



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Generous Heart

Exodus 25:1-9 & 35:4-9

Fr. William Klock

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This morning we're going to step into the final section of the book of Exodus. Don't get me wrong. This doesn't mean our sermon series is almost over. We're only a little over halfway through the book. This last section runs from chapter 25 to 40 and it's dedicated to the building of the tabernacle. In chapters 25 to 31 we read about the Lord's instructions to Moses regarding how to build the tabernacle and the things associated with it. Chapters 32 to 34 are an interlude. Moses comes down from the mountain carrying the stone tablets and finds the people worshipping around a golden calf. Barely have they entered into covenant with the Lord and declared, "All this we will do!" and they've already fallen into idolatry. This is followed by the actual construction of the tabernacle according to the instructions given. We read this in chapters 35 to 40 and most of this final section repeats almost verbatim the instructions given earlier.

Rather than preach on these parallel parts of Exodus separately, I've decided to address them together. So today, for example, we'll be looking at Exodus 25:1-9 and 35:4-9. In the first, Moses is given instructions and in the second Moses follows through in giving those instructions to the people. I may be wrong, but at this point it seems to me the best way to approach the text without being overly repetitive. That said, I don't want to suggest that any parts that I may minimize aren't important. This is one of the difficulties of approaching the text from such a distance. As modern people, we lack a connection with the ancient near-eastern world of the

Israelites and as Christians we're also very distant from the covenantal framework of their religious life. We know it only from reading the Old Testament and I'm willing to bet that most of us, when we read passages like this struggle to grasp their significance. The golden calf incident is almost a relief to us. Finally some exciting narrative after all the weird and minute details of the tabernacle. And that's if we read it at all. I've lost count of the times someone has told me that they had finally decided to read the Bible through, cover to cover, only to stall out here in the latter half of Exodus. Up to this point we've got the exciting narratives of Genesis: Creation, the Fall, and the stories of the Patriarchs. Then Exodus: slavery, a burning bush, plagues falling on Egypt, the deliverance at the Red Sea, water from a rock and manna in the wilderness, the familiar Ten Commandments, and then...the tabernacle.

The seemingly weird thing is that all of the excitement of the first half of Exodus—the Passover, the Red Sea, the giving of the law—reaches its climax here in the instructions for and building of the tabernacle. It'd be like the excitement of Star Wars compressed into an hour, followed by the Death Star exploding in slow motion for the second hour. But that Exodus does reach its crescendo into this detailed depiction of the Tabernacle—that this is how Israel told her story—should prompt us to pause and ask why. What's so important about the tabernacle and in so much detail and why right here at this point in the story?

Well, consider where we left off last week at the end of Chapter 24. Moses climbed Mt. Sinai. The Lord descended on the mountain in a cloud and for six days Moses waited and prepared himself. Finally, on the seventh day, the Lord called to Moses and Moses entered the cloud. The story is told from the perspective of the Israelites at the base of the mountain. The cloud wasn't just a

fog. It wasn't some white, fluffy, happy-looking cloud. What they saw on the mountain was a "devouring fire". They trembled below, but Moses walked into that devouring fire with confidence—I think—to meet the Lord. It's as if the flame he met in the burning bush is now revealing itself in all its awesome glory, enveloping the mountain. A few of the people may have thought that surely Moses was a gonner. As the days dragged on and turned into weeks, surely more and more of them thought the same. Forty days Moses was on the mountain, hidden inside the devouring fire. It's not hard to imagine the Israelites being overcome by fear. They cower at a distance, but Moses boldly draws near to God.

The depiction of the tabernacle comes as a counterpoint. The Lord will draw near to his people and will dwell amongst them. That's what the Hebrew word that we translate "tabernacle" means. It comes from the word "to dwell". The King James is helpful in that it uses "tabernacle" as both a verb—describing the action of dwelling—and as a noun—describing the dwelling, the place itself where the Lord will dwell.

