of the plagues was that the Egyptians would know him to be the Lord. Indeed, a major theme of the book of Exodus is that God makes himself known. If

the Lord were to destroy his people, what picture of him would the nations have? Fourthly, Moses reminds God of his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Rather than accept God’s offer to be a new Abraham, he reminds God of what he had started to do with Abraham. God had promised him both a nation and a land, and those promises to Abraham are as yet unfulfilled. God should be faithful to what he has already started.

And so Moses makes his daring request: change your mind. Turn from your anger, and change your mind about the great calamity you were going to bring on your people in destroying them. No, Moses does not leave God alone. He continues his role as mediator. He looks both ways. He enjoys intimacy with God; God’s Presence is what is most important to him. He can thus reach up and stroke the face of God. And he looks on Israel with compassion.

I imagine that God is very pleased that Moses would not leave him alone; that Moses did not accept the exalted role offered to him, but instead chose to persevere in the hard work of mediation. The psalmist says that “Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them” (Ps 106:23). And so God changed his mind. He relented from the disaster he had said he would bring. He would not destroy Israel.

The Bible makes no attempt to whitewash Israel: it is a stiff-necked people that grumbles its way through the entire wilderness journey. It does not whitewash Aaron, though many commentators have tried to do so, offering excuses for his behavior in this chapter; but he is beyond excuse. The Lord would continue to persevere with this stiff-necked people, and would allow Aaron to fill the role of high priest. There is hope for us here. If God would work with this sort of Israel, perhaps he’ll work with us in all our weaknesses and failings.

Israel owed its continued existence to a mediator who stood in the breach between God and humanity. It would not be the last time that Moses stood in the breach. But ultimately Moses and the law he mediated were unable to stand permanently in the breach. The law was unable to soften the stiff-neckedness of the people, and Moses himself was a human, like the other Israelites, and he, too, succumbed to sin and disobedience.

But God has provided another mediator, one birthed from Israel but greater than Moses. He is one who is both fully God and fully human. He has a far greater intimacy with God than had even Moses. Since before the beginning the Son has been in the very bosom of the Father, in his closest embrace. The Father loves the Son, and the Son returns that love to the Father. The Father and the Son are One. But the Son also became incarnate; he entered into the human story, into our story, becoming one of us, yet without sin. He became like us so that we might become like him. God, by the incarnation of his Son, gathers into One things earthly and things heavenly, things past and things future. Having completed his earthly mission the Son, as Christ Jesus, has returned to the Father, now as a human fully in God’s presence. He is therefore able to represent us. He fully represents the Father and he fully represents us humans. He is the bridge-builder between heaven and earth. He stands in the breach between heaven and earth, between a holy God and sinful humanity. And so, we have confidence to draw near to God; we have confidence that we are welcome in his presence. And God pours out his Spirit on us to transform our stiff-necked nature, so that we become supple.

Israel broke its allegiance to the Lord after just forty days. Their resolve to be obedient to him petered out in the face of the harsh

realities of life at the foot of the mountain. It's important that we gather regularly to reaffirm our allegiance. This accounts for the design of today's service. We started by reciting together the *Te Deum*, "We praise you, O God," seeing ourselves as part of a great company: the apostles, the prophets, the martyrs, the church throughout the world, all gathered together to praise God and acclaim him as the Lord. As is stated in the worship folder each week, "We gather in worship to remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing in his Spirit in us." We remind ourselves of what story we're in. Israel lost sight of that story. It created its own story, one of its own making, one that centered around a golden calf and a party of immediate gratification. They forgot God's story: he had redeemed them and was taking them from the land of slavery to the land of promise. We have gathered today to affirm our allegiance to the triune God. God has appointed a mediator to stand between us and himself. As a result, he looks on us with a friendly face. It is a great privilege to gather as his people, to pledge our allegiance, and to know that he is for us.

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
(Num 6:24-26)*

1. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" (1941), in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 26.

© 2018 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino



SATISFIED IN HIM ALONE

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

Exodus 32:15-35

Tenth Message

Bernard Bell

January 14, 2018

In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye asks Golde, his wife of 25 years, a strange question, “Do you love me?” He reminisces: “The first time I met you was on our wedding day... my father and my mother said we’d learn to love each other, and now I’m asking, Golde, Do you love me?” Golde does her own reminiscing about the less glamorous aspects of the past 25 years before saying, “I suppose I do.” For most of us this is a very different attitude to marriage. Today most view the wedding day as the finish line after falling in love, engagement and all the wedding preparations. Beyond lies marital bliss! The couple is in love: they have eyes only for each other; they’re satisfied in each other alone. But those days don’t last. If the couple is not careful they won’t begin the hard work of learning to love each other that comes from recognizing that the wedding day was not the finish line but the start line. Tevye and Golde had the advantage that their wedding day was clearly the start line. It was the beginning of learning to love each other within the protection of lifelong marriage vows.

Marriage is about lifelong commitment, about being faithful to one another through all the circumstances of life: for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health. Bound by loyalty and fidelity the couple learns to love each other.

Marriage is the one environment in which jealousy is appropriate. Jealousy is usually a negative trait, akin to envy and coveting. It’s an inappropriate longing for something, tangible or intangible, that someone else has that we wish we had. It’s often accompanied by fear, suspicion or resentment. Jealousy has wrecked many marriages. Yet marriage is the one situation in which jealousy is appropriate. Once a couple marry, their affections belong to each other within the marriage. Transferring them outside the marriage should arouse the jealousy of the jilted spouse.

The Bible frequently uses the metaphor of marriage to describe the relationship between God and his people. Our entry into relationship with God is the beginning of a lifelong journey of loyalty and faithfulness. Our affections belong to God alone. The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, uses the language of jealousy to describe God’s demand for our undivided loyalty. Jealousy in its positive sense is predicated on relationship; it has no meaning outside of relationship. In the OT God expected undivided loyalty of Israel because he had entered into relationship with Israel: “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” In the NT he expects undivided loyalty of Christians because he has entered into relationship with us through Christ: we are not our own, we’ve been bought with a price.

Last week we saw that within just forty days Israel had transferred its affections to a golden calf of its own making. It had broken the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” It had broken the second commandment,

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow

down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exod 20:4-6 ESV)

This breach of allegiance had aroused God’s jealousy and provoked him to wrath. These two words “jealousy” and “wrath” go together. The Lord said, “They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols” (Deut 32:21). Both jealousy and wrath arise from relationship: God’s exclusive relationship to his people.

God had told Moses, “Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them” (32:10). But Moses did not leave God alone. He implored him to change his mind. God did so: he “relented from the disaster he had spoken of bringing on his people” (32:14). The people have been spared from complete destruction, but they are by no means out of danger. We pick up the story.

Moses’s Anger (32:15-20)

Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.” But he said, “It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear.” And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it. (Exod 32:15-20)

Much attention is given to the two stone tablets in Moses’s hand; indeed this is the longest description of the tablets in Scripture. Both the tablets and the writing on them were God’s work. Why two tablets? Because there wasn’t enough room on one tablet for all ten commandments? That’s how they are depicted in art, whether the Catholic and Lutheran 3+7 or the Protestant 4+6 or the Jewish 5+5. Lutheran and Protestant confessions state that the first tablet contains the laws pertaining to God and the second tablet contains the laws pertaining to mankind. It is much 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 binding God and his people together. The two copies were to be kept together in the ark of the covenant, the meeting point between heaven and earth, between God and his people.

Moses descended the mountain with these two copies of the treaty in hand. He rejoined his assistant Joshua, who remarked on the noise rising up from the people at the foot of the mountain. But Joshua misidentified the noise as the sound of fighting in camp. Moses corrected him: it's the sound of neither victory nor defeat, but of singing. This attention to the sound delays the story and heightens our suspense.

Finally Moses approached the camp. He burst into a flurry of activity with a long string of verbs attributed to him. He saw the golden calf and the dancing. Immediately his anger burned. The Lord had asked leave for his anger to burn, leave which Moses had not given him. Not so Moses: his anger kindled into immediate action. He hurled the two tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. Again, these are the two copies of the treaty. No sooner have they been made and handed over to Moses pending the manufacture of the ark of the covenant than they lie shattered to pieces. The covenant has been broken on the people's side.

Moses next enacted a strange ritual: he took the calf, burned it, ground it to powder, which he scattered on water and made the people drink. He immediately destroyed the object of false worship. This forbidden image suffered the indignity of being passed through the digestive system of all the Israelites and out the other end. But there's more to it than that. This action is similar to the ordeal prescribed for a suspected adulteress (Num 5). If a man suspects his wife of adultery, provoking him to jealousy, he is to bring her to the priest who will bring her before the Lord. The priest unbinds her hair so it hangs loose, makes her take an oath complete with curses that go into effect should she be guilty, writes the curses on a scroll and washes them off into holy water, which he makes her drink. This water is "the water of bitterness that brings the curse."

Moses doesn't administer this water of bitterness as a test. He has seen the calf and the dancing and heard the singing. It's clear what the people have done. They've been unfaithful to their covenant partner. They've engaged in idolatry, which so often in Scripture is described as adultery. Moses makes them drink the water as those who are clearly guilty.

Next Moses turns to Aaron.

Aaron's Weakness (32:21-24)

And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?" And Aaron said, "Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, 'Make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' So I said to them, 'Let any who have gold take it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf." (32:21-24)

Moses knows that it is Aaron who has brought this great sin upon the people. Elsewhere in Scripture and in the Ancient Near East this phrase "great sin" refers to adultery, whether literal or metaphorical. Aaron has brought on the people the great sin of covenant infidelity, for which the consequence is God's visitation in jealous wrath. But rather than accuse Aaron directly, Moses generously gives him the opportunity to explain, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?" What can the people have possibly done to you that you have put their lives in such jeopardy? Similarly, in the garden God gave both Adam and Eve the

opportunity to confess: Where are you? Who told you? What have you done? Like Adam and Eve, Aaron doesn't confess and admit responsibility. "Let not the anger of my lord burn hot." Just as Moses calmed God down, so now Aaron tries to calm Moses down. But he doesn't have the same arguments at his disposal as did Moses who reminded God of what he had set out to do and urged him to be faithful to those purposes.

Aaron refuses to take any responsibility for what has happened, the evidence of which is so clear to Moses's eyes and ears. The only argument at his disposal is to pass on the blame, just like Adam and Eve. Aaron throws Israel under the bus: "You know the people, that they are set on evil." Yes, Moses knows the people only too well. He has been on the receiving end of their constant grumbling and complaining ever since they left Egypt. He would agree with God's assessment of them as a stiff-necked people. But Moses looks on this people very differently than does Aaron. This is the people he has agreed to represent before God, and to whom he represents God. He is the mediator in this grand experiment of a holy God and his sinful people attempting to live together in covenant relationship. Aaron refuses to identify with the people. He has no solidarity with them, no compassion for them. They are simply "the people." By contrast, not only did Moses express solidarity with and compassion for his people, he implored God to do the same. "They're *your* people," he had reminded God. "Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against *your* people."

Aaron fails to treat the situation as serious. "Let not the anger of my lord burn hot," he said to Moses. Let's not get too worked up over this. Is this really that serious? Presumably Aaron didn't see this as a great sin. He didn't take seriously God's warnings of his jealous wrath. He had simply given the people what they requested. Aaron faithfully repeats to Moses the people's words to him. There's no indication that resisting the people might have been a suitable choice for him as the one Moses left in his place as leader, that he could have led the people away from putting themselves in jeopardy of God's jealous wrath.

Finally Aaron blames his tools: "I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf." This, of course, is ludicrous to us readers, for we have been told that Aaron "fashioned [the gold] with a graving tool and made a golden calf" (32:4). We also know that it was Aaron who built the altar and proclaimed the festival that the people are celebrating with their partying, their singing and dancing. But none of this does he confess to Moses.

Aaron fails in leadership on so many levels. Yet this is the person the Lord had told Moses to consecrate as high priest to act on behalf of the people. How can Aaron be the high priest if he doesn't identify with the people whom he represents? Moses later says that "the Lord was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him" (Deut 9:20).

What a contrast between Aaron and Moses:

Aaron saw the people 'bent on evil'; Moses defended them before God's hot anger (v. 11). Aaron exonerated himself from all active involvement; Moses put his own life on the line for Israel's sake. Aaron was too weak to restrain the people; Moses was strong enough to restrain even God.¹

Aaron tried to avoid his guilt by denying responsibility and blaming the people and his tools. But all he does is intensify his guilt. Moses doesn't bother to reply to him.

The Levites' Zeal (32:25-29)

And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.'" And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. And Moses said, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day." (32:25-29)

Moses saw that the people had broken loose; this is the same verb used of the priest loosening the hair of the suspected adulteress (Num 5), yet another indication that this passage is about adultery, about breaking covenant with God by serving and bowing down to man-made images of created things. Aaron had lost control. One could say he abdicated control at the very beginning, when the people first gathered against him, when he refused to correct them. The people are running wild. They are so wild "that they were a menace to any who might oppose them" (JPS). No one could stand in their way. But this is what Moses does; he acts swiftly and decisively to restore order.

Stationing himself at the entrance to the camp, Moses said, "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me." He challenged the people to make a choice. To whom was their allegiance? Even if they had transferred their allegiance to the golden calf there was now the opportunity to repent and turn back to the Lord. All the Levite men rallied to him—his own tribe. Moses prefaced his instructions to the Levites with the solemn prophetic preamble, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel." At his instruction they passed through the camp and struck down 3000 men with the sword. This raises troubling questions about religion and violence. Desperate times called for desperate measures. Through this slaughter the Levites restored order to a camp that was out of control. They acted on behalf of the Lord's jealousy, his passion for his honor. The word "jealousy" can also be translated "zeal," which perhaps makes it a little easier to understand. Who is on the Lord's side? The Levites were zealous for God and acted in zeal to restore his honor. As well as restoring order to the camp, this gruesome slaughter was their ordination into the service of the Lord. This ordination into the Lord's service was the bestowal of a blessing from the Lord. In turn the Levites were to bestow a blessing on the people, the priestly benediction with which I am ending each service this month.

Moses has already interceded once for his people. Having restored order in the camp, he announces he will return to God to make a second intercession.

Moses's intercession (32:30-35)

The next day Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." So Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written." But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned

against me, I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them."

Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made. (32:30-35)

Here again we see Moses's leadership in contrast to Aaron's lack thereof. Moses is under no illusions about the people's guilt: they have sinned a great sin. They are guilty of spiritual adultery. They have aroused the Lord's jealousy, for he is a jealous God. In the second commandment he would visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him.

Moses has won a reprieve for the people as a whole: God changed his mind about finishing off the whole people. But 3000 have just been killed. Now Moses dares to go further: "perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." How can he make atonement for the people? The instructions for the tabernacle had included the mercy seat or atonement cover and the bronze altar. But with the tablets shattered and the covenant broken, can the tabernacle be built? There is no atonement system and it looks doubtful if there will be one. Furthermore sinning this great sin is beyond atonement. This is deliberate, intentional sin of the worst kind. This infidelity arouses the Lord's jealousy and provokes him to anger.

Moses went back up the mountain to the Lord. He confessed the people's sin: "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin." The people are without excuse and without options. Moses can offer no apology for them. Instead, he makes another daring request: "if you will forgive their sin." And if not? If God will not forgive the people's sin, Moses asks to be blotted out of the Lord's book. Moses is either saying that he will go down with the sinking ship or he is offering himself in the place of the people: take me instead; blot me out of your book so that they remain in the book. Either way, he shows how thoroughly he identifies with the people he leads and for whom he intercedes. He's willing to lay down his life either with them or for them.

The Lord refuses his request. "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book." Moses has not sinned, so he cannot be blotted out of the book. But everyone else has sinned. So what hope is there?

God tells Moses to lead the people onward from Sinai to the place of which he has spoken, to the land he promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He will send an angel, a heavenly messenger, ahead of Moses and the people. But the implication is that God himself will not come along. They will journey on with his Absence not his Presence. They will journey on without the tabernacle. Nevertheless, he will visit, but this will not be a pleasant visit. His visit will be to visit the people's sin upon them, as he had warned in the second commandment. His jealousy has been aroused and his wrath provoked. The chapter closes with the Lord sending a plague on the people, an immediate fulfillment of his warning that he would visit the people's sin upon them.

The Women's Bible Studies have been in 1 Corinthians 10 this past week. This is very timely for there are numerous parallels with Exodus 32. Paul cites several episodes from Israel's wilderness wanderings, including the golden calf incident. "Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play'" (1 Cor 10:7, quoting Exod 32:6).

Paul likens the Christian life to a race (9:24-27). Many may start a race but not all make it across the finish line. All the Israelites crossed the Red Sea to begin the passage through the wilderness. They all entered the race. But not all made it to the finish line, crossing the Jordan to enter the land of promise. Indeed, of the adults aged 20 and above, only two made it to the finish line: Joshua and Caleb. All the others fell along the way, and their bodies were strewn through the wilderness: “with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness” (10:5). Looking back on Israel’s history, Paul sees the wilderness strewn with thousands of dead bodies of those who had begun the race but fallen along the way and failed to finish. He writes, “these things took place as examples for us... these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (10:6, 11).

