

“God’s Tent”
Exodus 40:34-38
June 20, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

We’re looking today at the tabernacle, which is basically a tent with a courtyard around it. The tabernacle is a special tent because it was God’s tent, the place where he lived among his people. Remember that the people of Israel were living in a wilderness, where they would end up staying for forty years following their exodus from Egypt. While in the wilderness, they were living in tents, and their God would live among them in his own tent. Prior to the tabernacle, God had appeared only occasionally to his people, and that was on top of the mountain called Mt. Sinai. Now, he moves in with them and becomes permanently present in their midst. He is not some remote God far off, like all the other ancient Near Eastern gods, but a God who leaves the mountain and takes up residence in the center of the camp. No longer will Moses be called to come up to God, because God has now come down to them.

The material in the book of Exodus about the tabernacle is surprisingly large, with about one-third of the book being devoted to the detailed description of it. The author arranges his material in such a way that he manages to describe the tabernacle twice. The first time is when he reports of God’s instructions to Moses about its construction, and the second time when its actual construction is described. Modern readers find tedious the level of detail given about the tabernacle. For example, precise recipes are given for the anointing oil and incense used in the tabernacle practices. Precise measurements are given for the furnishings throughout the tabernacle, as well as the overall size of the tabernacle itself. Why is there such attention to detail, and why is there such a large volume of material on this? And what possible application can we find from this material, in light of the fact that we don’t use a tabernacle in our worship of God?

The answer to this question is that liberation from bondage, both for ourselves and for our world, can only be found in the kind of worship that is portrayed in the tabernacle. Remember that the theme of the book of Exodus is that of liberation. Israel’s full liberation will not be found simply in their release from their Egyptian taskmasters, but also in their new service of worship to God. It is the same for us. We will not be fully human until we learn to worship God. But there is more here. Our world will not be liberated from its bondage to sin until the worship of God spreads to every corner. I like the language used by one commentator. “At this small, lonely place in the midst of the chaos of the wilderness, a new creation comes into being. In the midst of disorder, there is order. The tabernacle is the world order as God intended writ small in Israel” (Fretheim, p. 271). In other words, the tabernacle is the beginning of God’s new

creation, by which the entire earth will be liberated. So it teaches us about the kind of worship that liberates us. Notice three qualities about this worship.

I. A Readiness to Follow God

The last two verses of Exodus speak of this feature of a readiness to follow God. After the construction of the tabernacle was completed, the glory of God settled upon it. There was a visible manifestation of this glory that is reported in verse 38. **“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.”** So God was present in the cloud and fire. From their own tents, the Israelites would look toward the center of the camp and see the cloud by day and the column of fire by night, hovering over the tabernacle. It wasn't the case that the cloud and fire would follow the tabernacle, but that the tabernacle would follow the cloud and fire. When the Israelites saw the cloud move, they knew it was time to begin packing up their tents and follow the cloud wherever it went.

God had prepared Israel for this by commanding that the tabernacle be constructed as a portable system. For example, the ark of the covenant was essentially a rectangular-shaped box. God commanded that it be built with rings on all four top corners, in order for poles to be passed through the rings for the purpose of transporting the ark by placing a priest on each end of both poles. We read something interesting in Ex. 25:15. **“The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it.”** They were to be ready at all times to follow God.

Part of worshiping God is to be characterized by that kind of readiness to follow God. We are called to be a pilgrim people, ready to pick up and follow God wherever he leads. But how do we know when God is leading, especially when we don't have the visible manifestation of the cloud and fire like Israel did. God's leading may not be as quickly obvious to us as it was for Israel, but our starting point needs to be the same. Their starting point, like ours, is to ask, “When is God moving?” If you want to follow God, it makes sense that our first question ought to be to ask what God is doing. So often we do the opposite, dreaming up plans for where we want to go and then asking God to come along and bless those plans. So as a community of those who are following God, our first question needs to be, “What is God doing in our midst? Where do we see evidence of his work among us?” We ask the same questions as individuals. “Where is God using me for his good purposes? Does he seem to be calling me into new areas of fruitfulness for him?”

The answers for guidance will not always come immediately when we follow this order, but they will come as we seek to ask ourselves what God is doing. This is especially important when we are in the chaos of the wilderness, such

as was the case for Israel. Maybe you are in a wilderness of chaotic uncertainty in your life right now. May I suggest to you that your greatest need isn't to have all the answers or to be delivered from the suffering of the wilderness or to be safe? Your greatest need is to follow God wherever he leads.

II. A God-Centered Attitude

Let's try to visualize Israel's camp during their wilderness years. The camp was organized according to one's tribe. There were a total of twelve tribes, and the camp was set up with three tribes on each side. The middle space among the tribes was reserved for God's tent, the tabernacle. So the tabernacle was physically located in the center of the camp. With this arrangement, every tribe would have been next to God's tent.

The tabernacle was not just in the center, but it would also have commanded their attention for two reasons. First, it was larger and more splendid than all the other tents. Its hardware was made of precious metals, and the fabric of the tent was of a finer quality than anyone else's. Second, the cloud by day and the fire by night hovered over the tent, lifted up for all to see. And since they moved camp whenever God moved, it would have been a natural thing every time an Israelite exited his tent to cast a glance at the tabernacle and see if the cloud was moving.

