



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sign Forever

Exodus 31:1-18, 35:1-3, 30-36:7

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When I was in high school I worked as a draftsman for a residential architect. I was just a kid. I wasn't a designer. I just drew what they told me to draw. But every once in a while the boss asked me to sit in on meetings with clients—usually the really important clients—because he wanted to let me see into that part of the business. One of those meetings was with a couple who were getting ready to build a big house overlooking the Columbia River Gorge. It was an amazing setting and everyone agreed that setting needed an amazing house. The plans were basically done, but my boss and the clients were going round in circles about who was going to build it. They had already started working with a builder, but the architect refused to let that builder construct it. He knew all the local builders and this guy wasn't going to get it right. He knew what was going to be involved and he knew just the guy to get it right. After listening to the back and forth I gradually figured out what the real issue was. This house was going to have my boss's name on it and he wasn't going to just let it go once the plans were drawn. He wasn't normally like that, but this was a special case. He wanted to be able to give input to the builder during construction and he knew the guy the client had picked wasn't going to let that happen.

I was thinking about that meeting the last couple of weeks as I was looking at Exodus 31. Moses is up on Mt. Sinai. He has been since Chapter 24. The Lord has given him detailed instructions for the tabernacle and everything associated with it. But the Lord isn't going to send Moses down

the mountain to find any old builder he likes. And, if you happened to be paying *really* close attention, you might already suspect that the Lord's not quite done. I mentioned last week that the instructions for the tabernacle are structured around the phrase, "The Lord spoke to Moses". Seven times the Lord speaks to Moses. The Lord's word is creative. There's a reason for this. As we've seen, the tabernacle is designed to be a sort of cosmos in miniature. The most holy place with its fierce cherubim standing guard is reminiscent of the garden, the place where human beings lived in the presence of the Lord. And so even the instructions for this little model microcosm of the cosmos are structured in a way that points us back to the creation of the cosmos itself. Seven times the Lord speaks—as if he's calling the tabernacle into being just as he did Creation.

Brothers and Sisters, this is why the Lord isn't going to send Moses down the mountain to just round up a team of builders on his own initiative. The people of Israel may do the work, but the Lord himself—not too unlike my old architect boss—will choose the craftsmen, will empower them to bring his vision into being, and will superintend the project himself. Look at Exodus 31:1-11.

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."

The Lord has called and appointed two men by name. It's not clear if that means Moses is going to have to track them down and give them the news when he descends from the mountain or if the Lord has summoned them himself and that they'll already be waiting for Moses. Whatever the case, providence seems to be at work. "Bezalel" means something like "in the shadow or protection of God" and "Oholiab" means "the father is my tent", "tent" referring to "protection". Down to their names, these two craftsmen are suited to the task of building the tabernacle. The Lord says that there are other able-bodied men as well, but the key thing here is that he says that he has filled these men with his Spirit.

We're used to thinking about the Spirit causing us to bear fruit. Paul writes about the various ways in which the Spirit equips Christians for ministry—giving people gifts for teaching, pastoring, showing mercy, things like that. But here the Spirit equips these men to build and to craft. He gives them "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". How often do you think of the Holy Spirit equipping in that sort of way? I remember watching an interview with a sculptor who was working on the Sagrada Familia basilica in Barcelona. They showed some of the amazing and beautiful work he was doing and in the interview he said that this passage here about the Lord equipping Bezalel and

Oholiab was his favourite in the Bible. He picked up a chisel and a mallet and he said something like, “This is how God has equipped me to serve the Church. This is the gift the Spirit has given me.” There’s great encouragement here for those people called to do this kind of hands-on work in the body of Christ.

But, again, it’s important to think of this work of the Spirit in the context of Creation. Remember: the tabernacle represents the cosmos in miniature, the garden, the presence of God, at its centre. We’ve got the speech acts of God: “The Lord said to Moses”. God’s word has the power to create. He commands, he calls forth, and things come into being. But his Spirit is at work along with his word. Go back to the beginning and there was the Spirit hovering over the waters of chaos awaiting his word to bring order. And now, again, God gives his word to command and to instruct, but it’s the Spirit who brings the tabernacle into being as he equips and inspires the craftsmen. Creation is a work of God’s word and God’s spirit. It always has been and it always will be. What we see here prepares God’s people for what will happen in the new covenant. Think of what we read of the birth of the Church in Acts 2. Jesus, the word of God incarnate, has fulfilled his mission and Peter preaches the good news of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and Lordship from God’s word and what happens? People believe. The Spirit fills them. The new Israel, the new people of God is born. As St. Paul sums up this story, this narrative in Ephesians 2, saying that building on the foundation of the prophets and apostles, Jesus being the cornerstone, this new people is being built up as the new temple and that we have access to the Spirit. God brings forth new creation through his word and his Spirit.