The particular issue in Corinth was participation in meals in idol temples. The “strong,” because of their superior knowledge that the idols were not really gods, felt at liberty to participate in meals in temples in the presence of the idols. But they were causing the brethren with weaker consciences to stumble. They were also putting themselves in jeopardy. “Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy?” (10:22). How? By eating and drinking at demons’ table in the temple one day, and eating and drinking at the Lord’s table in the church the next day. This indicates divided loyalty, mixed affections. These who claim to be strong are unaware of how their affections are being diverted by this participation at two tables. Paul, as a good leader like Moses and unlike Aaron, takes this seriously and warns the Corinthians: “flee from idolatry” (10:14). Later he writes, “For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor 11:2).

So often we think of coming to faith in Christ as the finish line; we have our ticket to heaven and the journey is secure. But coming to Christ is the start line. It’s entrance into the journey in which we begin the process of learning to give all our affections to the Lord, giving our undivided loyalty to him, with eyes for no other. This is not easy, because as we go through each week we encounter things and people that attract us, that seduce us to give our affections to things of our own creation. Our affections for the Lord diminish.

This is why it is so important that we meet on a Sunday morning. We gather to remind ourselves of who God is, what he has done for us in Christ, and what he is doing in us through his Spirit. We remind ourselves of which race we’re in, and we reset our eyes on the finish line. We leave with a renewed resolve to persevere in this race so that we cross the finish lines with our hearts wholly devoted to the Lord.

And when we do sin, when our affections are drawn away? We need a mediator, one who will intercede for us. Moses said that perhaps he could make atonement. He was unable to do so. The OT priesthood was weak: “Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood... the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests” (Heb 7:11, 28). Men like Aaron. But we now have a perfect high priest who has entered into God’s very presence there to appear on our behalf. He pleads our case before God. God hears, and he forgives. And he pours out his Spirit on us to intensify our affections for him and to enable us to persevere in this race towards the finish line.

God has “won my affection and bound my soul fast.”² We belong to Christ: “my love he owns, I have no longings for another, I’m satisfied in him alone.”³

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
(Num 6:24-26)*

1. Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 570.

2. John Stocker, *Thy Mercy My God* (1776).

3. Steve and Vikki Cook, *I Will Glory in My Redeemer* (2000).



GOD'S FACE: FRIEND OR FOE?

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

Exodus 33:1-17

Eleventh Message

Bernard Bell

January 21, 2018

*Come, Holy Spirit, our souls inspire, and lighten us with your celestial fire. For if you are with us then nothing else matters. And if you are not with us, then nothing else matters. Be with us we pray in the name of your Beloved. Amen.*¹

If God is with us then nothing else matters. And if God is not with us, then nothing else matters. Do we really believe that? Is the presence of God all-important to us? Or does it matter only on Sunday mornings and on some other special occasions when we invoke him and his presence?

The Hebrew word translated “presence” is the word for “face.” Imagine God’s face turned toward you. What do you see? Is it a friendly face, a face that looks on you with pleasure? Is it a face that brings you joy and comfort? Or is it a frowning face, a disapproving face, a face that isn’t sure about you? Is it a face that arouses anxiety or fear? Or is it an angry face, a face that strikes terror into your heart? Is God friend or foe?

In his hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” William Cowper penned the line, “Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.” Is God’s face turned toward you ever a smiling face? David prayed, “Hide your face from my sins...Cast me not away from your presence (face)” (Ps 51:9, 11). Many of us fear it’s the other way round: God hides his face from us but keeps our sins ever before his face. Maybe that’s because we’ve superimposed someone else’s face onto God’s face.

Do you want to hide from God’s face, like Adam and Eve “who hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden” (Gen 3:8)? Do you want to run away from that face, like Cain who “went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Gen 4:16)?

Today is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday on which we affirm that all human beings are special, including the unborn, no matter their country, no matter the color of their skin, no matter their socioeconomic status. There are no [blank] people. All human beings are in the image of God. But what distinguishes us humans from animals? We’re made of the same stuff. We share almost all our DNA with chimpanzees. Animals can outperform us. Among the domestic animals the ox can carry heavier loads. Among the birds the eagle can soar higher and see farther. Among the wild animals the lion is stronger. Animals can run faster, jump further, carry more. We now know that some animals use tools and have remarkable intelligence. So wherein lies our difference?

Unlike animals, we image God. We represent God in the world. We are his image in the world. Genesis 1 depicts us as the image in God’s temple which is the cosmos. Because God has made us to represent him he has made us capable of being in relationship with him. We are his people on whom he gazes and with whom he relates. We are capable of God, meaning that we are capable of conceiving of God, of contemplating God, of being in relationship with God.

We’ve just sung, “O great God of highest heaven occupy my lowly heart.” We read of David in his passionate longing for God (Psalm 63). Humans can conceive of the transcendent. We understand that there is more to life than food and drink, sex and offspring, survival and death. Like animals, we engage in these activities. But unlike animals, we can conceive of ourselves doing these things under the gaze of a transcendent, supernatural God. This is what makes us human.

But humans can also turn their back on the transcendent. This is what Cain did when he voluntarily exiled himself from God. Both Cain and Abel had brought offerings to the Lord, offerings from the physical realm to the transcendent realm. God had turned his face toward both the offerers and their offerings. Toward Abel it was a face of pleasure and approval because Abel’s face was turned toward God. Toward Cain it was a face of disapproval because Cain’s face remained anchored in the material world. Eventually Cain could tolerate that face no longer. He fled from it to wander east of Eden, the realm of the physical with no transcendence.

But God called Israel out of the world of the merely physical into a transcendent relationship with himself. He heard their groaning in Egypt; “God saw the people of Israel—and God knew” (Exod 2:25). He looked on them with compassion and favor. He delivered them from Egypt and brought them to Mt Sinai to meet with himself. He entered into covenant with them: I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.

But within forty days, while Moses was enjoying God’s Presence atop Mt Sinai, the people at the foot of the mountain were feeling his Absence not his Presence. They rejected the transcendent and returned to the merely physical, the world of man-made idols, the world of the golden calf. They ate and they drank, they danced and they sang under the gaze of that golden calf which they themselves had made. But the calf could neither see nor hear.

Moses alone remains capable of God. Mediating between the two realms he intercedes for sinful Israel before a holy God. He has asked God to change his mind about destroying the people, and God has granted this request. He has asked God to forgive the people for sinning a great sin, but God has not granted this request. How can Moses make these daring requests? He has an appetite for God’s presence; God’s face is approachable. He also remains one with the people.

Moses has not yet finished petitioning God’s face. We pick up the story in 33:1.

I’m Not Coming with You (33:1-6)

The LORD said to Moses, “Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give it.’ I will send an angel before

you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, “Say to the people of Israel, ‘You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.’” Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward. (Exod 33:1-6 ESV)

“It’s time to move on,” says the Lord to Moses. The exodus from Egypt had two destinations. The intermediate destination was Mt Sinai, here to meet the Lord and worship him. The ultimate destination was Canaan, the land God had promised to Abraham four hundred years earlier, there to live in rest in a land of plenty. God was still willing for the people to reach this final destination. He would send his angel or heavenly messenger ahead to drive out the native peoples of the land.

But all is not well. The Lord expresses his displeasure by again refusing to identify the people as his people. They’re *your* people he says to Moses: “the people whom *you* have brought up out of the land of Egypt.” Furthermore, the Lord will not accompany Israel on this journey: “I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” In the Old Testament the distinction between the angel of the Lord and the Lord himself is a fuzzy one. The angel of the Lord whom the Lord will send ahead of the Israelites does represent the Lord’s presence, but it’s a limited presence. What the Lord here announces that he will withhold is his fuller presence, his presence *among* the people. This is his tabernacling Presence.

Moses has spent forty days and nights atop Mt Sinai receiving detailed instructions for the tabernacle: “let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (25:8). The tabernacle was to have been a movable shrine that transferred God’s Presence from the top of Mt Sinai to the Promised Land, to the site where God would choose to put his Name as a permanent presence in the midst of his people. The tabernacle was to have been a portable Mt Sinai. But now this Presence will not go in the midst of the people. The tabernacle will not be built. This is why our tabernacle exhibit is shrouded in black and why the high priest does not wear his colorful vestments.

The Lord’s Absence is for the people’s protection: “lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” Even a single moment of the Lord’s Presence among them would finish them off. Again we have the problem of how can a sinful people survive the presence of a holy God in their midst. As stiff-necked people it’s their backs not their faces that they’ve turned to him. How can there be any relationship if they can’t turn their faces to him? This is the second time God describes Israel as a “stiff-necked people.” The first time it was grounds for why he wanted to consume them, finishing them off. Now it is the reason why he can’t come with them, tabernacling in their midst.

Israel must leave Sinai, the place where they have known Yahweh’s Presence, and they must journey forth in a way to have been graced by his Presence to a place to have been filled with

his Presence with no hope of his Presence ever again.... The great narrative of promised Presence and the great narrative of the Advent of Presence are thus to be brought to an abrupt and empty conclusion by a narrative of Absence.²

The people rightly understand this as a disastrous word. There’s been no emotion from the people since they cavorted around the golden calf. Now they mourn and refrain from putting on their ornaments, the gold and silver jewelry which the Egyptians had given them on their exodus from Egypt. Is this repentance? I doubt it. More likely, this is simply remorse.

But there is a note of hope: “...that I may know what to do with you.” The Lord is as yet undecided on what to do with this stubborn, difficult people. Does this leave the door open for Moses to intercede yet again? Before we get an answer to that question, we are given a glimpse of how Moses relates to the Lord.

The Tent of Meeting (33:7-11)

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent. (33:7-11)

This paragraph is detached from the storyline of the narrative. It uses customary language: “used to... whenever... would.” Moses used to pitch a tent outside the camp where God-seekers would go. This tent is not the tabernacle; that has not been built and at this stage looks like it will never be built. But there was an appointed place for meeting with God. Whoever sought the Lord would go there to meet with him. But who at this time in Israel’s history did seek the Lord?

Since this paragraph describes customary behavior, it stands outside of time and outside of the narrative flow. It could have been placed anywhere in these chapters. Why has it been placed here? This is not accidental. It is here to show that there is one God-seeker in the camp: Moses. I think that “everyone who sought the Lord” consists of just this one person Moses. Moses regularly and repeatedly went outside the camp to the Tent of Meeting to seek the Lord. This was his customary behavior. Each time he did this the people followed his every move. Each standing at the entrance of his own tent in the safety of the camp, they watched intently. They saw him walk far beyond the camp. They saw him enter the tent. Then they saw him no more, for the pillar of cloud descended and took its stand at the tent entrance. This cloud both represented God’s Presence and shielded the people from that Presence. But inside the tent, Moses was in the Presence. The people knew that Moses was in the Presence, the Presence that terrified them. And so they prostrated themselves in worship each at his tent door. That’s the appropriate thing to do in the Presence: bow down in worship.

But inside the tent, in the Presence, Moses didn't bow in worship. Instead the Lord would speak with him, face to face as one speaks to his friend. Of no one else is this said. What a beautiful picture of intimacy between God and his friend Moses. Moses was there as both one of the people and God's friend.

We are privileged to now listen in on a conversation between Moses and his friend, the Lord. We return to the storyline which picks up from v. 6.

Moses's Intercession (33:12-17)

Moses said to the LORD, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" And the LORD said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." (33:12-17)

This is one of the most remarkable conversations in the whole Bible. It well illustrates the intimacy of Moses and the Lord talking face to face as friends. Moses begins by directing God's attention to his difficult situation: "Look! You've been telling me to bring up this people, but I can't do it on my own, and you haven't made known to me who you're sending to help." Now the Lord has told him twice that he's sending an angel, but, evidently, an angel is not good enough for Moses. He wants to know more. His request for knowledge is based upon how God sees him, that he looks on him with favor. These are the key themes of the conversation. In vv. 12-17 the verb "know" is used six times, and the phrase "find favor in the sight of" occurs five times.

Moses is not asking for facts. Certain languages have different verbs to distinguish between knowing a fact and knowing a person. In French, for example, it's *savoir* for a fact and *connaître* for a person. Knowing a person is mental, intellectual. But knowing a person is relational. In Hebrew, the verb "to know" is relational. Its most intimate use is for sexual relations. Moses's request to know God is predicated on relationship, on finding favor in God's sight, on the fact that God looks on him with pleasure.

So what is Moses asking to know? "If I have found favor in your sight, please show me (cause me to know) now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight." Moses asks the Lord, "Cause me to know your ways so that I might know you." The Lord has to make himself known to Moses so that he can know him further. This is part of what makes us human, that God is able to make himself known to us, and we are able to receive that revelation. We are capable of God. Finding favor in God's sight is both the grounds of Moses's request and the goal of his request: "if I have found favor in your sight...in order to find favor in your sight."

"Make known to me your ways." What is Moses asking for? The Lord had told Israel, "...that I may know what to do with you" (v. 5). Moses is now making yet another daring petition, asking God to

make known to him his intentions, what he will do with Israel. Lest God be in any doubt what to do with this people, Moses reminds God that this is not just any people: "See, this nation is *your* people." Just like in his first intercession he rejects God's attempt to offload the people onto him.

The Lord's response to Moses is very brief; just four words in Hebrew, which require twelve words in English. He makes two statements: "My Presence will go with you," and "I will give you rest." My Presence will go with you, my tabernacling Presence. I will give you rest: I'll satisfy your concerns and pacify you; I'll relieve you of all your anxieties.

Moses replies to the Lord, showing that the Lord's Presence is all-important: "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here." "If you are with us then nothing else matters. And if you are not with us, then nothing else matters." We cannot journey on with your Absence; we must have your Presence. It is this Presence that distinguishes Israel from every other people. Only Israel has the great privilege of the Lord dwelling in their midst. This Presence is evidence that the people finds favor in God's sight.

Moses is God's friend, but he continues to express his solidarity with the people. "I and the people...I and the people," he says twice. He doesn't want the Presence just for himself. No, "I and the people." He doesn't want it to be just himself who finds favor in the Lord's sight. No, "I and the people."

The Lord replies to this second speech from Moses: "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." We are on holy ground here, listening in to this conversation between God and his friend Moses. "My Presence will go with you." The tabernacle can be built. When the people do move on from Mt Sinai, God will be in their midst; he will be among them.

The tabernacle was built. The Lord did go with his people through the wilderness. His Presence eventually was transferred to the temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem. Israel was to live in the land conscious of his Presence. Three times a year they were to go up to Jerusalem to have a festival in the Lord's Presence, to eat and drink under his gaze. When they were in trouble they were to pray toward the temple, which was a conduit to God in heaven, where his ears, eyes and heart were open toward the temple and toward his people. But Israel again turned its back not its face toward the Lord; it stiffened its neck and hardened its heart. God withdrew his presence and sent his people into exile, first the northern kingdom Israel, then the southern kingdom Judah. We do not read of the Lord's presence returning to the people after their return from exile, until...

Until, "The Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). This Word, who is the Son eternal, in the Father's closest embrace, in his bosom, came and made his Father's face visible on earth among his people Israel. But Israel again turned its back, rejecting this presence of the Lord in their midst, putting him to death. But the risen Lord Jesus Christ has returned to the Father's presence, and God has poured out his Spirit on his people to be his abiding Presence with us and his empowering Presence in us, transforming our stiff necks into supple ones, our hard hearts into soft ones. Through his Spirit God is present in us individually and in us corporately as the Church.

God's intent is that now all that we do in all our life we do under his watchful gaze. There is an expression for this, long used in the

church. It's the little phrase *coram Deo*, a Latin phrase that means "before the face of God" or "in the presence of God." We live out our lives *coram Deo*, before the face of God. In all that we do we are conscious that God's face is turned toward us, conscious of his gaze upon us. We partake of the life of this material world conscious of the transcendent world, of God gazing upon us. We don't diminish the world; we affirm it. We affirm that God loves the world he made. As the Psalmist said, "The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof" (Ps 24:1).

Before the material world was created, in the transcendent realm there was a relationship of love between the Father and the Son. The Father gazed upon the Son in love with pleasure and affection. That's the primary role of a father: to gaze with affection on his son. The Son returned that love to the Father. God created the world as an expression of his love, doing so through his two hands, the Son and the Spirit. He loves the world that he made, declaring it very good. He put us humans in the world to image him, to represent him in the world, to be capable of him. Just as he gazed with affection on his Son, so he gazes with affection on us. He has adopted us through his Spirit to be his children. So his face toward us is of a Father who loves his sons and daughters—the same Father who gazed upon his own Son and said, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:1:11).

We seek to live out our lives under the gaze of this loving Father. The problem is that so many of us have put someone else's face onto the Father's face. For so many, that face is the face of their own earthly father, which has not been a friendly face. I've twice heard Paul Young, author of *The Shack*, speak. Both times he said that it took him fifty years to wipe the face of his father off the face of God. *The Shack* is the story he wrote for his kids about that.