The tabernacle becomes a portable Mt. Sinai. As we'll see in the chapters that follow, it will have an outer court where the people assembled, an inner "holy place" where the priests will attend to the Lord, and beyond that a "most holy place" or "holy of holies"—an inner sanctum—where no one but the high priest may enter and, then, only once a year. The ark of the covenant will be placed in the most holy place to serve as the Lord's footstool. There his glory will be enthroned, watched over and guarded by two golden cherubim. It mirrors the mountain as we saw last week. The people assembled at the base and no one was permitted to touch the holy mountain. Aaron, his sons, and the elders were called up part-way to meet the Lord, but only Moses was summoned up into the cloud, into the Lord's immediate presence.

There are two key things going on here. The first is the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people, the family of Abraham whom he had called long before. The Creator of the cosmos has entered into a relationship with this people, making them his own and condescending to dwell in their midst as part of his redemptive plan for his creation.

The second element here is the holiness of God. The Lord is holy. Yes, he's going to dwell—to tabernacle—with his people, but he's not going to set his holiness aside to do it. How is a holy God to dwell in the midst of sinners? Or, maybe better, how are sinners to live in the presence of the holy?

This is what the law is for. Through the *torah* the Lord will instruct his people how they are to consecrate themselves to him. There will be purifying washing rituals, there will be special garments, there will be special anointings and more. The *torah* will also spell out a host of things meant to protect the people from entering the Lord's presence unprepared and impure. The sacrificial system will be the key to this—blood sacrifice will atone for sin, so that the people might live in the presence of the Lord. So the mountain provided a means of separation. The Lord was in their midst, but at a distance. This was for the protection of the people. The tabernacle will do the same thing. The main difference is that the tabernacle, as I said, was portable. Israel wasn't meant to live forever in the wilderness of Sinai. The Lord had promised to lead them into his land. The tabernacle was the means the Lord used to lead and to travel with his people into the land he had promised. And, of course, once they were in the land and had taken control of it, the same structure could become permanent. The temple would be built on the same model as the tabernacle.

But there's more to the tabernacle than that. The tabernacle ties into redemptive history in other ways and one of the most important is through its symbolism. In fact, the way the author of Exodus structures his narrative of the building of the tabernacle parallels the account of God's creative work in Genesis. The story of Creation gives us a picture of the cosmos as a place in which the Lord would live in the midst of and in fellowship with human beings. Of course, we all know the story. Our fellowship was broken because we rebelled. The unholy cannot live in the presence of the holy and we were cast out of the Lord's presence. But here in Exodus, the tabernacle becomes the means of restoring humanity—or least Israel, chosen to be our representatives—to that lost fellowship with the Lord.

This connection is highlighted by the structure of the stories. In Genesis 1, God creates in seven acts. Each one begins with, "And God said..." And here in Exodus the instructions for building the tabernacle are structures into seven acts, each beginning with the words, "And the Lord said..."—25:1, 30:11, 17, 22, 34; 31:1, 12. The tabernacle is not only a portable Mt. Sinai. The tabernacle also represents the garden of Genesis, the place the Lord created in which to live with and fellowship with humanity. Eden and the tabernacle are both filled with gold and precious gemstones. But, too, as a reminder that even as the Lord tabernacles in the midst of his people, the work of redemption is not fully accomplished, the presence of the Lord is guarded by two cherubim, just as the way back into Eden was guarded by two cherubim.

Drawing even more parallels, the story of creation ended with the statement that on the seventh day, the Sabbath, the Lord rested. Here in Exodus, the instructions for the tabernacle conclude with a reminder from the Lord that his people are to observe the

Sabbath. Also, when the Lord's creative work was done we read, "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). Just so, when the tabernacle was finished we're told, "And Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had done it; as the LORD had commanded, so had they done it" (Exodus 39:43a).

