



## GOD'S GIFT OF HIMSELF

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

Exodus 40:34-38

17th Message

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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).

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