God loves us in Christ. Moses was conscious in all that he did that he was under the gaze of God. For him the Lord's Presence was all-important. For him God's face was not an angry face or a scrutinizing, doubtful face. It was the loving face of a friend. It was a face that could be approached, so Moses interceded before that face for his people. We now have an intercessor before God's face on whom he looks with even more favor than he did on Moses. Through him we have access to the throne of God and to that face. And so, we seek God.

All that we do, our food and drink, sex and offspring, life and death, what are sometimes called the animal instincts, we do *coram Deo*, in God's presence and to his glory. This is sacramental living, viewing every aspect of our lives as a sacrament to God, as holy. The Reformation 500 years ago recovered the sanctity of ordinary life, of work, of family, of marriage. It healed the separation between material and spiritual categories of life. We have the great privilege of engaging in our daily lives under his loving gaze, conscious of his presence, to his glory, and knowing his pleasure.

C. S. Lewis wrote,

How God thinks of us is not only more important [than how we think of God], but infinitely more important... It is written that we shall "stand before" Him, shall appear, shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God...to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness...to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can scarcely sustain. But so it is.³

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
(Num 6:24-26)*

1. Prayer by Barbara Brown Taylor. The first sentence is drawn from a 17th century translation of the 9th century hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*: "Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire."

2. John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1987), 437, 438.

3. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York (Simon & Schuster, 1996), 34.



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

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

Exodus 33:18–34:9

Twelfth Message

Bernard Bell

January 28, 2018

“What’s in a name?” said Juliet to Romeo. “That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet.”¹ Can the names Capulet and Montague divide the lovers?

What’s in a name? A name can cost a lot of money. Companies pay big dollars to branding consultants to create an identity: a name, a logo, even a color. Some names are meaningful. Others are meaningless but designed to sound meaningful: Agilent and Keysight are a couple of local examples.

Car models have names. Some are indecipherable strings of letters and numbers. Some are evocative: the Ford Mustang, the Dodge Viper. Others leave us scratching our heads. Who named the Chevy Nova (*no va*, “no go”) or the AMC Gremlin?

Sometimes the public usurps the naming. In London each new skyscraper quickly acquires a public nickname: the Gherkin, the Shard, the Walkie-Talkie, the Cheese-Grater. No one even knows the official names of the buildings. Apple has named its new campus Apple Park, but we keep on calling it the Spaceship. Companies may eventually acquiesce: Federal Express finally renamed itself FedEx; Minnesota Mining & Manufacturing renamed itself 3M.

Churches have names. Such naming used to be easy: First Baptist Church, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Peninsula Bible Church. But now church names avoid any hint of being a church: The River, The Highway, Reality.

We have names: a family name and one or more given names. New parents consult books to find meaningful names. Parents may name us after other people; that’s true for both of my given names. Some people grow tired of their name or view it negatively, and switch to using their middle name. Many Asians adopt an English name. I have a Thai name, as does the rest of my family.

Names are of great significance in the Bible. We’re told the meaning of many names. These can be positive: Samuel, “heard of God,” or Judah, “the Lord be praised.” Or they can be negative: Jacob the trickster or heel-grabber, Nabal the fool. Sometimes God changes a name: Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, Saul to Paul.

God himself has a name. At the Burning Bush, God commissioned Moses to return to Egypt and tell Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Let my people go.’” But Moses raised several objections. First, Who am I? “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” The Lord replied, “But I will be with you.” Moses followed with a second question: Who are you?

“If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to

you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” (Exod 3:13-15 ESV)

God lays out his name in three stages. First, the enigmatic, “I AM WHO I AM” (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*) which he abbreviates to “I AM” (*ehyeh*). This first person term is appropriate as he addresses Moses directly. But Moses needs a name to take to the Israelites, so God translates the name into the third person, “He is.” But that’s not what we read in our English translations, which universally use “the LORD” in smallcaps. God’s name is written in Hebrew as the consonants YHWH. Scholars reckon it was pronounced Yahweh, related to the verb “he is” (*yihyeh*). Why then do translations render this as “the LORD”? Lest they break the third commandment, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain” (Exod 20:7), Jews avoided saying the name. It became the ineffable tetragrammaton, the unspeakable four-letter word. Instead they would say *Adonai*, Lord. Yahweh was translated into Greek and then Latin as “Lord” and thence into English. The practice of smallcaps began with the KJV (1611).

God’s name is Yahweh, “He is,” or “I am.” “I AM WHO I AM.” What does this mean? God will be God. He will be true to himself; he will be faithful. God’s name therefore develops his answer to Moses’s first question: “I will be with you.”

What’s in a name? A lot. Names are important. Today, as we conclude the golden calf section, God’s name is front and center. God has assured Moses that his Presence will go with him and the Israelites when they leave Sinai to journey to the Promised Land. Moses has not yet finished petitioning God.

Show Me Your Glory (33:18-23)

Moses said, “Please show me your glory.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” (Exod 33:18-23)

“Please show me your glory.” Glory is a difficult term to define. God’s glory is a manifestation of his Presence, usually accompanied by the cloud. Most often it is in response to grumbling or rebellion by the people. The cloud descends and God’s glory is seen by all the people so as to rebuke and humble them. But now Moses requests a private, personal manifestation of God’s Presence. Nowhere else in Scripture is this bold request made. Not even Elijah and Isaiah requested the manifestations of God’s presence that they were given.

God has just assured Moses that his Presence will go with him. Now Moses wants visible assurance of that Presence.

The Lord's reply is presented as three speeches. In the first speech (19), his response goes above and beyond Moses's request. "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD' (Yahweh)." We should probably take these statements as synonymous. The Lord's goodness is his character which he will proclaim in his name. The Lord offers Moses something better than the glory cloud; he offers him an exposition of his name, of what it means to be "I AM." As if to whet his appetite, the Lord offers a riff on his name: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." This double riff follows the same pattern as the original presentation of his name at the Burning Bush: "I AM WHO I AM." God will be God; he will be true to self. Now he elaborates on what being God looks like.

"I will be gracious...I will show mercy" (ESV) or "I will have mercy...I will have compassion" (NIV). These are new terms that have not previously appeared in Exodus. Mercy and compassion are what the Israelites desperately need. Dare Moses hope that God show this mercy and compassion to the stiff-necked Israelites?

The second and third speech address the logistics of the impending revelation. No human can survive seeing God's face. Therefore the Lord will cover Moses's face as he passes by, so that Moses will see only his back but not his face.

God Proclaims His Name (34:1-9)

The LORD said to Moses, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. No one shall come up with you, and let no one be seen throughout all the mountain. Let no flocks or herds graze opposite that mountain." So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "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, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. And he said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance." (34:1-9)

The commandment to cut two new stone tablets is promising, implying that new copies of the treaty will be written, and the covenant reinstated. God will once again take Israel to be his people, he will be their God, and he will dwell among them.

The Lord descended in the cloud to the top of Mt Sinai and stood there with Moses. All other manifestations of God's glory are at a distance. Again we see Moses's friendship with God, that God's Pres-

ence should be right beside him. The Lord passed before him 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, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (34:6-7)

Who is Yahweh? What's in his name? What is the meaning of this one who has already declared himself as "I AM WHO I AM," "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious," "I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy"?

The significance of this name is best understood against the backdrop of the second commandment, which we've seen over the last four weeks forms the backdrop for the entire golden calf narrative.

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (20:4-6)

The commandment and the proclamation of the name contain shared language: the visitation of the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation, and showing steadfast love to thousands. The commandment divides the Israelites into two sets: those who love the Lord and those who hate the Lord. It's black and white, binary; there's no middle ground. To those who love him and keep his commandments the Lord will show steadfast love, *hesed* love, love that is loyal to covenant. Moses is in this category. He's been loyal to God; God will be loyal to him. But all the other Israelites are in the other category. They have bowed down to images of their own making. They have given their loyalty and affections to another, committing treason and adultery. They've broken the covenant and the stone tablets lie shattered. Therefore covenant-loyal love no longer applies. They are those who hate him in this black and white world. All they can expect is that God will visit their iniquity upon them and their offspring. The second commandment holds out no hope for the golden calf worshippers. It only condemns.

In the proclamation of the Name, the visiting of the iniquity of the fathers upon the children is still here. But the proclamation is a lot more hopeful than the second commandment. It is more hopeful in multiple ways. In the commandment the visiting iniquity was first, followed by showing *hesed* love. Here it is reversed so that the focus is on showing loyal love. Secondly, the showing *hesed* love part is greatly expanded to include compassion, mercy and forgiveness. Furthermore, these are new terms. Compassion and mercy were first mentioned in 33:19. This is the first mention of God forgiving humans. Thirdly, the commandment divided the Israelites into two groups, those who hate the Lord and those who love him. Whether he visits iniquity or shows *hesed* love depends on human behavior. It's a quid pro quo. You show loyalty to God and he'll show loyalty to you. You show disloyalty to God and he'll show disloyalty to you. If you're among the idolaters, all you can expect is the visitation of iniquity. There is no crossover. But in the revelation of God's name there is no mention at all of human behavior. God's character is not driven by human behavior but by being true to himself. God is God.

He is who he is. He will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and compassion on whom he will have compassion.

God will be God. How does God want to be known? He is “a God merciful and gracious” (ESV) or “compassionate and gracious” (NIV). He will have compassion on whom he will have compassion because compassion and grace are intrinsic to his nature. He abounds in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness; his supply won't run dry. He forgives iniquity, transgression and sin. There is cross-over. There is hope for those who have broken the second commandment, those who have given their affections to another, those who have made idols and worshipped them, those who have broken the covenant. Golden-calf worshipers can receive compassion, grace and forgiveness from God. To drive home the point God mentions all three major words for wrong-doing: iniquity, transgression, sin. All can be forgiven. Why? Because the sinners are deserving? No, because it is in God's character to do so. They can be forgiven by God being God.

A major theme of the Book of Exodus is God making himself known: to Moses, to the Israelites, to Pharaoh, and to the Egyptians. How does God want to be known? Here's how. This is what it means to be “I AM.”

How did Moses respond to the Lord's proclamation of his name? He quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. I think this proclamation took him by surprise. It went so far beyond anything he asked and dared hope for. He had asked God, “Please show me your glory.” He received so much more. His immediate response was to fall on his face and give homage and allegiance to this sort of God.

But still Moses is not finished in his role as intercessor between God and his people. He has one more request, his fourth. It is the most daring, and it summarizes the previous three petitions.

“If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.” (34:9)

Moses *has* found favor in the Lord's sight; that was a major thrust of 33:12-17 where the phrase was used five times. Therefore he can be bold to make three requests, confident that the Lord will grant them. The first request: “let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people.” The Lord's tabernacling Presence *will* go in the midst of his people. The tabernacle will be built. This tabernacling Presence will show that the people find favor in the Lord's sight and that they are distinct from other nations. This is how Israel will be known, as the people which has the Lord in their midst.

Now it is Moses's turn to call the people a stiff-necked people. The Lord has previously used the term three times. He used it first as grounds for destroying the people (32:9). He then used it as grounds for why his tabernacling Presence could not go with the people lest he destroy them (33:3,5). Now Moses uses it to show God why he has to tabernacle in the midst of the people. Not in spite of them being a stiff-necked people but precisely because they are a stiff-necked people. It's their only hope.

This is similar to the situation before and after the Flood. “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). Because humanity had ruined itself and the earth, God brought ruin upon humanity and the earth. After the Flood

the Lord promised he would never do that again. Why? “I will never again curse the ground because of man, *for* the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth” (Gen 8:21). Humanity's evil heart was grounds for God's judgment but also grounds for his mercy. The same is true with the golden calf incident. The world needs God's faithfulness symbolized by the rainbow because humanity is sinful. Israel needed God's Presence because they were stiff-necked. We need God not because we are good but because we are bad. We are prone to wander. We turn in on self. We worship idols, things of our own making.

Moses's second request is “pardon our iniquity and our sin.” In his second petition Moses had said, “If you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book” (32:32). God had not granted that request. He would not allow Moses to stand in the place of Israel. But now that the Lord has revealed himself to be one “forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,” Moses has confidence to ask him to pardon the people's iniquity and sin. This, too, is the first occurrence in Scripture of this word “pardon.”

Moses's third request is “take us for your inheritance.” Be faithful to what you said when you first met with Israel at Mt Sinai: “you will be my treasured possession among all peoples” (19:5). You'll be mine, I'll be yours, and we will dwell together. I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you. Notice how yet again Moses shows solidarity with the people: take *us*. Each time God has tried to reject the people, offloading them onto Moses as his people, Moses has reminded God, they're *your* people.

We've come a long way since the Israelites forsook God and worshiped the golden calf which they had made. Moses was the intercessor who stood in the breach between God and his people. God wanted to destroy the people, because they were a stiff-necked people. He wanted to start over with Moses. But Moses implored him to change his mind, and he did. The people had sinned a great sin. Moses asked God to forgive their great sin, offering himself in their place. God did not grant that request. When God told Moses to lead the people on, but he would not come in their midst because they were a stiff-necked people, Moses again interceded until God said his Presence would go with them. Moses asked God to show him his glory, and God showed him so much more. He proclaimed his name, his character, how he wished himself to be known, what it means to be God. Finally Moses asked God to be in their midst precisely because they were a stiff-necked people, and to pardon, and to take them as his.

This is how God wanted to be known by Israel. This proclamation of the Lord's name became like a creed in Israel's subsequent history; it recurs throughout the Old Testament. This was bedrock truth in which Israel could be anchored. We next encounter it in Numbers 14. After Moses sent the twelve spies into the land, the Israelites wanted to pick a new leader and return to Egypt. Again the Lord wanted to strike them, disinherit them and begin again with Moses. Again Moses intervened. Again he used the argument, Consider what the Egyptians will say; think of the reputation you'll have in the neighborhood. But now he had a new argument:

“please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, ‘The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression...’ Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.” (Num 14:17-19)

Notice that he says that forgiveness demonstrates not the Lord's weakness but his power.

The prophets found hope in this character of God's. For example, Joel urged the people,

**Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster. (Joel 2:13)**

But others took offense that God should be this way to people they didn't like. Jonah was angry enough to die because God was merciful to the Ninevites:

That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. (Jonah 4:2)

The tension between God showing steadfast love and visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children remained, even though the balance had been shifted in such favor to steadfast love. Ultimately, Israel did not avail itself of this sort of God. No matter how much compassion and mercy the Lord extended to his people, they rejected it, and he visited their iniquity upon them, sending them into exile.

There is a tension between visiting iniquity and showing steadfast love. But God has resolved that tension in Jesus. He has also given a fuller proclamation of himself and of his name in Jesus.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (John 1:14,17-18)

The Lord's proclamation of his name was an exposition of his name "Yahweh," I am. Jesus, God incarnate, is a much fuller exposition of his name, of what it means to be God. Jesus made him known; he exegeted him; he explicated him. He was God's Presence among his people. Sinners and lepers approached him, crying out, "Lord, have mercy," *Kyrie eleison*. They couldn't approach the religious leaders to ask for mercy; the leaders interpreted their condition as being God's visitation of iniquity upon them. What they needed was compassion and mercy, the same things that the golden-calf worshipers needed. This they found in Jesus.

God resolved the tension between visiting iniquity and showing steadfast love in Jesus on the cross. In Israel's most iniquitous act, putting to death the author of life, Jesus bore their sin and submitted to the curse due upon them. God vindicated Jesus, raising him from death to new life, raising him to his right hand in glory, where he has enthroned him and given him a name. What is this name?

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9-11)

What's in a name? A lot when it is God's name, a name he shares with none other except the Lord Jesus Christ through whom he makes himself known. In the Old Testament that name was reserved

for God alone. To give it to any other was blasphemy. But God shares that name with the risen and enthroned Christ Jesus.

God extends forgiveness. He extended forgiveness to the Jews who put Jesus to death. He expanded the circle of forgiveness to include Gentiles. He extends forgiveness to all who will repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. God is a gracious and compassionate God who forgives our sins in Christ Jesus.

Two weeks ago in Mississippi a legislator submitted a bill to the state House, "To require the ten commandments to be displayed in each public school classroom; to require teachers to have the ten commandments recited aloud at the beginning of each school day."

Is this how we want God to be known? The Ten Commandments were given to Israel alone. They were the treaty between God and his people. The Ten Commandments condemned Israel, especially the second commandment. Their iniquities were visited upon them. The Ten Commandments would condemn us were we to place ourselves under them, and the second commandment would be especially devastating. We have all worshiped and served things other than God.

Better than reciting the ten commandments would be to recite God's proclamation of 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.

We've recited this each of the last four Sundays after confession of sins. I hope you're well on your way toward memorizing it.

Jesus has made this God known. To Jesus one can cry out, "Lord, have mercy," and he does have mercy.

Many people see a conflict between the God of the Old Testament and the Jesus of the Gospels. Many say they are have trouble with the God of the OT, but most have no trouble with the Jesus of the NT. If all you see is the Ten Commandments and the visiting of iniquity then all you'll see of God is a God of wrath. But, as we saw two weeks ago, God's jealousy and wrath is predicated on relationship. God desires a relationship with all humanity. Intrinsic to his character is to be compassionate and gracious; he overflows in his steadfast love and faithfulness. He forgives iniquity, transgression and sin. This is what it means for God to be God. There is no contradiction between this sort of God and the Jesus we see in the Gospels.