But the parallels don't end with the construction. The fall—the rebellion of Adam and Eve—follows the creation and the story in Exodus is told in such a way that the episode of the golden calf follows the giving of the instructions for the tabernacle. And yet as the Lord did not abandon Adam and Eve, neither does he abandon Israel because of her rebellion. As he clothed Adam and Eve, he clothes Israel—he gives his people the tabernacle. The golden calf incident falls right between the instructions for the tabernacle and the building of the tabernacle. He does not abandon his people. Instead, he provides means of atonement for their sin and dwells in their midst. The pattern remains or continues and it points to the day when the Lord will finally set humanity and creation to rights and we will live in his presence and know his life.

The pattern of the tabernacle is full of symbolism. One of the problems, however, is that the text doesn't tell us what any of that symbolism means. Much of it certainly drew on the imagery and symbolism of the thought-world the ancient Israelites knew. It wasn't necessary to spell it out in detail. But the New Testament writers explain some of this imagery—often seeing it as types and shadows of what was to come in Jesus. I'll try to draw on that as we work through these chapters.

So that's a sort of general introduction to the tabernacle. There's a lot more that could be said, but I think I've hit the high points. Let's look now at the

text itself. Let's look at Exodus 25:1-9.

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.

Exodus 35 gives a longer list of the materials used in building the tabernacle, but the narrator singles out a list of precious and costly items here. He doesn't explain the significance of them, but it may be that no explanation is needed. They were valuable. These were the sorts of things that would make the tabernacle both beautiful and impressive to behold.

Most of these items have traditionally been associated by Jews and Christians with kings and royalty. It makes sense that they would be used to construct the house of the Lord. But I think it's also important to look at other places in the Bible—especially the Old Testament—where these same materials are noted. When we do that, we're again pulled back to the beginning of Genesis. In the description of Eden we're told that “the gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there” (Genesis 2:12 NIV). These costly things that were present in the garden are here in the tabernacle, too. The tabernacle points us back to the

garden, but it also points us forward to future in which the Lord has set his creation to rights.

Being so distant from the world of the Israelites, we may miss why these other materials were so valuable. The colours of the dyes noted for the yarn and for the skins are amongst the most costly to make. Indigo and purple dyes were, in the ancient world, made from murex shells. The Phoenicians were known for this dye. It took thousands of shells to produce the dye for a single garment. Similarly, the red dye came from the eggs of insects that are found only on oak trees—again, a tremendous quantity of these tiny and hard-to-harvest eggs went into dying a single garment. So these were the sorts of things reserved for kings.

And then we're faced with the obvious question? Where was all of this going to come from? None of these are things that slaves living in the wilderness would have had. But remember back to the last of the Lord's great signs in Egypt. When the firstborn of Egypt were killed, the Israelites were sent packing. The Egyptians not only wanted them gone, but they loaded them down with precious cargo. The Lord provided. At the time the people, no doubt, simply thought that they were being enriched by the Egyptians, but now the Lord asks for some of that precious cargo back.

The Lord, in verse 2, tells Moses that these gifts are to come from every man whose heart moves him. These gifts are to be freely given by the people. Even though it was the Lord who, in the first place, moved the Egyptians to give the Israelites these precious goods, he doesn't demand them back. The people are to give them in response to the Lord, who has promised his people a future in a land filled with milk and honey and who has proved his goodness already. In Exodus 35:4-9 these precious goods

are listed again, but more importantly Moses delivers the Lord's words to the people. He says to them:

“This is the thing that the LORD has commanded. Take from among you a contribution to the LORD. Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring the LORD'S contribution...” (Exodus 35:4-5)

Brothers and Sisters, apart from a general overview of the tabernacle, this is, I think, the key takeaway from this short passage today. True worship flows freely from a generous heart. Again, true worship flows freely from a generous heart. What does that mean? It means that true worship is, first and foremost, focused on the Lord. This can be a struggle for us. I suppose it's always been something of a problem. Jesus did have to warn people not to show their pious deeds before others. But particularly over the last century in the West, worship has become increasingly focused on the feelings and experience of the worshipper. It began with the 19th Century Revivalists who, as the Second Great Awakening began to slow down, looked for “means” to keep it going. The result was that a true moving of the Holy Spirit was quickly transformed into a work of men. Preachers and musicians turned their focus to means by which they could get people worked up, have a certain experience, and manipulate them into conversion. And this has, ever since, dominated Evangelicalism to the point that many—maybe even most modern Christians—judge worship based on how it makes them feel. Feelings become confused with the Spirit. I've heard people say things like, “Hymns quench the Spirit” or “I didn't feel the Spirit present this morning”. This is horribly, horribly wrong.