Of course, this also highlights a key difference between the old covenant and the new and one of the ways in

which the new fulfils the promises of the old. In the old covenant, to be filled with the Spirit was a unique experience. The craftsmen who built the tabernacle were filled with the Spirit of God for this unique task. Joshua, we’re told was filled with the Spirit. And we’re told that at his anointing as King, the Spirit rush upon David. But even in these unique situations, it’s not clear that the Spirit accomplished in these men what he accomplishes in the New Testament. The Spirit equipped for a special task, but what was really needed for the people of God—the whole people, not just leaders or kings—was a heart renewed by the Spirit. The prophets knew Israel’s heart problem and through them the Lord promised a day when his Spirit would make hearts of stone in to hearts of flesh. We don’t see that until the birth of the Church. And, of course, being filled with the Spirit, having that renewed heart, bearing fruit, being equipped for ministry—all the work of the Spirit—is the *essential* mark of *every* Christian. Along with faith in Jesus, the indwelling of God’s Spirit is what defines us and sets us apart. Our baptism is not only symbolic of our being washed clean from sin by Jesus, but of the Spirit being poured into us to do his transformative work.

Now, we’ve spent all this time looking at the *work* of building the tabernacle. If you were counting, we’ve read those words “The Lord said to Moses” *six* times. Six creative speech acts. The Creation theme means one more speech from the Lord and it follows naturally that the subject will be the sabbath. Look at verses 12-17:

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.”

The tabernacle is sacred space. The sabbath is sacred time. The Lord brings them together. The tabernacle is the place of his presence, but it’s tied to his covenant with Israel. The ark of the covenant is his footstool. But interestingly, the Sabbath isn’t just a mandatory day of rest. The Lord says here that the Sabbath—this sacred time—is a sign of the Israel’s covenant with the Lord.

This not only ties in with the theme of Creation as it follows the building of the tabernacle, but more importantly, it ties into the theme of Creation in the sense that in the Exodus, God is creating a new people for himself in the Israelites. Everything in Exodus has been working towards this point. It’s easy for us to miss it. When we think of the book of Exodus, we usually think about all the exciting stuff that happened in the first half: Moses fleeing and meeting the Lord in the burning bush, Pharaoh and the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea and the drowning of the Egyptians. For most of us, I think, the story sort of peters out after that. Moses goes up onto Mt. Sinai and then comes all this boring technical stuff about laws and the tabernacle. Preachers often reinforce it. I’ve looked around the Internet to see how others have preached through Exodus and it’s surprising to me how many preachers

cover the first half of Exodus and then stop after the Ten Commandments. That's where the movies all stop, I guess. But the Red Sea, even Moses on Mt. Sinai, those aren't the climax of the book. The birth of the people of God is the climax, the fulfilment of the covenant: I will be your God and you will be my people. And we see that as the tabernacle is completed and the Lord's presence descends upon it in a cloud of glory: God dwelling in the midst of his newly created people. (It happens again in Acts with the descent of the Spirit onto the Church.)

So the Lord has done this work of new creation. He's called, rescued, and come to dwell in the midst of this people through whom he will begin his work of setting this fallen creation to rights, and at its completion—symbolised by the building of his dwelling place amongst them—they are to rest as he rested from his work of creation in the beginning. So the Sabbath isn't just a reminder of God's original creation of the cosmos, but a reminder to his people of this work of re-creation that he will bring about through them and that is symbolised in the tabernacle.

If there is an argument for the sabbath carrying over from the old to the new covenant and being observed as the Lord's Day, being observed on Sunday with a day of rest and worship, I think it lies here. We have no direct command to Christians, like this one given to the Israelites, but the idea is basically the same. A day of rest, one out of seven, can remind us that we are the Lord's new creation and the observance of that day—along with worship—on the first day of the week points to the resurrection of Jesus as the source of new creation. Recalling the covenant is the key.

Notice that the Lord tells Moses that the purpose of the Sabbath is that “you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you”—that I, the Lord, have set you apart, made you my own, and given

you a holy purpose. By tying Israel's identity into this idea of creation and new creation, the Sabbath became a reminder to Israel not only of who the Lord is, but his purposes for her, for rescuing her from bondage and making her his people. It's not just an issue of people needing rest. That's a perk. But at its core, the Sabbath was a reminder to Israel of who she was. This might give us a better sense of what Jesus was getting at when he said that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath in Mark 2:27.

Although it's not the direct focus of this passage, tying Israel's observance of the Sabbath to Creation and the covenant, also makes it a sign of faith, of trust in the Lord. Living in the modern age of the forty-hour work week, it can be difficult for us to grasp this aspect of the Sabbath. Ancient people didn't have weekends. Life was hard. Unless you were wealthy, you worked from sunup to sundown, usually seven days a week in order to survive. Like the tithe, which asked people to give back to the Lord ten per cent of their income off the top, before they knew if they'd have anything left over, the Sabbath asked people to take one day in seven off from work, acknowledging that everything they had came from the Lord in the first place, acknowledging that he was sovereign over Creation, and trusting him to be good to his promises and to provide—to trust that six days of work and ninety per cent would be enough because God is faithful.