This is our God. To him be the glory.

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
(Num 6:24-26)*

1. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* II.2.



PASSIONATE PRESENCE

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

Exodus 34:10-28

13th Message

Bernard Bell

March 17, 2019

Last week Ryan finished his series on the Book of Joshua, describing how Israel entered into the Promised Land and took possession of it. Today we take a step backwards in the Old Testament to the Book of Exodus, to the period when Israel was at Mt Sinai on its journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. We return to our series on the tabernacle after a break of over a year. Once again our space has been transformed into a tabernacle by our Visual Arts Ministry. Since it's been so long let me give a quick review of the story so far.

Out of all the people on earth God called out Abraham into a new relationship with himself: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you...so that you will be a blessing" (Gen 12:2). He also promised him a home for this future people. Abraham didn't live to see the fulfilment of this promise. Instead his descendants lived in Egypt for four centuries, where they were fruitful, multiplied and filled the land. But this was a threat to Pharaoh so he subjected them to harsh slavery. The Lord took pity on this suffering people. He delivered them from the oppression of Pharaoh and from their misery in Egypt. He brought them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai to meet with him. Here at Sinai he entered into covenant with them: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." He had brought them *to* himself and *for* himself. God and Israel were now bound together as covenant partners. The people now belonged to him. God had taken all the initiative; this status of being his people was a gift from beginning to end. Were there strings attached to this gift? Was it a completely free gift with no expectation of anything in return? No, God did expect something in return.

The Ten Commandments, which essentially forms the treaty document between God and his people, begin:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

"You shall have no other gods before me." (Exod 20:2-3 ESV)

Because the people now belonged to God, they owed him their allegiance, their loyalty and devotion. Their obedience was not to earn his favor but the way of living life under his favor already given. Their obedience was the way of living a faithful life of allegiance to their sovereign who had brought them into his benevolent domain, into his kingdom. In return for his great generosity God wanted their hearts. He wanted their affections. He wanted their undivided loyalty and devotion.

But within forty days Israel broke the covenant by worshiping a golden calf. This was an act of treason, a breach of allegiance. They had quickly abandoned the God who loved them. They gave their allegiance to another. They gave their allegiance to one who was not worthy of that allegiance: a golden calf made by human hands. How can something made by human hands be worthy of one's allegiance?

In four sermons last year we looked at the Golden Calf episode, at Israel's sin and at the response of both God and Moses. Moses shat-

tered the two stone tablets, the treaty document binding God and Israel together. The covenant was broken. God disowned the people, repeatedly telling Moses, "They are *your* people, not my people." But Moses abandoned neither the people nor God. He acted as the faithful mediator between a holy God and a sinful people. Repeatedly he said to God, "No, they are *your* people." Loyal to both sides, he stood in the breach, putting his own life on the line to avert the Lord's anger from breaking out against the people to destroy them. Then Moses asked God to show him his glory. God invited him to come up Mt Sinai with a fresh pair of stone tablets. He hid Moses in a cleft in the rock, and proclaimed to him his name, this name that we recited earlier:

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)

The immediate response of Moses was to fall down and worship. His immediate response was to give homage and allegiance to this sort of God. This is a God worthy of such loyalty and devotion.

Then Moses made one more daring request: "Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance" (34:9). Forgive us and take us again as your people! Forgive us and take us for yours. Moses had nothing to bring except the people's sin and a pair of blank tablets. Would God be willing to write on those tablets? Would he be willing to take this sinful people as his people? Would he forgive them and reinstate them?

Forgive us and take us for yours. Lord, you know who we are; will you still love us? Who has not felt this way? We feel that way towards one another: if she really knew me would she love me? We feel that way towards God: knowing who I am, how can he love me?

Forgive us and take us for yours, O Lord. With this plea hanging in the air, we pick up the story.

And he said, "Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.

Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you

take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whose after their gods and make your sons whose after their gods.

“You shall not make for yourself any gods of cast metal.

“You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month Abib, for in the month Abib you came out from Egypt. All that open the womb are mine, all your male livestock, the firstborn of cow and sheep. The firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before me empty-handed.

“Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest. You shall observe the Feast of Weeks, the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year’s end. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel. For I will cast out nations before you and enlarge your borders; no one shall covet your land, when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year.

“You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the sacrifice of the Feast of the Passover remain until the morning. The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”

And the LORD said to Moses, “Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. (Exod 34:10-28)

I. A new covenant (34:10)

And he [the LORD] said, “Behold, I am making a covenant...”

Immediately Moses has good news: “I am going to make a covenant.” The Lord *will* write a new treaty on those blank tablets. He *will* take this people back into covenant with himself. He *will* forgive them and reinstate them as his own. It is true when he says he is a God forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. It is true when he says he abounds in loyal love. At this moment he still refers to them as “*your* people.” But once his word is written on those blank tablets they will once again be *his* people, bound to him in covenant. “Forgive us and take us for yours,” Moses dared ask. God said, “Yes!”

Tim Keller, in his book about marriage, which I use in premarital counseling, writes:

To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything.¹

We all long to be both known and loved.

“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial.” We all long to be known; we inwardly ache to be known. We may have many Facebook friends but still feel unknown. Having more and more friends does not lead to us being better known. We may post a lot about ourselves on social media, but still feel unknown. We have so many friends and are surrounded by so many people. The world has moved from rural environments to densely-populated urban environments. We are living closer and closer together. But we have

an epidemic of loneliness; it’s a crisis. I’m sure some of you here feel lonely, wondering if people really know you.

Or we feel that people don’t know the real us, don’t know who we really are. Children wonder if their parents really know and understand them. In premarital counseling I seek to help the couple begin to know and understand each other—a lifelong task. One of the dangers is that the person they profess to “love” is not the real person but a projection, an idealization, someone seen through rose-colored glasses, or a project in need of much work.

Who has not ached with this longing to be known? To be loved but not known is comforting but it’s superficial.

On the other hand, “to be known and not loved is our greatest fear.” Just as we ache to be known, we’re afraid to be known. If people really knew us surely they would not love us. How could they love us? Surely they would reject us. So, even as we’re desperate to be known, we dare not allow ourselves to be known.

I recently read the memoir of a nurse from the south of England who fifty years ago went to live and work on a remote Scottish island, in a very small community. She marveled at the strong community. They had all known each other from birth. No one ever locked their doors; they didn’t even shut their doors, but just wandered in and out of each other’s homes. They knew what each other needed without anyone even asking. They knew all the foibles and idiosyncrasies of each other; they knew all the secrets. And still they were always there for each other. They were always there for each other because they knew and loved each other. They were deeply known and deeply loved. As I was reading this book, I kept thinking this is what church community should be like: to be known yet still be loved.

“To be fully known and truly loved is like being loved by God.” God knows who Israel is: she is a sinful and transgressing people. But still God says, “Yes, I’ll take you.” He loves her, forgives her, and binds her to himself in covenant. This is the “overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God” of which we sang. So it is with us. He knows who we really are and still he loves us.

We want to be known. We want to be noticed. We want to be loved. We want to be found. Becoming a follower of Jesus is allowing oneself to be found by God. Jesus told three related parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son. What they shared in common was that they were lost and in need of finding. Do you feel that God has found you? Or do you feel lost and longing to be found? Do you feel known by God? Or are you afraid to be known by him? Do you feel you need to hide from him? Or do you think you have to clean yourself up before you can allow him to know you?

The story of the Golden Calf contains good news: God knew that Israel was a sinful people. But still he forgave and took this sinful people to be his people. This is the good news of the gospel: Christ died for sinners, not for those who have their act together. Jesus came to find the lost. He is the Good Shepherd.

2. A Jealous/Passionate God (34:14)

The rest of God’s speech to Moses is a lengthy series of commands (34:11-26). These commands repeat ones given earlier when God made the initial covenant. They are commands which Israel had confidently agreed to keep: “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (24:7). But Israel had quickly proven itself unable to do so. One could focus on these commandments which the Lord repeats, but that would just leave us feeling a heavy

burden: all these things that we have to do. Many people think that this is what the Christian life is about: the “shall’s” and “shall not’s,” especially the “shall not’s.” I think there is a more helpful way to read these commandments, one that hinges on verse 14. I consider this to be the most important verse in the passage, even though ESV puts it in parentheses:

you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. (34:14)

The Lord is a jealous God; indeed his name is Jealous. In the Bible God has many names: *El-Shaddai*, God Almighty; *El-Elyon*, God Most High; *Yhwh Yireh* (*Jehovah Jireh*), the LORD who provides; *Yhwh Rapha*, the LORD who heals. And many, many more. These are all beautiful names, rich in meaning and of great comfort. But “Jealous”? I never see “Jealous” on any list of the names of God. To us jealousy is a negative trait, similar to envy or covetousness. We are jealous of what someone else has that we wish we had. Jealousy is aroused by unsatisfied longings. What can arouse the Lord’s jealousy? He has everything; what can he be jealous of? His jealousy has nothing to do with envy or covetousness. He commanded Israel to worship no other god, for he is a jealous God. Indeed this is the second commandment (20:5). Israel is to worship no other god because she belongs to him. If she worships other gods, the Lord is not jealous of those gods because he knows they are not gods at all. They are inappropriate objects for the affections of his people. His jealousy is directed not towards those so-called gods, but towards his people. He is jealous of their affections, of their loyalty and devotion. He is jealous of their love towards him.

Such jealousy is rooted in passion and can be translated as such. The standard Jewish translation renders it as Impassioned (JPS). Old Testament scholar John Goldingay, in his new translation, renders it as Passionate: the Lord, “whose name is ‘Passionate,’ is the passionate God.”² Here we have a name we can put on the list of God’s names: Passionate! Here we have a name we can hang onto: Passionate! He is filled with fervor, fervor for his people. Such passion is rooted in intense love. The Lord has set his affections on his people Israel; he loves Israel. He has taken Israel into a covenant relationship with himself, a relationship which elsewhere he describes as marriage. The marriage covenant is the one human environment in which jealousy is appropriate.

If you were to summarize God in one word what would that be? Love: God is Love. God is satisfied in the love that flows within the Godhead between Father and Son. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father back. God pours out his love on this creation that he has made. And he pours out his love on the people he has made. He has made people to be loved by him. He is passionate about this. We are people to be loved.

The rest of God’s speech to Moses can be read in the light of this self-description as a jealous or passionate God. There are negative and positive aspects to these commands. Negatively, God warns Israel to not worship other gods. Positively, he commands Israel to observe religious festivals.

3. The Danger of Idolatry (34:11-17)

Firstly the negative: he warns Israel to not worship other gods. It’s not because they are rivals of whom he is jealous, but because he knows they are not gods at all. God would travel with the people and bring them into the land he had promised Abraham. That land was full of Canaanites and various other peoples who worshiped other

gods, as we see in the Book of Joshua. Israel was not to make a covenant with any of these people nor to whore after their gods. Whoring is the language of adultery, and adultery breaks the covenant of marriage. It is appropriate language here for marriage is the analogy of a people’s relation to God.

We are not surrounded by people who bow down and worship idols and images and sacrifice on their altars. Growing up in Thailand I saw people doing this. Nevertheless, we are surrounded by many things calling us to bow down to them. We are surrounded by idols. The idol of higher education at elite schools such as Stanford, USC and Yale, at whose altar the rich and famous have prostituted themselves, as we have learned in the past few days. The idol of business success. The idol of family success. Just as the Canaanite gods would compete for the affections of the Israelites, so there are many things that compete for our affections and allegiance.

We are creatures of desire, which is a good thing. We are made to have longings. We have affections but it is so easy for our desires and affections to be disordered, to be misdirected. When God brings us to himself our affections belong to him, and he sets about bringing order to our affections through his Spirit. When we come to him in faith we have disordered affections. He knows that. All he asks is that we recognize that he is bigger and give him our love. This love will grow as we draw closer to him.

How was Israel to resist the lure of these false gods? How was she to keep her affections directed towards the Lord. An answer to that is given in the second part of our passage: the positive commands.

4. Religious Festivals: Remember Your Story (34:18-26)

The bulk of vv. 18-26 concerns Israel’s religious calendar. “Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel” (23). Israel was to observe three religious festivals each year, gathering in the Lord’s presence. These feasts reminded Israel of her identity and her history. The Feast of Unleavened Bread in the first month commemorated Israel’s exodus from Egypt. She was the people whom God brought out of Egypt. The first day of that festival is Passover: she was the people whom God redeemed. The Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot* in the third month marked the beginning of the harvest, the firstfruits. It was also the month in which God brought Israel to Mt Sinai and entered into covenant. The Feast of Ingathering in the seventh month marked the end of the harvest. It was also the Feast of Tabernacles or *Sukkot* reminding Israel that God had brought his people through the wilderness from the house of bondage in Egypt to the land of freedom in the Promised Land. On the way the people stayed in tents, accompanied by the Lord, also in a tent or tabernacle.

Every year Israel remembered its story with these feasts in the Lord’s presence. Who was Israel? Israel was the people whom God had redeemed and brought out of Egypt, whom he had brought to Mt Sinai and taken for himself in covenant, and whom he had brought safely through the wilderness into the Promised Land. Israel and all she had was a gift from God and so the firstfruits and the firstborn belonged to him.

Israel’s religious calendar was later expanded with two further feasts: Purim commemorating deliverance in the days of Esther, and Hanukkah commemorating deliverance in the days of the Maccabean Revolt. Both feasts recognized God’s miraculous deliverance of his people from attempted genocide.

This liturgical calendar reminded Israel of its story and its identity. It helped keep her from alternative narratives. This calendar and history was specific to Israel, part of the Old Covenant. These feasts do not apply to us. This is not our story. We are grafted into Israel's story as the children of Abraham, but we have our own story. We remember something greater. Our story is anchored in the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. We are the people who participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus, which we identify with and commemorate in baptism and the Lord's supper.

What is your story? What is your identity? Just as there are many idols competing for our affections, so there are many alternative narratives competing for our identity, competing to own us, to include us in their way of telling the story of the world. The narrative of the American Dream: that life is going to get better and better, that we will have a nice suburban house with two nice cars in the driveway and three nicely-scrubbed kids going to good schools. But we have a younger generation which for the first time will not be as well off as its parents. The American Dream seems to be failing, and has failed for many. The narrative of nationalism, of who belongs in a nation state. The narrative of global crisis. Many different narratives competing to own us. And so we need to remind ourselves of our true narrative. We gather on Sunday mornings to be reminded of who we really are, to be reminded of what our narrative is. We gather to be reminded of who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit, and in light of that who we are in relation to God, in relation to one another, and in relation to the world.

This narrative is portrayed in the "Church" bay of our window. Our hands are reached up to receive the gift which God gives us through his Spirit, the gift of resurrection life, the life of the slain but risen lamb. An important part of this narrative is that the lion has conquered by being the slain lamb, not using violence but allowing violence to himself. We symbolically enter that life through baptism, following Christ and participating in his death and resurrection by our own death and resurrection, death to the old sinful self, resurrection into the new self, putting on Christ. Our hands reach up to return praise to God. We are re-born into a community, gathered around the Scriptures which tell us the narrative, and gathered around the table where we regularly break bread and drink the cup. Our hands reach out in reconciliation for we are a people who don't belong together gathering around the Lord Jesus to learn how to belong together. And our hands reach out to the world, serving as God's instruments of blessing, even as he promised Abraham, "you will be a blessing."

This narrative portrayed in the window is reflected in our PBCC Family Values:

1. Life in the Spirit by Grace
2. Devotion to the Word
3. Discipleship through Relationships
4. Participation in God's Work.

We gather on Sunday mornings to remind ourselves that this is our story, this is our narrative, this is our identity. As we gather, there is one religious feast that we are commanded to keep regularly: the Lord's Supper. By eating and drinking regularly we refresh our memory of our narrative.

My favorite communion service is on Good Friday each year. It is one service when we are not constrained by time pressures. We each bring a nail and lay it down at the foot of the cross. We say to God, "This is who I am, a sinner." At the cross God says, "Yes, I know. I know who you are. You are forgiven. You are loved. You are known and loved." Then we take the bread and the cup: the body of Christ given for us, the blood of Christ poured out for us for the forgiveness of sin, the blood of a new covenant. And we watch each other do this. We watch each other say to God, "This is who I am," and receive the reply, "Yes, I know. I love you."

One can think of communion as a very powerful way in which we counteract the idols which compete for our affections and the narratives which compete for our identity. We remind ourselves of what story we're in, and we remind ourselves of the one to whom our affections truly belong: the one who has made us for himself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in him. Communion is a pledge of allegiance.

5. New Tablets (34:27-28)

"Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." ... And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. (34:27-28)

Moses pleaded, "Forgive us our iniquity and sin, and take us for your own." Yes, says God and through Moses writes a new covenant treaty. Yes, says God to us even more strongly, and makes a new covenant with us in Christ's blood. We are sinners. "Yes," says God. "I know. You are forgiven and loved. You are my people, known and loved."