Brothers and Sisters, the Spirit of God is present wherever and whenever Christians gather to worship, whether you feel it or not. He is in us. As St.

John tells us in his Gospel, the Word became flesh and has dwelt amongst us—has tabernacle in our midst. Jesus, through the gift of the Spirit, has made us the tabernacle. The Spirit cannot not be present when Christians gather. His presence with believers is an objective *fact*. It's a fulfilment of God's promise that extends all the way back to the tabernacle in the Old Testament and if we deny it, we make God a liar.

If you're not "feeling it" on a Sunday morning, pause and reflect on the truth that the Spirit is with us—and with you—always and everywhere because you are in Christ. The Lord has shown you his goodness and his faithfulness by plunging you into his own Spirit in your baptism. Remember what he's done for you find joy there. By the death of Jesus he has forgiven your sins and by his resurrection he has delivered you from your slavery to sin and death. That's where the feelings come from on our end in worship. We ought to feel joy and gratitude towards the Lord for what he has done for us. We ought to feel love for him as we read his word and recall again his mighty deed and his grace and his glory. There's certainly something of a cycle. Our joyful, grateful, and loving worship feeds back to us and strengthens our feelings towards God, but worship *starts* in God's goodness and faithfulness towards us and is our heartfelt and generous response to that. As my friend Johnny likes to say, "The right question to ask after worship isn't, 'How did that make me feel?', but 'Did I do a good job?'" In other words, our hearts should be focused on the Lord who has redeemed us and we ought to be asking, "Did I offer him my best in return?"

That's the lesson here. Worship is our response to the Lord for what he has done for us. In his grace, he has given us more than we can ever earn or deserve, and so we offer him back our

all freely and generously. The other lesson here, I think, is that he does not ask of us what he has not already graciously given us. The Israelites would have had nothing to offer him. They couldn't even feed themselves in the wilderness. But the Lord had provided when they left Egypt. Some may have wondered, "What am I ever going to do with all this rich stuff?" And now, having poured out his love and his grace on Israel, the Lord asks for a portion of these gifts to be returned. Do you see the pattern of worship and giving here? The Lord makes himself known to his people. The Lord redeems his people. The Lord cares for and provides for his people. Worship becomes the natural response as the Lord's people seek to reciprocate his love and his grace. And he provides the abundance from which his people give. Think of those words of King David that we quote at the Offertory—words he spoke as the people once again gave offerings, this time to build the temple:

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. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding. O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own. (1 Chronicles 29:14-16)

Think on that, Brothers and Sisters, as we worship. Worship isn't about us. Worship is about the Lord. It's a response to his goodness and faithfulness to us. Worship is the product of our love and gratitude towards God pouring out of hearts overwhelmed by his gracious generosity. There's a sense in which we will always feel inadequate to the task. God has given his own Son for our sake and all we can offer is a

thank you card of macaroni glued messily on a piece of paper. Some of our artwork may be better than others, but in end nothing any of us does can compare. But it doesn't matter. That our worship flows generously from grateful hearts and that it is the best we can offer reveals that we have left behind our love of self and all of our old idolatries and that we have taken hold of the living God in faith and have known his salvation.

Let us pray: Almighty God and Father, you have given your Son to die as a sacrifice for our sins and have graciously made us to share in your life by filling us with your own Spirit. You have given us your word that we might know you and know your goodness and faithfulness. As you renew our hearts, may we reflect on who you are and what you have done for us and be moved to give you our all and our best, out of gratitude and to give you some measure of the honour and glory you are due. Strengthen our faith we pray, that we might hold loosely the things you have given, so that we will be more ready to return them to you and to use them in your service, we ask through Jesus our Lord. Amen.