The liberating worship of God requires that God be kept in the center of our lives, that he be placed in the dominant place in our hearts. There is room for only one center in our lives, and if we want to put ourselves in that center, we end up pushing God to the margins of life. When we were in Italy a few weeks ago, we saw many cathedrals. I was struck by the difference between those buildings and our large American evangelical churches. In the cathedrals, there was little thought given to the comfort of the worshipers, and a great deal of thought given to how a building could reflect the glory of God. The pews were nothing but planks of bare wood. There were no coffee bars, no padded seats, and no family life centers. There seemed to be no thought at all given to the comforts of those who would attend worship, and no expense spared to portray the glory of God. I'm not suggesting that we should not attend to the comforts of those who come to church, only that we should be far more concerned with the glory of God through worship. I think it boils down to a central question. Does God exist for us, or do we exist for him? To center our lives on God means that we place him in the center and ourselves on the periphery, being more concerned with his glory and reputation than with our own.

I met a man a few years ago who was a lay leader in his church. He told me that he had discovered that the best time for him to plan his week was during the Sunday morning sermon. What struck me was the fact that he saw absolutely nothing wrong with this. He spoke of this practice with a self-

congratulatory tone, as if he had found a way to be efficient with his time. That's a bit like being given a private audience with the president of the United States, and answering e-mails on your smart phone while in his presence.

What would it look like for us to center our lives on God? It would mean that we listen to God through his word. It would mean that we come to worship with a desire for God's glory more than our own comfort. It would mean that our heart is broken by the things that break the heart of God, including our own sin and the injustice and brokenness of this world. Our final point shows us the only way we can come to center our lives on God.

III. A Blood-Bought Forgiveness

Let's turn now to consider this tabernacle in a little more detail. You can see from the diagram in your bulletins that it consisted of an outer courtyard with an altar where sacrifices were made, and a tent with two rooms. The inner sanctum of this tent was the smaller room where the ark of the covenant was located. This ark was in the form of a footstool for a king. It was the very throne room of God himself. Average Israelites were not allowed to enter this room. We are told in verse 35 that not even Moses was allowed into this room. Average priests were not allowed here. Only the high priest was allowed into this room, and he was given permission to enter on only one day of the year, the Day of Atonement.

The Day of Atonement is described for us in Leviticus 16. It began with the high priest washing himself and putting on the special garments designed for this day alone. It was a very plain linen ephod, as opposed to the very elaborate clothing he normally wore. The high priest would next sacrifice a bull for a sin offering for himself and the other priests. He did this where all the sacrifices were made, at the altar standing in the middle of the courtyard. He would then walk into the Most Holy Place carrying two items, the blood of the bull he had just sacrificed and his censer filled with coals in order to burn incense. The burning incense would create a cloud of smoke that would conceal the glory cloud from his view, thus keeping him from dying. He would then take the blood and sprinkle it first on the atonement cover and then seven times on the ground in front of the Ark of the Covenant. The book of Hebrews says that the tabernacle is a copy of heaven itself, with this room being the very throne room of God. It is interesting to note that heaven is the first place where atonement is made, and it is a complete atonement, indicated by the seven-fold sprinkling.

The high priest then leaves the Most Holy Place and goes outside the tabernacle to cast lots between two goats, one of which was to be sacrificed and the other to become the scapegoat. He would sacrifice the goat of sacrifice and return to the Most Holy Place to sprinkle the blood in the same way he had just done with the blood of the bull. This sacrifice was to atone for the sins of the

Israelites, unlike the previous one which was for the sins of the priests. He would then go back to the altar carrying both the bull's blood and the goat's blood and sprinkle it there.

There are several things we learn from this event taking place in the Holy of Holies. First, the main thing happening here, and the thing that will bring about the new creation and liberate mankind, is something that happens with God and not us. The blood satisfies the holy wrath of God. The heart of Christianity is not some change that occurs in us, but something that happens with God. We've all witnessed in the last two months how something that happens one mile below the surface of the ocean can affect us all. A hole in the ocean floor spews forth oil that brings death to many creatures, and we were all completely ignorant of it for a time. The transaction portrayed in this tabernacle on the Day of Atonement changes everything. Our great high priest, Jesus, has shed his blood. The resulting fountain brings life, not death, to all who flee to it.

Second, since this is a transaction between the high priest and a holy God, there is no opportunity for us to mess it up. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest had to be very careful to carry things out in the precise manner specified. His effectiveness was dependent on his faithfulness. It is the same for us. The effectiveness of our cleansing is dependent on the performance of the high priest. Jesus is our High Priest, and he has performed flawlessly.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with two applications. First, Jesus is our liberation. The New Testament teaches that he is the tabernacle of God, the one who has come down to us and the one by whose blood we can enter God's presence. We are liberated as we place him in the center of our lives. Someone sent me a quote several years ago that explains well what it looks like to center our lives on Jesus.

It is important to understand that fruitfulness and growth are the results of focusing on Christ and desiring to honor Him. When growth and change are our primary goals, we tend to be preoccupied with ourselves instead of with Christ. 'Am I growing? Am I getting any better? Am I more like Christ today? What am I learning?'.... As we grasp the unconditional love, grace, and power of God, then honoring Christ will increasingly be our consuming passion.

Second, the author of Hebrews says that the earthly tabernacle is a copy of what is in heaven. That means that God has a throne room there, and the only way to stand before God in heaven is with the blood of Jesus. The application, then, is to trust the blood of Jesus alone. That's what it means to be a Christian.