It has been our practice for the past fifteen years to celebrate communion on the first Sunday of each month. This is the third Sunday, but it's impossible for us to not now come to the table.

The Lord Jesus celebrated Passover with his disciples. The Passover meal centers on the telling (*Haggadah*) of the story. The bread and the wine represent important elements of that story. But Jesus gave the bread and wine new meaning; he reshaped the story around himself. The bread and wine now represented his body given and blood shed. Jesus knew his disciples, knew that one would soon betray him, one would take up the sword, and all would abandon him. But still he ate this meal with them. Still, "he loved them to the end" (John 13:1).

Before we come to the table we will sing a song entitled Remembrance. We will sing, "None too lost to be saved; None too broken or ashamed; All are welcome in this place."³

1. Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 95.
2. John Goldingay, *The First Testament: A New Translation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 86.
3. Matt Redman and Matt Maher, *Remembrance*.

© 2019 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino



TRANSFORMING PRESENCE

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

Exodus 34:29-35

14th Message

Bernard Bell

March 24, 2019

We continue our series about the Tabernacle: God's Presence with his people. God had called Israel to himself and for himself: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." He had entered into covenant with Israel, as signified by the Ten Commandments, the treaty document. God and Israel were now bound together. He had brought them into his benevolent domain, into his kingdom. In return, Israel was to have no other gods before him; this is the very first of the Ten Commandments. Israel was to be loyal and devoted to him. Israel owed its allegiance to him and was to maintain this allegiance. But within forty days Israel had broken this allegiance. Israel had turned aside to worship the golden calf, giving its allegiance to something made by human hands.

Our Call to Worship was from Psalm 115, about the idols which the nations make: they have mouths but not speak, eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear. How can such things be worthy of worship? The tragedy is that those who make them and gaze upon them become like them, deaf and dumb and blind. That's how it had become with Israel. It had given its allegiance to something not worthy of that allegiance. It had given its loyalty and devotion to something that didn't deserve its devotion.

Moses had shattered the tablets; the covenant was broken. Israel was no longer God's people. This could have so easily been the end of the story. But it was not. Moses, the faithful mediator, interceded with God on behalf of the people, even at great risk to himself. He even invited God to blot him out if he would only save the people. And God listened to Moses. Moses asked God to show him his glory. God invited Moses to come back up Mt Sinai and to bring two fresh stone tablets. Maybe there was hope; maybe God would write a new treaty. There at the top of the mountain, God proclaimed his name to Moses:

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)

Moses immediately fell down in worship. In homage and devotion he gave his allegiance to God. Here was a God worthy of worship. Moses dared ask, "Forgive us and take us as yours." And God did. He was indeed a God "abounding in steadfast love...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." He made a covenant again, which Moses wrote on the tablets. Israel was once again God's people. He took her back, though he knew that she was a sinful people, prone to rebellion and grumbling, prone to breaking allegiance. Would Israel be any better this second time? Would Israel be more successful in staying loyal to the God who had saved her and brought her into his domain?

God knew Israel yet still loved her. God knows us yet still loves us. He accepts us as we are, but this doesn't mean he wants us to remain as we are. We are projects in need of work, a mess in need of cleaning up. When we accept God finding us we acknowledge this.

We acknowledge that we were lost and are now found, but we carry the marks of our lostness. We acknowledge that we are sinners saved by grace, but we carry the marks of our sin. We acknowledge that we are people with disordered affections now learning how to have true affections. We are all works in progress.

So how do people change? Some change is conscious. At the beginning of each year we make resolutions to be better, to do better. These usually don't last very long. The resolution itself is unable to change us. It must be accompanied by resolve that perseveres. Over time it may get easier as the resolve develops into a habit. Now we're in the season of Lent, a time when many people give up something. Generally you don't give up things that are good for you; you give up the things that are not so good. These things may appear very good and appealing, but you know you would be better off without them, at least for a season: chocolate, alcohol, social media such as FaceBook or Twitter. New Year resolutions and Lenten self-denial are conscious efforts to change. Only sometimes do they work.

Other change is subconscious. We change without consciously trying to, even without consciously knowing that we are changing. Newborn babies, after weeks of looking into their mother's face, begin to respond; they begin to imitate their mother's smile. The sounds that infants make gradually begin to form recognizable words. They imitate the sounds they hear. Slowly they sort their words out into a language. This is how children learn language: it is all inductive, mimicking what they hear around them. Watching a young child learn a language is amazing. Watching a child do this in two or three languages simultaneously is even more amazing. Children do this all by imitation.

As children learn language they adopt the accent of those with whom they speak. My accent has been very fluid. I grew up in an international setting as a missionary kid in South-east Asia. At 6 my accent was Australian, at 9 it was American. Then I went to school in Scotland, then in the south of England; my accent changed each time. Now I'm recognized as foreign wherever I am. On Thursday evening I was at a British event in San Francisco. People there wondered why I, an American, had been in Britain! I had to explain that I was actually British, despite the evidence of my accent. Meanwhile Americans recognize I'm foreign but have trouble identifying my accent. So wherever I am I'm different. Sue notes that my language quickly changes a little when I go back to the UK; I use different words and pronounce words differently.

I never tried to have any of these accents; they were an automatic response to what I heard. We are all born imitators. We naturally imitate those who are around us. Dogs come to look like their owners, or is the other way around? It is both the good and the bad that we imitate. It is disconcerting for a parent to see his or her poor speech or poor behavior reflected back by their child! It's no fault of the child. Every child imitates. We all imitate.

Nine days ago the world was shocked by the horrific mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand. Muslims stop and pray five times each day, wherever they are. But Friday midday prayer is special: Muslims gather for *jumu'ah*, for congregational prayer. It was into these gatherings in two different mosques that the gunman fired, killing fifty. Making the horrific slaughter even worse, he livestreamed his actions on FaceBook, whence it was reposted to other streaming sites. Eventually social media sites scrambled to remove the video. Why remove it? So as not to glorify the actions of the gunman. But also because watching such a video affects the viewer. Most would be sickened by watching such video. But others would be inspired; they would want to imitate, leading to copycat crimes. We are not detached observers. We are changed by what we see, whether for better or for worse. If you watch a video like that you are no longer the same person. It has changed you, and you cannot unwatch the video.

Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand's premier, has been widely praised for how she has led her nation's response. Last Friday five of us from here went to one of our nearby Muslim prayer houses to stand in solidarity with the community as they gathered for Friday prayers. We stood outside carrying placards, not of protest but of support and friendship: You are my friend. We are better together. We will keep watch while you pray.

Some of us may be afraid of Muslims. We are called to love our neighbors, and these are our neighbors. Every Muslim who entered the prayer house thanked us, and so many of them said it meant so much to them for us to be there. They invited us inside, and welcomed us with warm hospitality. I left wanting to imitate them—in their gracious welcome, in their generosity of spirit, and in their hospitality.

We are naturally imitators, for better or for worse. We are being changed every day by our encounters, by what we see and by who we see.

Moses was changed by an encounter. He had asked God to show him his glory. God had invited him to come up Mt Sinai.

So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. (34:28a)

Moses spent forty days in God's presence. This presence was a sustaining presence. Moses needed neither bread nor water, for he was sustained by the Lord himself. God was his food and drink, nourishing him. But the time came for Moses to descend from Mt Sinai. He had the two freshly-written tablets to deliver to the Israelite camp. He needed to return to his people to convey to them what God had told him, this good news that God would take them back as his people and would go with them.

We pick up the story:

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him. (Exodus 34:29-35 ESV)

Three times the text tells us that the skin of Moses' face shone. There has been considerable misunderstanding about the nature of this shining face. The verb translated "shone" is cognate with the noun "horn." The Latin Vulgate render this as "Moses's face was horned." As a result, in religious art Moses has been frequently depicted with two horns sprouting from his forehead. Michelangelo's famous sculpture of Moses portrays him this way, with horns. Much more likely, the idea is that twin rays of light were beaming from Moses's face, like the rays of light when the sun is about to rise above the horizon at dawn. So, Marc Chagall is more accurate than Michelangelo; in his many portrayals of Moses, he always shows him with two rays of light beaming upwards from his forehead.

The skin of Moses' face shone because he had been talking with God. Moses had a privilege unique in the Old Testament: "the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (33:11). His face shone with the reflected glory of God. Moses had asked God to show him his glory. God had invited him into his presence, into his glory. Forty days in this presence changed Moses. For forty days he was irradiated with God's glory. Some of this glory stayed with him and was reflected on his face as he came down the mountain. God's presence was a transforming presence. Moses spent forty days in that presence and was no longer the same.

But Moses did not know that he had been transformed. He sought God not transformation, but he was transformed because he sought God. Transformation was a by-product of being in God's presence. This change, though unbeknownst to him, was obvious to all around him. All Israel saw Moses, and saw that his face shone. Earlier they had been terrified of God's presence atop Mt Sinai; that's why Moses was serving as mediator between God and his people. Now they are terrified even of this radiation of God's glory from Moses' face. But Moses was the faithful mediator, able to look on God and on his people. He called the leaders to himself, and then all the people drew near. He communicated to them the word of the Lord, this good news that God had taken them again as his people and would go with him. And then out of consideration for the people, he put a veil over his face.

Moses' face shone because he had been in God's transforming presence. He was changed without trying to be changed. He sought God not change, but change came with seeking God. God has made us capable of himself. Now when I say that God has made us capable, you may think that he has made us capable of doing things, capable of activities. We can make tools and use them. We can transform our environment. But so can animals to some extent. What distinguishes us from animals is that we are capable of God. God has made us for himself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in him, as Augustine put it so eloquently. God has made us capable of relationship with himself, of seeking him and finding him. Our greatest capacity is our capacity for God.

David the psalmist cried out to the Lord,
**You have said, "Seek my face."
 My heart says to you,**

“Your face, LORD, do I seek.”

Hide not your face from me. (Ps 27:8-9)

David’s greatest longing was to seek God’s face. To seek God’s face is our great calling. Throughout church history Christians have struggled with the tension between the active life and the contemplative life. The last two centuries have been dominated by the active life. Christians have been stirred up to evangelical fervor. We feel guilty if we’re not doing something for God. The pendulum is beginning to swing towards contemplation with growing interest in spiritual formation. But even this can become misdirected into activity: some who are in a hurry to be spiritually formed can make it into an active program. But that’s not how it works. Here in Silicon Valley with its frenetic pace of activity the contemplative life is a challenge. It can seem like a waste of time, as something that detracts us from actually serving the Lord. Seeking God’s face is not waste time. The forty days that Moses spent in God’s presence was not waste time.

How do we seek God’s face? How do we seek the face of Jesus? We can’t see him face-to-face. We can’t look at this 6th century icon from St Catherine’s Monastery at Sinai and say we see Jesus face-to-face. One of the most important ways we seek God’s face is when we gather on Sunday morning like we do now. During the week idols have drawn away our affections, and alternative narratives have drawn away our identity, as we saw last Sunday. During the week we have set our gaze on many things; this act of looking has changed us. On Sunday mornings we gather to seek God in Christ through his Spirit. We gather to set our gaze on him. We gather to contemplate God. And so on Sunday morning we need to be shown as much of God and Christ as possible. We gather to remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit. In one sense this *is* a waste of time. We do not gather to be productive or to learn how to be more productive. We gather to be in God’s presence because this is what we are made for. His presence is a transforming presence, and so we will be changed by this encounter. Having refreshed our vision of who he is, we are then reminded of who we are in relation to God, in relation to one another, and in relation to the world beyond. And this will change our behavior. It is a “waste” of time to seek God’s face, but it has a profound effect on how we spend the rest of our time. Contemplation changes our action. We imitate what we contemplate.

We have gathered to seek the face of God. And so we invoked God’s presence in this beautiful 15th century hymn by Bianco da Siena:

Come down, O Love divine!
 Seek thou this soul of mine,
 and visit it with thine own ardor glowing;
 O Comforter, draw near,
 within my heart appear,
 and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.
 O let it freely burn...

“Seek thou this soul of mine”: we are capable of God. “Visit it with thine own ardor glowing”: God is a passionate God and we pray that his passion fill us.

After last Sunday one of the worship team said how good it was to sing of God’s love for us instead of our love for God. Many may be unable to honestly sing, “I love you Lord.” They may be overcome with grief, worry, anxiety, pain. But we can all sing of God’s love for us, for that is always true. Singing of our love for God does not transform us; singing of God’s love for us does. Last week we sang:

O the deep, deep love of Jesus,
 vast, unmeasured, boundless, free,
 rolling as a mighty ocean
 in its fullness over me.
 Underneath me, all around me,
 is the current of Your love,
 leading onward, leading homeward
 to Your glorious rest above.

To contemplate such love is transformative.

I’m sure many of us can think of people whose faces have shone with God’s glory, with his love and joy. I think of two right now. The first is a Chinese nuclear physicist who, as both an academic and a Christian, suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution. I had the privilege of visiting him in his home in Beijing thirty years ago. I thought then, and I still think today recalling him, that his face shone.

The other is Marva Dawn, from who I took a summer school class at Regent College twenty years ago. I quickly realized that, though I would probably forget everything she said, I would never forget her. She had multiple chronic health problems but was one of the most joyful people I’ve ever met. She radiated Joy. In her many books she frequently writes about Joy and always capitalizes the word. She has written two books on worship; one is entitled *A Royal “Waste” of Time*.

These two people suffered greatly. They experienced God’s transforming presence not in his keeping them from suffering but in his being present with them through their suffering. If you are hurting and suffering, God’s transforming presence can be there with you in your pain and sorrow.

On Tuesday I will start teaching a small class on Revelation. Last week one of the people who will be in the class expressed apprehension; she was fearful of the book. This is a not-uncommon reaction. I find that most people are either fearful of or fascinated by the Book of Revelation. Unfortunately the people who are fascinated are fascinated in the wrong things: timetables, military hardware, the terrible destruction of judgment, the impending Battle of Armageddon. Fascination with these things changes us, and I don’t think it changes us for the better. It breeds a militaristic outlook full of violence and destruction. It is precisely these things that make the other people fearful.

If these are the wrong things to be fascinated with, what should our fascination be? Revelation is a book about worship. When I preached through the book here in 2001-2007 I said that many times. Most people were surprised the first few times I said it. It is a book about allegiance, about loyalty and devotion to the Lamb. In chapters 4 and 5 we are invited into the heavenly throne room, there to see God Almighty enthroned at the center, receiving the worship of the four cherubim and the twenty-four elders. Then we see the Lamb standing as though slain, also receiving worship. Prior to preaching these two chapters, Sue and I went to Belgium to sit in front of a painting for two hours: van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece* (early 15th century), and specifically its central panel *The Adoration of the Lamb*. You might think this was a waste of time. We could have run around and seen so many more sights in Ghent during those two hours! But I didn’t care if this was the only sight we saw in Belgium. I wanted to sit and contemplate this painting, and I wanted this contemplation to form me. *The Adoration of the Lamb* is a static picture but it contains a story. We see the instruments of Christ’s passion: the pillar at which

he was scourged, the spear that pierced his side, the crown of thorns, the cross. He suffered and died on our behalf. But he is risen. And he is worshiped: standing on the altar, receiving the worship of great crowds. And we join that company in loyalty and adoration of the Lamb. And we are reminded that the Lion conquered by being the slain Lamb. He renounced violence, allowing violence to be done to himself while refusing to use violence against others. Looking at this changes you, and you go away with a different attitude about how to behave in the world.

God is a passionate God, burning in ardor. His presence is a passionate presence. It is also a transforming presence. As we seek his face, we are capable of having that ardor, that passion burn within us. We are transformed by contemplating him and we want to imitate him.

We are transformed by contemplating story. Stories are one of the most powerful agents of transformation. We gather on Sundays to pay attention to the greatest of stories, to the Biblical story, which begins, "In the beginning God," and ends, "Come, Lord Jesus!" It begins with God in eternal glory; it ends with us drawn into that eternal glory. In the middle is the Lord Jesus Christ. The eternal Son, in the Father's bosom, has always had the privilege of gazing on the Father face-to-face. But now, as the risen and ascended human, he does so as man also. There is a human gazing on God face-to-face. The Father's gaze confers glory. It confers pleasure: "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." The Lord Jesus Christ returns that gaze in worship. He is the liturgist with a liturgy (Heb 8:2, 6). He is the chief worshiper.

We are invited into this relationship. When we are in Christ, our life is hid with Christ on high. We too will one day see God face-to-face and hear him say, "You are my beloved daughter, my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased," as he looks on us with pleasure, conferring glory unimaginable.

