



EXCLUSION AND EMBRACE

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

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

Fifth Message

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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).

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