



A CONTAINER FOR THE UNCONTAINABLE

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

Exodus 36:8–40:33

16th Message

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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).

I. 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.

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