How do people change? We are changed by what we look at. We imitate what we see. Throughout the week our gaze has been drawn away to things not worthy of imitation. God bids us come and seek his face and be transformed into his image perfectly expressed in Christ Jesus.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:18)

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. (Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo, August 28)

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*
(Num 6:24-26)

© 2019 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino



BRINGING OUR ALL AND EVEN MORE

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

Exodus 35:1–36:7

15th Message

Bernard Bell

March 31, 2019

The story of the woman with the alabaster flask is told in all four gospels. In a room full of men the woman approached Jesus and on him poured out her costly gift, an alabaster flask of ointment worth almost a year's wage. The men watching her were hostile and indignant. The woman was silent but the men were quick to speak. "What a waste!" said the disciples in Matthew and Mark. Her precious offering could have been used so much more productively if it had been sold and the money given to the poor. In John's account Judas Iscariot also thought it should have been sold, not because he cared for the poor, but because he was accustomed to helping himself to the common purse. Jesus defended the woman, "She has done a beautiful thing to me." In Luke's account, the host, a Pharisee, dismisses the woman as a sinner. She is indeed a sinner, though not necessarily a prostitute. She is a sinner, but Luke's gospel is full of sinners and they all find in Jesus someone who cares for sinners, who loves them and forgives them. The Pharisee had failed to extend a hospitable welcome to Jesus, a gesture intended to publicly humiliate him. Jesus rebuked the Pharisee and commended to him the woman as a role model for what true hospitality should be. He followed with the punchline: "I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." Yes, the woman is a sinner, but she has been forgiven much and so she loves much. With eyes only for Jesus she has braved the scorn of the self-righteous men. She has brought herself and her precious gift to the Savior who loves, forgives and welcomes sinners. In love and gratitude she has brought her all and even more.

Israel was a sinful people. God had redeemed Israel from harsh slavery in Egypt and brought them to Mount Sinai; he brought them *to* himself and *for* himself. He had entered into covenant with them: I will be your God, you will be my people and I will dwell with you. They now belonged to him and owed him their allegiance. But within a few weeks Israel had broken that allegiance, worshiping a golden calf. They broke both the first and second commandments. God disowned them and wanted to destroy them. But Moses, the faithful mediator, had interceded. He pleaded for the people and begged God not to destroy them. God listened to Moses: he spared the people. Moses asked God to show him his glory, and God had proclaimed to him his Name, this Name which we said together after our prayer of confession, this Name that we're hearing every week so that it sinks into us and forms how we think about God:

"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 ESV)

Falling down in worship, Moses petitioned God,

"If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance." (34:9)

"Forgive us and take us as yours." We've been hearing this also each week. God did; he made a new covenant which Moses wrote on a fresh pair of stone tablets. He descended Mt Sinai carrying those tablets.

As we saw last week, the people were initially afraid of his shining face. But he called the leaders and then "all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai" (34:32). We pick up the story in Exodus 35:1. The passage consists of four scenes. In the first scene (35:1-20) Moses assembles Israel to pass on to them God's instructions.

1. Moses delivers God's instructions (35:1-20)

Moses assembled the whole congregation of Israel to tell them the things which the Lord had commanded him atop Mt Sinai. God had delivered those instructions to Moses in chapters 25–31, and Moses had descended the mountain. But he had been unable to deliver the instructions to the people because he found Israel worshiping the golden calf. Moses had shattered the tablets and the instructions were never delivered. Now he has a fresh pair of tablets and has come down the mountain. This time he does deliver the instructions. He does so in two parts: instructions about the sabbath (1-3) and instructions about the tabernacle (4-19).

The first instructions concern the sabbath (35:2-3).

Six days work shall be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. (35:2)

These instructions about the sabbath were the very last instructions that God had given Moses (31:12-17). Israel's sin with the golden calf is thus bracketed between these two sets of instructions about the sabbath. The sabbath was a sign of the covenant between God and his people, that he was their God and they were his people. The basic premise was that Israel imitated God. His presence was a transforming presence: the people were to be formed by his presence in their midst; they were to be like him. God had done his work in six days and on the seventh he rested from his work. So should Israel do in imitation of God. God's work was the work of creation. Israel is about to embark on a work, that of a new creation: building the tabernacle. Israel is called to imitate God on the six days and on the seventh day.

The second set of instructions that Moses passes on to Israel concern the tabernacle. Earlier, at the beginning of the instructions, the Lord had told Moses,

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. (25:8-9)

The Lord had told Moses that the people were to bring and make: bring their contributions and make the tabernacle. These original instructions had covered six chapters (25–30).

Now Moses summarizes them in just 15 verses: bring and make. Bring your contributions and make the tabernacle. Moses had begged, “O Lord, please let the Lord go in our midst, for it is a stiff-necked people” (34:9). He knew that without the Lord in their midst this stiff-necked people Israel was lost, helpless and hopeless. The Lord heard and answered: bring your contributions and make the tabernacle. The Lord *would* go with his people. He *would* lead them through the wilderness. He *would* bring them into the land of promise. He was their God, they were his people, and he *would* dwell with them. And so Moses conveys the Lord’s instructions to the people: bring and make.

First, the bringing:

“Take from among you a contribution to the LORD. Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring the LORD’s contribution.” (35:5)

The list of materials is essentially identical to 25:3-7—the precious metals of gold, silver and bronze; the textiles of blue, purple and scarlet, linen, and woven goats’ hair; animal skins and wood; oil for lamps and spices for incense; and precious stones. Everything that is needed for the next stage, the making of the tabernacle.

“Let every skillful craftsman among you come and make all that the LORD has commanded.” (35:10)

The skilled craftsmen are to make the tabernacle. They are to make the tent and the seven items of furniture: the ark and the atonement cover for the Most Holy Place; the table for the bread of Presence, the lampstand, and the incense altar for the Holy Place; the altar of burnt offering and the basin for the courtyard; and also the priests’ garments. These were described in great detail in chapters 25–30; here they are summarized in 9 verses.

Having received these instructions to bring and to make, the whole congregation which Moses had assembled went away. They’ve heard the Lord’s instructions: bring and make. How will they respond? Will anyone have a generous heart? Will anyone be moved to give? What if no one comes back?

2. The people bring (35:21-29)

The second scene (35:21-29) shows the people’s response; they do return. The people come bringing their contributions. First, a general statement:

And they came, everyone whose heart stirred him, and everyone whose spirit moved him, and brought the LORD’s contribution to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the holy garments. (35:21)

The people came to Moses and they brought with them their contributions, everything necessary for making the tabernacle. But this general statement that the people came and brought is not enough for the narrator. He wants us to slow down and linger over this scene. He wants us to see the procession. And so, after the general statement, he gives us a detailed description (22-29). They came and they brought...and they brought...and they brought... Seven times he says, “they brought”! They brought in all fullness.

Who came and brought? They all came and brought: “they came, both men and women” (22); “the leaders brought” (27); “All the men and women, the people of Israel, brought” (29). Who brought? They all came and brought. The word “all” is used 14 times in this paragraph. Who came and brought? All, all, everyone: they *all* came and

brought, every one of them. The entire congregation participated in this act of coming and bringing.

They brought willingly, of their own free will, with hearts moved to give: “everyone whose heart stirred him, and everyone whose spirit moved him” (21), “all who were of a willing heart” (22), “all...whose heart moved them” (29). “All the women whose hearts stirred them” used their skill to spin (26). As they brought their contributions they presented them to the Lord: “Here, Lord.” This was not giving in response to guilt or in response to Moses haranguing them. This was joyful giving. This was giving from hearts full of gratitude and appreciation. They all came to Moses and they all brought their willing contributions for the Lord. Their hearts were moved and their spirits were stirred to bring.

What a joyful procession this second scene is! How overjoyed Moses must have been that the people had responded this way, that their hearts were so moved and their spirits so stirred. How pleased the Lord must have been that they were so appreciative, that they brought their all and even more.

3. The craftsmen (35:30–36:1)

In the third scene Moses again addresses all the Israelites. Once again the entire congregation is assembled in front of him, this time with the contributions they have all brought. In this third scene Moses tells the people who will use these contributions to make the tabernacle.

“See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel..., and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for work in every skilled craft. And he has inspired him to teach, both him and Oholiab... He has filled them with skill to do every sort of work done by an engraver or by a designer or by an embroiderer...or by a weaver—by any sort of workman or skilled designer. (35:30-35)

Who is to do the work? God himself supplies the craftsmen and supplies them with the necessary skills to make the tabernacle. He has provided Bezalel to head up the project, calling him by name to this specific task. He has filled Bezalel with his Spirit. This is the very first person in Scripture to be filled with the Spirit. God’s Spirit equips him for the task: with skill in technical matters, with ingenuity, with ability, and with all craftsmanship. These skills enable him to do three things: to conceive the design; to execute the work, whether it be working with the precious metals, or cutting the precious stones, or shaping the wood; and to teach other craftsmen.

The Lord has provided him with an assistant: Oholiab. Together they are able to work as engravers, designers, embroiderers, and weavers. And the Lord has provided other craftsmen:

“Bezalel and Oholiab and every craftsman in whom the LORD has put skill and intelligence to know how to do any work in the construction of the sanctuary shall work in accordance with all that the LORD has commanded.” (36:1)

The Lord has provided everyone necessary and equipped them with every necessary skill for building him a sanctuary, the tabernacle.

4. The craftsmen receive (36:2-7)

In the fourth and final scene the craftsmen get to work. They start by receiving the contributions which all the people had brought to Moses, the materials that they will use in making the tabernacle.

And Moses called Bezalel and Oholiab and every craftsman in whose mind the LORD had put skill, everyone whose heart stirred him up to come to do the work. And they received from Moses all the contribution that the people of Israel had brought for doing the work on the sanctuary. They still kept bringing him freewill offerings every morning, so that all the craftsmen who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary came, each from the task that he was doing, and said to Moses, “The people bring much more than enough for doing the work that the LORD has commanded us to do.” So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp, “Let no man or woman do anything more for the contribution for the sanctuary.” So the people were restrained from bringing, for the material they had was sufficient to do all the work, and more. (36:2-7)

Moses summons the craftsmen and they receive all the contributions that the people had brought to him. But the people kept bringing more contributions every morning—until the craftsmen had to interrupt their work and go to Moses and say, “The people bring much more than enough” (36:4). It’s not simply enough, it’s more than enough. Moses gave the command to stop, and the people were restrained from bringing. Their work of bringing was enough for the craftsmen to do their work of making the tabernacle. It was more than enough, for there were leftovers. The people had brought their all and even more.

This was not compulsory giving. It was not giving under duress or coercion. It was not giving by an unwilling people. This was voluntary giving, it was freewill giving. It was giving from stirred hearts and moved spirits. It was giving impelled by what was in the hearts of the Israelites.

There was compulsory giving for Israel. They were to contribute their tithe, a tenth of their produce. This was used to provide for those who had no resources: for the Levites who had no inheritance in the land and were thus unable to provide for themselves. The Levites in turn gave a tenth, their tithe, to the priests. The tithe was also to support the orphan, the widow and the stranger, those who were weak and vulnerable in Israelite society. And the tithe was used to celebrate, to have a party in God’s presence, to eat and drink before him. But the tithe was not used for the building of the tabernacle or later of the temple.

A second compulsory contribution was the annual half-shekel tax given by every adult. This provided the ongoing service in the tabernacle and temple: the regular burnt offerings morning and evening, the bread of the presence that was placed on the table each week, the oil for the lampstand, the incense for the golden altar.

But the tabernacle itself and later the temple was not to be built with money given of necessity or compulsion. It was to be built with freewill offerings, brought by people whose hearts were moved and whose spirits were stirred; brought by people filled with appreciation at God’s grace, at his forgiveness, and at the privilege of having the God whom the heavens cannot contain nevertheless take up residence in their midst—that God would really come and dwell among them, a stiff-necked people. Moses had pleaded, “O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people” (34:9). The Lord said yes. And the people—this stiff-necked people

whom the Lord had forgiven and taken as his—gave. They came and they brought and they brought and they brought. They came and brought until there was enough and still they brought until there was more than enough. Their grateful hearts and spirits impelled them to give.

Israel was a stiff-necked people but forgiven by a gracious God, who abounds in steadfast love and forgives. Israel’s sin was inexcusable, but God had forgiven the inexcusable. As a result, their hearts stirred them and their spirits moved them. They came and they gave. They brought their all and even more.

Many years later it was time for Solomon to build a temple in Jerusalem. King David led in providing materials: “I have provided for the house of my God...gold... Moreover, in addition to all that I have provided...I have a treasure of my own of gold and silver, and because of my devotion to the house of my God I give it... Who then will offer willingly?” (1 Chr 29:2-5). The leaders and the people did. “Then 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.” (29:9) And he offered a beautiful prayer, part of which formed our call to worship:

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... 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)

David was a sinner, guilty of inexcusable sin of adultery and murder. But God had heard his cry for mercy and his petition for the creation of a clean heart. He was forgiven and he was full of gratitude. So he brought his all and even more.

There are many directions I could go with this wonderful text. I could give a talk on giving. Talks on giving make people squirm, make them feel embarrassed. But this is how giving should work: not out of compulsion but out of grateful hearts. I could give a talk about how God provides the workers and the materials. If he wants something built he will provide the resources for that. If he wants the church to be the body of Christ, a dwelling place for himself, he will supply everything necessary: all the body parts, equipped by his Spirit.

But I want to dwell on this idea of moved hearts and stirred spirits. Israel had compulsory giving: the half-shekel tax and the tithe. But it also had this voluntary giving from moved hearts and stirred spirits, whereby the tabernacle and the temple were built, whereby God lived among his people. The New Testament doesn’t have these compulsory gifts. The half-shekel temple tax and the tithe were just for Israel. We don’t have a temple to maintain. But the principle of giving out of moved hearts still applies. Paul devotes two chapters to this sort of giving (2 Cor 8–9). Paul wanted the largely Gentile churches in Galatia, Asia, Macedonia and Achaia to take up a collection and so contribute to the needs of the church in Jerusalem. The basic principle is: God has abounded or overflowed into their hearts, so that they can abound or overflow to others who are lacking. So, we give not out of compulsion or necessity but willingly out of hearts that are moved. This basic principle that God overflows to us so that we can overflow to others I find has far-reaching implications.

I am pastor of biblical studies here at PBCC. My role is to study and teach. I study Scripture so that God overflows to me. I study so that I have a heart that is moved and a spirit that is stirred to overflowing. Out of that overflow I then teach with the goal that you

overflow. Then all together, with moved hearts and stirred spirits, we overflow and give willingly; we bring our all and even more. We bring our very selves to God and to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week we sang,

Come down, O Love divine!
 seek thou this soul of mine,
 and visit it with thine own ardor glowing.
 O Comforter, draw near,
 within my heart appear,
 and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

We want the God of love to pour out his love deep into our hearts so that we become together what A.W. Tozer describes as the fellowship of the burning heart. Everything else that we do is the overflow of this.

Today's service is a beautiful illustration of this overflow. We meet each Tuesday morning to plan the following Sunday's service. I had already picked for the Scripture reading the story of the woman with the alabaster flask. I had in mind the line "she loved much for she is forgiven much," which I wanted on the cover of the worship guide. I was looking for a picture of the scene to accompany that verse. Someone immediately suggested *The Woman who Loved Much* that Nancy Woodward had painted for the first Luke show of Art in the Auditorium in 2013. Nancy wrote this description for that show:

Luke is my most beloved gospel because Luke shines a light on several women, many in whom I see myself... the woman, realizing her need and who He [Jesus] is, pours out love from her heart... Her offering is lovingly accepted by Christ... Similarly I came to Him, broken, immoral, and in desperate need. His love poured over me and changed my life. I owe Him everything.

We had the art, now we needed a song. As I described the scene of the Israelites coming and bringing and bringing and bringing their contributions until it was enough and more than enough, Kady Taylor was so moved that she wrote a song *Alabaster Jar*, with the refrain "I bring my all and even more, love poured out from my alabaster jar." She sang this as our offertory today. All that remained was for me to change my sermon title from "Hearts Moved to Give" to "Bringing Our All and Even More."

So today we have contributions by two of our artists whose hearts and spirits have been stirred. We also have hanging on our walls here contributions from other artists and craftsmen: the two cherubim sewn by Robyn Haney, Kathy Woodward's painting *Cleft of the Rock*, and Tom Carr's photo *Blaze of Glory*. These have been contributed out of full hearts.

Israel had sinned but was forgiven; all Israel brought their all and even more. David was a sinner but was forgiven; he brought his all and even more. The woman with the alabaster flask was a sinner but was forgiven; she brought her all and even more. We are sinners, but are forgiven; we bring our all and even more.

We bring our very selves. We present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, which is our act of worship. We present ourselves to God and say, "Here I am to worship, here I am to bow down, here I am to say that you're my God."