Understanding all of this also helps us to understand why the penalty for breaking the Sabbath was so severe. “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.” The point of the Sabbath was to know “that I am the Lord”. The point of the Sabbath was for Israel to gain a deeper understanding of her covenant relationship with the Lord and his purposes for her. To profane the

Sabbath was to reject this covenant, it was to say, “I'm not really interested in the Lord. I'm not satisfied with what he's given. I trust in my own hands to provide, not the Lord.” To break the Sabbath was, essentially, to reject the covenant and the penalty for that was death. And if you ever wondered why the Jews invested so much in what seem like nit-picking laws and regulations about what constituted work on the sabbath, this is why. In many respects they may have missed the spirit of the law for all their focus on the letter, but the reason behind it was that they took this covenant and the penalty for breaking it seriously.

So the tabernacle is sacred space. The Sabbath is sacred time. In entering the tabernacle, Israel entered into the dwelling place of the Lord. In keeping the Sabbath, Israel entered into the Lord's rest.

Now, finally, this whole section is wrapped up in verse 18:

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.

Before sending him down the mountain and back to the people, the Lord gives Moses two tablets of stone inscribed with everything he's told him. This isn't just the ten commandments, it's everything we've read since Moses went up the mountain. Moses was to go down and deliver the Lord's covenantal instructions to the people and the Lord ensures that no one will question who has spoken. It's inscribed on stone. How this happened we can only speculate. The Lord doesn't have literal fingers. But the point here is that the Lord has given this law to Moses, he is the source, and it carries his authority. That it's written on stone gives it gravity, gives it weight, give it permanence.

Most of you probably know what's about to come next. Moses descends the mountain to find that the people have made and are worshipping a gold calf. The scene stands in stark contrast to the need for men and women to come to God on his terms. God has spent these last chapters giving specific instructions for what worship is to look like and how the people are to approach him. Everything reminds them of their sinfulness, his holiness, and that they come to him by grace. And lest anyone think all of these details aren't really a big deal, the Lord inscribes them on stone. And we think, is that really necessary? And then we descend the mountain with Moses and we see that, yes indeed, it is. Left to ourselves, left without reminders of the covenant, left without God's word, we fall so easily into idolatry. God's people did, indeed, need his word carved on stone to keep them in line.

And, Brothers and Sisters, we continue to need God's word. The seriousness and the permanence of the Lord's instructions for Israel's life and worship were underscored by their being written on stone by God's own hand. And yet, even the law inscribed on stone tablets wasn't enough. An external law wasn't enough. The law looked forward to a day when God, through his Spirit, would indwell his people—to a day when the people themselves would be the tabernacle, the temple in which God dwelt. And so we see just how great the ministry of the Spirit is in that it is he who finally supersedes that law written on stone tablets. It is the Spirit of God, poured into us by Jesus in our baptism, who finally sets our hearts and minds on God and who fills us with love, both for him and for each other. It is finally the Spirit who fulfills the law and inscribes it once again, not this time on stone, but on our hearts. And yet, Brothers and Sisters, the Spirit and his work does not and can never stand apart from God's word. The

Spirit has, in many ways, lightened the load for us. And because of that it can be easy to think that all we need is the Spirit and all we need is love. We downplay God's word and we get into all sorts of trouble. We forget that the Scriptures were inspired by the same Spirit who now dwells within us and we forget that the love with which the Spirit has filled us is defined by that same word he caused to be written. We see two great errors in the Church in our day. On one hand there is a strong tendency to think that because we have the Spirit, we can approach the Lord however or as casually as we want. Brothers and Sisters, no, we can't. The other great error is defining love apart from God's word. Christians increasingly are saying things like, "God loves everybody. This or that isn't really sin. God is fine with you however you are. Love means doing what makes you happy." All this in blatant disregard for God's word. We do this in the name of the Spirit and in doing that we grieve him. Friends, the death of Jesus on the cross reminds us that even with the Spirit, we can approach God only on his terms. We must come to him by way of the cross, by way of repentance, and by way of submission to the Lordship of Jesus. And in that, Jesus reminds us too, that love is defined not by what makes us feel good, but by sacrifice and by submission to God's word. Too, the gift of the Spirit is a reminder that as Israel was freed from bondage to the Egyptians, Jesus as freed us from our bondage to sin and death, we have been chosen to be God's people, his new creation, not only to take his royal summons to the world, but to live in such a way—a way of holiness, sacrifice, and hope—that we lift the veil and give the world a glimpse of God's age to come.

Let's pray: Lord, as we asked earlier in the collect, may we walk in your grace that we may be given always to the good works you have given us to do. Remind us that walking in grace isn't some passive and nebulous thing

we do, but that to walk in grace means that we daily avail ourselves of the means of grace that you have given, that we immerse ourselves in your word, that we be always in prayer, that we participate in your Supper to be reminded whose people we are so that we can swim in our baptism. Remind us always that you are our God and that we are your people. Keep before us not only the cross, but the risen and ascended Jesus that we might be the agents of your new creation for the sake of the world. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.