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
 the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*
 (Num 6:24-26)

© 2019 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino



A CONTAINER FOR THE UNCONTAINABLE

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

Exodus 36:8–40:33

16th Message

Bernard Bell

April 7, 2019

Some of you have toured Turkey with me to see the many sites associated with the New Testament and church history. If you haven't yet, I hope there will be future opportunities to do so. Among the many treasures are the beautiful Byzantine mosaics in churches. Some of the most exquisite are in Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. But my favorite mosaic is in another church, the Chora church, also in Istanbul. It depicts the Virgin Mary praying, with the Christ Child in a medallion in front of her chest. The inscription explains: *hē chōra tou achōretou*, "the container of the uncontainable." This type of icon is called *Platytera*, meaning "wider"; Mary's womb had become "more spacious than the heavens." This is a deeply theological image, reflecting the wonder of the incarnation. The eternal Son of God whom the highest heavens cannot contain nevertheless humbled himself and was conceived of the Holy Spirit in the virgin's womb. "Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made Man," as Charles Wesley wrote in one of his hymns.¹

C. S. Lewis captured this mystery in his seventh Narnia volume, *The Last Battle*. Tirian, the last king of Narnia, peers through a hole into the stable, and observes:

"It seems then...that the stable seen from within and the stable seen from without are two different places." "Yes," said the Lord Digory. "Its inside is bigger than its outside." "Yes," said Queen Lucy. "In our world too, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world."²

How can something be bigger inside than outside? How can something contain another thing bigger than itself? How do you contain the uncontainable? How can God who created everything live in a house made by the hands of his creatures?

God had redeemed Israel from harsh servitude in Egypt. He had brought them to Mt Sinai to himself and *for* himself. He had entered into covenant with them: I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you. I will dwell with you. How could God dwell with his people Israel? They are unholy, he is holy. They are finite, he is infinite. They are constrained, he is unconstrained. How can he be contained in Israel's midst? But this is what he intends to do. After solemnizing the covenant God had invited Moses to come up to the top of Mt Sinai, where he told him what he wanted the Israelites to do for him:

"[L]et 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 25:8-9 ESV)

"Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." To us this sounds a wonderful idea. Our hearts beat with the psalmist, "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD" (Ps 84:1), and with the songwriter, "I want to be where you are, O Lord." But Israel did not want to be where God was; this was a terrifying prospect.

The Lord had brought Israel to Mt Sinai, to himself. Israel encamped at the foot of the mountain and Moses prepared them to meet God. The Lord came down to the top of the mountain, accompanied by fire, thunder, lightning, loud trumpet blasts.

The people were afraid and trembled; and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us...but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." (20:18-19)

Now God wanted to put this terrifying Presence in the middle of their camp! Moses seemed able to survive the Presence, but how could the people possibly survive such a devouring fire in their midst. But this is what God wanted to do. Israel was to make him a sanctuary, a holy space, so that he could dwell among them. Its form was to be a tent, or a tabernacle (Lat. *tabernaculum* "tent"). God was accommodating himself to Israel. They were staying in tents as they moved through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan. He, too, would stay in a tent, albeit one much fancier than theirs. But how could God possibly be contained within anything? Surely he is uncontainable.

God showed Moses the pattern for the tabernacle and its furniture, giving detailed instructions in chapters 25–31. There was a heavenly blueprint or reality to which the earthly tabernacle corresponded. It was to be a piece of heaven on earth. But Moses had been unable to convey the instructions to Israel. Before he could deliver them Israel had broken faith, had broken allegiance with the Lord God who had set his affections upon her. God wanted to destroy the people, but Moses interceded and God yielded. Next, God wanted the people to go on without him. Again Moses interceded. He refused to move if it was God's Absence not his Presence that would accompany them. After God revealed his glory to him, Moses pleaded,

"If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance." (34:9)

Please come with us; come in our midst. Moses knew that Israel was helpless and hopeless without God. God graciously re-made the covenant and allowed Israel to make him a sanctuary in which he could dwell in their midst. Moses had passed on the Lord's instructions: bring and make. The people had brought more than enough resources for the project. God had provided the workmen. Now it was time to get to work, to make the tabernacle.

Our text today is long, nearly five chapters (36:8–40:33). There are three scenes: the craftsmen make the tabernacle and the priests' garments (36:8–39:32); they bring everything to Moses for evaluation (39:3-43); and Moses erects the tabernacle (40:1-33).

1. Manufacture (36:8–39:32)

And all the craftsmen among the workmen made the tabernacle... (36:8)

The craftsmen made the tabernacle and its furniture. They made the tent with its four layers of material, and two curtains. Bezalel the chief, assisted by many craftsmen, made the seven items of furniture: the ark of the covenant, the atonement cover, the table, the lampstand, the golden incense altar, the bronze altar of burnt offering, and the basin. They made the hangings that enclosed a courtyard around the tent and the screen for its entrance.

They made the holy garments for Aaron, as the LORD had commanded Moses. (39:1)

Finally they made the sacred garments for Aaron and his sons, that they would wear while ministering as priests in the tabernacle. Particular attention is paid to these garments, especially those for Aaron the high priest. Their manufacture is described in seven paragraphs, each ending with the statement “[they did]...as the LORD had commanded Moses.” Two years ago Robyn Haney made us a beautiful replica of the high priest’s garments.

Thus all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was finished, and the people of Israel did according to all that the LORD had commanded Moses; so they did. (39:32)

The work of making the tabernacle finished. The people had acted in full obedience. The next stage is evaluation.

2. Evaluation (39:33-43)

Then they brought the tabernacle to Moses... According to all that the LORD had commanded Moses, so the people of Israel had done all the work. And Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had done it; as the LORD had commanded, so had they done it. Then Moses blessed them. (39:33, 42-43)

The craftsmen had made all the components. Now their work needed to be checked. Unlike the FAA entrusting validation and certification to the manufacturer Boeing, this work needed to be evaluated by someone else. Moses the mediator was the man for the task. He had been shown God’s pattern; he had received the instructions and had faithfully passed them on to the Israelites. So the craftsmen brought everything to him: the tent, the seven items of furniture, the courtyard, and the priests’ garments. Again it is noted that “According to all that the LORD had commanded Moses, so the people of Israel had done all the work.” Moses saw all the work; he looked it over and made his evaluation: it was all exactly what God had commanded. This repetition of “just as the LORD commanded” may seem rather tedious. It certainly breaks usual rules of English style. But such repetition is very important in Hebrew narrative. This is now the tenth time in this chapter that we are told “they did...just as the LORD commanded.” Not only does this indicate Israel’s full obedience after the disaster of the golden calf, but also that the tabernacle as built was exactly what God intended. It was good. Therefore, Moses blessed the craftsmen.

But the tabernacle is still in its component parts. The final stage is for it to be assembled.

3. Assembly (40:1-33)

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “On the first day of the first month you shall erect the tabernacle of the tent of meeting. And you shall put in it the ark of the testimony...”

“Then you shall take the anointing oil and anoint the tabernacle and all that is in it, and consecrate it and all its furniture, so that it may become holy... Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons

to the entrance of the tent of meeting and shall wash them with water and put on Aaron the holy garments. And you shall anoint him and consecrate him, that he may serve me as priest.” ...

This Moses did; according to all that the LORD commanded him, so he did. In the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month, the tabernacle was erected. Moses erected the tabernacle...as the LORD had commanded Moses... So Moses finished the work. (40:1-3, 9-13, 16-17, 33)

The Lord gave Moses further instructions. Put it all together: erect the tent and courtyard and put the seven items of furniture in their proper place. Then anoint and consecrate everything to prepare it for use. Consecrate also Aaron and his sons to prepare them for service to the Lord as priests.

Again we hear, “Moses did; according to all that the LORD commanded, so he did” (40:16). Again, this summary statement is not sufficient. We’re shown this obedience in detail. Moses assembled everything in seven paragraphs, each ending “as the LORD had commanded Moses.”

Moses erected the tabernacle, a tent comprising four layers. The first layer was fine linen interwoven with blue, purple and scarlet, decorated with cherubim. Next was a layer of woven goats-hair, probably similar to what Bedouin tents today are made from. The outermost layers were two different types of animal skins for protection and durability.

Moses placed the testimony, the two stone tablets, into the ark, put the mercy seat or atonement cover on top of it, and placed the assembly in the back of the tent, screened by the veil. This protected sanctum behind the veil was the Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies.

In the front part of the tent, outside the veil, he placed three pieces of furniture: on the north side the table, on which he placed the twelve loaves of bread, the shewbread or bread of presence; on the south side the lampstand bearing seven lamps; and in the middle the golden incense altar on which he burned incense. Across the tent opening he placed the screen.

Outside the tent he placed two items of furniture: the altar of burnt offering, on which he offered up burnt offerings; and the basin which he filled with water.

He erected a perimeter set of curtains to form a courtyard around the tent and the altar, and across the opening placed another screen.

In a seven-fold manner Moses did “as the LORD had commanded Moses.” Then Moses finished the work (33). The structure was now ready for occupation, which we’ll look at next week.

It can be hard for us to relate to a tent in which God moved through the desert with his people. What sort of dwelling place is this? How is it a suitable dwelling place for God? What is it all about? The tabernacle has multiple layers of meaning.

Firstly, the tabernacle was a sanctuary. It was holy space where a holy God could safely dwell amidst an unholy people. The tent, the courtyard and the three curtains divided the structure into three zones of holiness: the courtyard, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. Three curtains guarded the entrances to these zones: screens at the entrance of the court and the entrance of the tent, and the veil across the interior of the tent. The openings allowed access but the screens restricted access, creating a tension. Ordinary Israelites could

pass through the outer screen to access the courtyard to bring their offerings. Only priests on duty could pass through the inner screen into the Holy Place to tend the table, lampstand and incense altar. Only the high priest on the Day of Atonement could pass through the veil into the innermost sanctum, the Most Holy Place. Though God was putting his Presence in the midst of his people, the tabernacle was as much about exclusion as about embrace. These screens protected the sanctity of God's Presence, and protected the people from the consuming fire in their midst. God could be approached, but only so close. This gradation of holiness is reflected in the materials used: bronze in the courtyard, gold in the tent, silver in between.

Secondly, the tabernacle was full of symbolism, both the structure as a whole and the individual pieces of furniture. Some of this I explored in sermons two and three years ago. For example, the Most Holy Place was God's earthly throne room. He was depicted as enthroned between the cherubim, with the atonement cover as his footstool. At his feet was the ark in which were kept the two stone tablets of the testimony, two copies of the treaty that bound God and his people together in covenant. One was God's copy, the other was Israel's copy, kept together at God's feet.

Thirdly, the tabernacle was also typical. It was a type pointing forward to a future anti-type or reality. Much of the symbolism prefigures a future reality which is fulfilled in Christ, as is shown particularly in the Book of Hebrews. So, for example, Jesus, after offering up himself as both priest and sacrifice, passed through the veil into the inner sanctum, into God's full presence in heaven, where he took his seat. So, the altar of burnt offering, the veil and the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle were typical, were pointing forward to fulfillment in Christ.

A fourth layer of meaning is that the tabernacle was a portable Sinai. Its tripartite structure replicated that of Mt Sinai, where Israel was camped at the bottom, and the Lord descended to the top in a thick cloud and his glory. In between, Aaron, his two sons Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders were invited to come half-way up the mountain, where they had a meal and saw God, or at least God's feet above them. Only Moses could go to the top. He alone was able to go up and down, to mediate between God on top and the people at the bottom. God was unable to come down from the top lest he destroy the people. The people were unable to come up from the bottom for they were unholy. Moses engaged in shuttle diplomacy between God and his people. In the tabernacle, the people with their offerings were able to enter the courtyard, corresponding to the bottom of the mountain. The priests could enter the Holy Place where they ate the bread of presence, corresponding to midway up the mountain. Aaron the high priest alone could enter the Most Holy Place, where God's presence was, corresponding to the top of the mountain. Aaron became a mediator, entering the Presence once a year then returning to the people.

The tabernacle was a portable Sinai, a way of transporting God's Presence from Mt Sinai to the place in the Promised Land where he would choose to put his name. There, in Jerusalem, the temporary tent would be replaced by a permanent structure on Mt Zion, the temple, to which God would transfer his Presence. All of the symbolism and typology of the tabernacle would be transferred to the temple.

God had brought Israel to Mt Sinai to meet him. But it was impossible for God to meet directly with the people. God was on top

of the mountain; the people were at the bottom. Instead Moses alone ascended to meet with God. This meeting place was transferred to the tabernacle, often referred to as the tent of meeting, where God met with his people through the mediator Moses. Exodus is followed by Leviticus: the whole book is presented as God speaking to Moses from the tent of meeting.

A fifth layer of meaning is that the tabernacle was a new creation. We have seen the extensive echoes of the original creation account. The seven-fold refrain that the Israelites made the priestly garments "as the LORD had commanded Moses," and the sevenfold refrain that Moses assembled the pieces "as the LORD had commanded Moses" correspond to the sevenfold refrain in Genesis 1, "and it was so." How was creation made? God spoke, and it was so. How was the tabernacle made? God spoke—his instructions are presented as seven speeches (chs. 25-31)—and the people did as he commanded. The evaluation is similar. God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good. Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had done it as the Lord had commanded. In both cases it was exactly what it was intended to be. God finished his work; Moses finished his work. God blessed the living creatures, the human, and the seventh day. Moses blessed the craftsmen who made the tabernacle. So, there are multiple correspondences between Genesis 1 and Exodus 39-40.

The tabernacle represents the restoration of order to a disordered world. This is what creation is about. In the original creation God spoke order into a world lacking in order. He gave structure to an unstructured world, form to an unformed mass that began as formless and empty. He created order by separating: light from darkness, waters above from below, dry land from sea. The tabernacle is the restoration of ordered space. God gave Israel the precious gift of order. The gift of order in space with the tabernacle. The gift of order in time with the sabbath. The gift of order in ethics with the Law.

A sixth layer of meaning is that the tabernacle is Eden restored to earth. The garden of Eden was an intrusion of heaven onto earth. It was God's sanctuary where he is portrayed as strolling in the cool of the day. This was where God put the human to serve and obey. Here God had fellowship with the humans he had made. The tabernacle restores God's presence to earth, and restores humanity to his presence. Now God will move about with Israel in the tabernacle—the same verb used of God strolling in the garden. Here, in and around the tabernacle, Israel, the Levites and the priests will serve and obey the Lord, the same commission given to Adam in Genesis 2.

So, the significance of the tabernacle is complex with these six layers of meaning. What about the tabernacle and temple today?

The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. But a generation before that Jesus had made it clear that the idea of temple had progressed. The temple in Jerusalem had failed. Instead Jesus was the temple, as we'll explore more fully next week.

The tabernacle was an earthly copy of a heaven reality. At his death on the cross, the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom, the veil separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place. At his ascension Jesus passed through the veil into the inner sanctum, into God's very presence. He is there not just as the eternal Son, back in the Presence which he had left to become God contracted to a span, to take up residence in the container of Mary's womb. He is there as the first human fully in God's Presence. He is there as the true worshiper, the liturgist with the liturgy. Unlike Aaron he need never come out of that Presence. He is there as our faithful mediator. The symbolism and typology of the tabernacle is fulfilled in him. There

is no need for the bread of the Presence, for the risen and ascended Christ represents us in God's presence. He offered himself as the final sacrifice. He is the light, and so on.

God has not left himself without a dwelling place on earth. Several passages talk of Christians being God's temple:

You are... God's building (1 Cor 3:9)

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. (1 Cor 3:16-17)

do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? (1 Cor 6:19)

These are familiar words, but often we misread them. As the product of the Enlightenment, with its focus on self, we read these verses individually. I personally am God's temple; you each individually are God's temple. This individualism is not the Biblical way of reading. The pronouns are plural. It is true that God is present through his Spirit in each one of us, which leads to the wonder of how we who are mortal and finite can contain God, something which long ago fascinated Augustine. But more important than this, it is collectively that we are God's temple in whom God's Spirit dwells. Paul makes this clearer in Ephesians,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and 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)

Paul uses two metaphors for those who are in Christ: we are the house and we are the household that lives in the house. The whole church, throughout time and space, is a single structure and a single family. The apostles and prophets are the foundation. Christ Jesus is the cornerstone, the most important stone in the building that provides the right orientation for the whole structure. All those who are in Christ are individual building blocks, all being fitted together to form this structure in which God is present.

The church is part of God's repairing of the cosmos, putting the world right. The church is about the restoration of order. We come to Christ with disordered lives, and find in him a place in the church where our lives become re-ordered. In the first-century world there were great divisions. The Jews distinguished between Jews and Gentiles, the Romans and Greeks between themselves and barbarians. But Christians didn't think of themselves as Jews or Gentiles. They were a third way, a new human race, a new way of being human. They had a new identity of being in Christ. There were now only two identities: in Christ or not in Christ. Being in Christ was a new way of living life as part of the household of God, as part of this building that was being put together in which God dwelt.

In the tabernacle the screens and the veil excluded. They were as much about exclusion as about inclusion. But those barriers have gone; Jesus has passed through the veil. Exclusion tends to breed an us-them mentality. Jesus welcomed sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes. This greatly offended the Pharisees who wanted to exclude such people. Jesus answered their complaint with the parable of the Prodigal Son. What is God like? He is like a father longing for his wayward son to come home, who rejoices when he does so. Jesus threw the doors open; so should the church. Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28). The church, as a place with screens and veils removed, should be a place where people can come with their disordered affections; where they can admit that they are a mess and in need of a new creation; where lives are restored as together we learn to have re-ordered affections. One reason it is important to understand the church is a community not a collection of individuals is that reordering affections is done in community. We learn to show love, forgiveness, forbearance, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control and so on to one another. You cannot do this on your own.

The church is a place where people who don't belong together gather together around Jesus to learn how to belong together. It's a place where we are all individual building blocks. Each of us has a place in the walls of this building. God has fashioned each of us in a particular way, each with a unique role to play. In the church throughout time and space God is putting all these blocks together. They may look like chipped, worn blocks, but in God's sight they are far more precious than the beautiful materials used in the tabernacle.

The tabernacle was a container for the uncontainable God. Together, we, the church, are the container for the uncontainable God. He is pleased to make us his dwelling place. He is pleased to dwell among us.

1. Charles Wesley, *Let Earth and Heaven Combine* (1745).
2. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (1956), chapter 13.

© 2019 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino



GOD'S GIFT OF HIMSELF

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

Exodus 40:34-38

17th Message

Bernard Bell

April 14, 2019

Today is Palm Sunday. We sang a Palm Sunday hymn written 1200 years ago: All glory, laud and honor to Thee, Redeemer, King, to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring! Then we had the joy of our children leading us in praise, waving their palm fronds. Today we remember the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. But those who welcomed him at the beginning of the week were a few days later calling for his crucifixion. So, next Friday evening we will gather here again for our Good Friday service to remember his death. We will hear again the story of his final 24 hours, beginning with his last meal with his disciples. Then we will follow his Passion, the sufferings of Jesus: his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, his betrayal and arrest, his trial by Jewish and Roman authorities, his crucifixion and burial. Interspersed among the telling of this story we will sing and reflect on what we have heard.

Friday evening is also the beginning of Passover. All over the world Jews will gather to share a meal and to remember. They will hold a Passover Seder (Heb. *seder* "order"); the meal follows a set order. Central to the Seder is the Haggadah (Heb. "the telling"), the script which tells a story from long ago: the story of how God delivered his people from Egypt. This telling will also be punctuated by songs. One of these songs is *Dayenu*. *Dayenu* means "enough for us." The song celebrates all that God had done for Israel in bringing them out of Egypt; he had done much more than might be considered "enough for us." The first stanza is "If he had brought us out of Egypt, *Dayenu*; it would have sufficed." So it continues for 15 stanzas: if he had split the sea for us...fed us manna...given us Shabbat...led us to Mount Sinai...given us Torah...brought us into the Land of Israel... and finally, built the Temple for us. Each of these might be considered "enough for us," but God kept going, he kept doing more and more.

God delivered Israel from harsh slavery in Egypt. This is the great act of salvation in the Old Testament, the paradigm of salvation. This is what is celebrated each year at Passover. But salvation was not God's greatest gift to his people. Bringing his people out of Egypt was only the start. He brought them to Sinai and gave them Torah, the gift of order in ethics, but this was not his greatest gift. Nor was the Sabbath, the gift of order in time. Nor was the tabernacle, the gift of order in space. As we saw last week the tabernacle was indeed a great gift; it was a new creation, it was Eden restored. But the tabernacle was only a container. It was a vessel designed to contain something, to contain that which is uncontainable. So, the final paragraph of the tabernacle narrative which has stretched across 16 chapters (Exodus 25-40) describes the entrance into the tabernacle of that which it was designed to contain.

The Lord had instructed Moses, "let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (Exod 25:8). "Let them make me a sanctuary": the tabernacle has now been made. But this is not the end. There is a purpose for the tabernacle. It has been made so that

the Lord might dwell in the midst of his people. This entrance into the tabernacle forms the climax of the whole book.

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys. (Exod 40:34-38 ESV)

The Lord had saved Israel to bring them to himself, to bring them to Mt Sinai to meet with him. He had descended to the top of the mountain: "the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai" (24:15-16). Now that same Presence descended from the top of Mt Sinai to fill the tabernacle: the cloud covers and the glory fills. The Lord is portrayed as enthroned above the ark between the cherubim with the ark as his footstool. The Most Holy Place was the earthly throne room of the heavenly king.

The tabernacle was designed to be a sanctuary, a holy place. Now that the holy God had filled it with his Presence it was indeed a sanctuary. This was God's greatest gift to Israel: he gave them himself. He put his Presence among them. At the heart of the covenant lies the promise, I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you. God gave himself to this nation Israel, and he gave them his Presence. This is what Moses had so persistently sought as he interceded with God after the golden calf incident. Moses knew what it was to be in God's Presence. He was transformed by that Presence so that his face was radiant. What he wanted most of all was for this passionate, transforming Presence to be with his people.

This indwelling Presence of the Lord would come to be known as the *shekinah*. It is a post-biblical word for a very biblical idea. *Shekinah* means "indwelling." It is what dwells in the *mishkan*, the "dwelling place" or tabernacle. The word is used uniquely for the divine Presence, first in the tabernacle and later in the temple.

God had saved Israel from Egypt. He had brought them to Sinai to meet him and to enter into covenant. But Sinai was not their final destination. A few weeks later Israel would leave Sinai and journey towards the land God had promised to Abraham. The Lord led and accompanied them on this journey. It was his Presence not his Absence that went with them. When the cloud moved the people broke camp and moved. When the cloud stopped the people stopped and set up camp. The tabernacle was a portable Sinai wherein the Lord journeyed from Sinai to the place where he would choose to place his name. The Lord was with them on the journey. Where the divine Presence went, the people went. The *shekinah* was in their midst.

The divine Presence accompanied them as the people prepared to enter the land. Poised on the east bank of the Jordan river, the Lord said to Joshua, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Josh 1:9). God’s Presence would accompany Joshua as he led the people into the land.

Eventually Solomon built a permanent structure, the temple, in Jerusalem, into which God moved his Presence. The priests brought the ark of the covenant into its final resting place in the Most Holy Place, beneath the wings of the cherubim. “A cloud filled the house of the LORD...the glory of the LORD filled the house of the Lord” (1 Kgs 8:10-11), the same cloud and glory that had previously descended on Mt Sinai and descended into the tabernacle. Solomon understood what a precious gift this divine Presence was. In his great prayer dedicating the temple, he said,

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! (1 Kgs 8:27)

But God the uncontainable put his Presence into the container in the midst of his people. The divine Presence ensured that this temple was a house of prayer. It was a conduit to God in heaven where his eyes, ears and heart were open toward this place. God would hear the prayers his people prayed toward this place, and respond. This entrance of the divine Presence into the permanent temple in the place where God chose to place his Name is the high point of the Old Testament. 480 years after the exodus, it is the completion of the exodus story. The Passover song *Dayenu* understands this: the gift of the Temple is the final stanza. Saving Israel from Egypt was not God’s greatest gift. Bringing his people into the Promised Land was not his greatest gift. These were stages along the way to the goal of God putting his Presence in the midst of his people. This was the greatest gift: God gave himself to his people. He was with them.

Sadly, Israel very quickly went into decline, beginning with Solomon whose heart was led astray by his many wives. Future leaders squandered the privilege of having God in their midst. In the days of Jeremiah the people of Jerusalem treated the temple like a lucky charm, a talisman guaranteeing their safety. Surely God would never allow harm to his temple! Therefore surely the people were safe as long as they lived in the protective shadow of the temple and kept coming to the temple to worship. But God sent his prophet Jeremiah to confront those who entered the temple with this attitude:

“Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?” (Jer 7:11)

“Robbers” is a weak translation here; the Hebrew word indicates violent people. These “worshippers” were oppressing the sojourner, the fatherless, the widow; they were guilty of stealing, murder, adultery, and serving false gods. They thought they could do all these abominations, then come to the temple and feel safe: “The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD...we are delivered!” They had reduced the temple and God’s Presence to a lucky charm. They had trivialized God. In a vision shortly thereafter, the prophet Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord, the divine Presence, rise up and depart from the temple (Ezek 10). The Lord removed his Presence from his people. They had squandered this most precious of gifts. Now the temple was just a container, an empty shell, no different than any other building. Soon after, it was destroyed by the Babylonians, and many of the people taken into captivity in Babylon. God went into exile, and then expelled the people from the land, this land

that he had promised Abraham, this land that was the destination of the exodus, this land that he had brought his people into, this land which he had graced with his Presence.

In Sunday School our younger elementary children (K-2) follow the whole Biblical story in a three-year cycle: two years in the Old Testament, one year in the New Testament. Now they are the nearing the end of the second OT year. A few months ago, when learning about king Solomon, they made models of the temple. In a few weeks they will come to the destruction of the temple. Then they will take their models out to the playground and set them on fire. This makes a big impression on the kids, driving home the tragedy of what was happening: God’s people had misused and rejected this most precious of gifts, his Presence among them.

Sixty years after the Babylonians destroyed the temple, Persia defeated Babylon. Cyrus, the Persian king, allowed various captive peoples to go home—not just the Jews. With Cyrus’s support Zerubbabel led a small group of Jews back to Jerusalem where they built a new temple. It was small and unimpressive, so the Jews were discouraged. But Haggai promised “The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former” (Hag 2:9). But we never read of God’s glory returning to this temple, of the divine Presence returning to his people. The ark of the covenant which had represented that Presence had disappeared. Moreover his people were now scattered, more outside the land than in the land. For six centuries God was absent from his people; his glory was in exile. Until...

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. John deliberately chose not the regular verb for “dwell,” but a word evocative of the *shakinah* glory that indwelt the dwelling place, the tabernacle. God’s glory returned, not to the temple in Jerusalem, but in Jesus. The divine Presence was in Jesus. After his ministry in Galilee, Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem. As he neared the city he joined the large crowds of pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the annual Passover feast. Jesus entered Jerusalem to the sound of Psalms 113–118, the collection that was sung at Passover.

Save us, we pray (Hosanna), O LORD!...Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! (Ps 118:25-26)

Jerusalem was not the end of his journey; he had a more specific destination. He entered the temple. The Jews of that day took great pride in their temple. It was no longer Zerubbabel’s small building. It had been completely remodeled and expanded by King Herod, one of history’s greatest builders. It was now one of the most magnificent structures in the world. But it did share one thing with Zerubbabel’s temple: we never read of God’s glory filling this temple.

Jesus entered the outermost court of the temple, the Court of the Gentiles. He found it to be a noisy, bustling marketplace, full of merchants and money-changers. The merchants were selling animals that had been certified pure so that the pilgrims could buy them to offer as sacrifices; these included the passover lambs that they would offer in a few days time, then eat with their families. The money-changers were trading the special temple coinage in which the annual half-shekel temple tax had to be paid. The temple elite were profiting nicely from this trade. But Jesus was more concerned about another thing; their noisy marketplace was preventing Gentiles from approaching God. This Court of the Gentiles was as close as Gentiles could come to God, but they were finding their way blocked

by all the trading. Jesus overturned the tables of the merchants and denounced them:

“It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.” (Matt 21:13)

“My house shall be called a house of prayer” is a quote from Isaiah, who foretold, “foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants...these I will bring to my holy mountain...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isa 56:6-7). God wanted to bring Gentiles also to enjoy his Presence. But the temple had long since ceased to be a house of prayer, a conduit to God’s open eyes, ears and heart.

Indeed, the temple had become a “den of robbers” just as in Jeremiah’s day. Again “robbers” is an inadequate translation. The word (*lēstēs*) can mean that, but it also means a revolutionary, an insurrectionist, a freedom fighter or terrorist depending on your point of view. The temple, which should have been a house of prayer for all peoples, had become a stronghold of nationalist hotheads, those who wanted to use “God” to accomplish their political and military purposes. This sounds familiar!

The action of Jesus in the temple was a showdown between two temples: the physical temple and Jesus. Remember, the temple, like the tabernacle, was the container for the divine presence. But the divine Presence was not in the physical temple. Instead it was in Jesus. As he moved around Galilee and towards Jerusalem it was clear that God’s Presence on earth was residing not in the temple in Jerusalem but in Jesus wherever he went. Sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes and lepers found him and approached him. They found that God was present there in him. Crying out, Lord have mercy, they found God present in Jesus. He heard their cry and showed them mercy. This is what Solomon understood the temple was for.

Five hundred years earlier God had promised through his prophet Malachi that he would come to his people:

And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple..., says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? (Mal 3:1-2)

Now the Lord had come to his temple. But it was not good news for his people: who can endure the day of his coming? The Lord was coming not in salvation but in judgment. Cleansing the temple was a prophetic act of judgment, an announcement that soon the temple would suffer the same fate as in Jeremiah’s day. The physical temple was ripe for divine judgment.

Cleansing the temple was also an implicit claim to be the true king, for the temple’s spiritual health was the responsibility of the king. The first temple had been built by King Solomon. Subsequent godly kings such as Hezekiah and Josiah had cleansed the temple in their days and restored true temple worship so that Passover could be celebrated. Now the true King was here to cleanse the temple and celebrate Passover.

The Lord had come to his temple in judgment. The true temple was here: God’s Presence had returned. The true King had arrived. All in the presence of Jesus. But the authorities rejected these deeply symbolic acts. A few days later they arrested Jesus, accompanied by a great crowd with swords and clubs. Jesus asked, “Have you come out as against a robber (*lēstēs*, insurrectionist), with swords and clubs to capture me?” (Matt 26:55). The religious authorities asked the Romans to crucify Jesus in place of Barrabas who really was an insur-

rectionist (*lēstēs*). The Romans crucified Jesus between two insurrectionists (*lēstēs*). So Jesus died in the place of an insurrectionist, between two other insurrectionists, rejected by insurrectionists—all rebels who were misusing God for their nationalistic ends.

Forty years later the temple was destroyed by the Romans after the Jews broke out in full-scale revolt. This was the end of the temple, but it had long been just an empty container. But God did not leave earth without his Presence. The risen Lord Jesus, in whom God was present, ascended to heaven, to God’s realm, after promising the disciples, “behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). Ten days later the Holy Spirit descended upon the gathered disciples, and the church was born. God was now present with his people individually and collectively. The Holy Spirit is God’s empowering presence in each individual Christian and in Christians collectively as the church.

God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless till they find our rest in him, wrote Augustine. “Why do you mean so much to me...why do I so mean so much to you?” he playfully asked.¹ God means so much to us and we mean so much to God because he has made us for himself. He entered into covenant with Israel: I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with. They were bound together. In Christ, God and us are bound together.

So, do you believe that we mean so much to God? That he loves us and wants to be with us, that he gives us this gift of his Presence. Does God mean so much to you? Is it God that you really want? Do you have an appetite for God himself? Or is your appetite for God’s gifts?

What is the best gift that parents can give their children? It is their presence. Sadly, many parents buy their kids gifts to compensate for their lack of presence. But presents cannot replace presence. God’s Presence is far more important than his presents, his gifts. God is an abundantly generous God who gives lavishly. He has saved us, but salvation is not his greatest gift; it is a step along the way. He saves us so that we might be his people, so that he might put his Presence in us, and so that ultimately we may see him face-to-face and be forever in his Presence. He gives himself to us. This is his greatest gift.

Jesus entered the temple and found it was a place where people could not meet God. Meanwhile the blind and the lame came to Jesus and he healed them. The blind and the lame, the deaf and the dumb knew that they could approach Jesus. They were noticed by Jesus, found by him, embraced by him, and healed so that they might be restored to a society that sought to exclude them. They came to Jesus and they found God. We all want to be noticed, to be found, to be known, to be loved. This is what God does for us in Christ through his Spirit. He notices us, finds us, knows us and loves us. So, when the world looks to the church, does it find Jesus there; does it find God there? Does the world find the church to be a conduit to God’s heart?

God gives himself to us. But it is so easy to trivialize God. We do so when we treat him as Aladdin’s lamp: rub the lamp and out pops the genie to do our bidding. We trivialize him when we seek his gifts more than him. We trivialize God when we reduce his Presence to a lucky charm, a talisman. We trivialize God when we reduce his Presence to a campaign button, when we co-opt God onto our side or for our cause.

We co-opt him as “God of my comfort” and treat him as the Great Therapist who is obliged to make us happy. We co-opt him as “God of my success” and treat him as our Personal Trainer who will

coach us to prosperity. We co-opt him as “God of my nation” and treat him as Guardian of Christian America or Christian Europe.² In these and many more ways we trivialize God. This is a tragedy because God is up to things far grander than my comfort, my success, my nation. He doesn’t promise us life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He invites us into his love, the love which he has shared with his Son since before the beginning of time. He gives himself to us and invites us to know him.

The prophet Habakkuk looked ahead and saw that
the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (Hab 2:14)

This universality of God’s glory will be accomplished in the new heavens and the new earth when the New Jerusalem descends from heaven, from God, with the glory of God (Rev 21:11). I think it clear that this glory fills the entire new world. The story begins with God in eternal glory, Father, Son and Spirit fully present to one another, person-to-person, within the godhead. The story ends with God and his people in eternal glory, God fully present to us and us fully present to God. Glory is his Presence. Our great reward will be to see the face of God. Is this enough? Is this what we really want? Does this sound like a great reward: to see the face of God and be forever in his Presence? This is what God gives: he gives us the gift of himself.

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
 the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
 (Num 6:24-26)*

1. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.5, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), 24.

Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God* (Colorado Springs: Nav-Press, 1995).

© 2019 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino