

Houses for God

The Rev. Dr.
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Exodus 35:4-19

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*God is present
even when He
seems absent.*

Charles Spurgeon was called the “Prince of Preachers” in 19th century England. For 31 years, he served the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, a type of mega-church in its day. Spurgeon was given to bouts of depression, no doubt exacerbated by gout and kidney disease. Spurgeon often described his depression as “fighting the mist.” During one of his melancholy episodes, he became so depressed that he couldn’t preach. He refused to preach the following Sunday and, instead, fled to his country home in Essex. That Sunday, he slipped into the back pew of the little chapel where he attended as a boy. A lay preacher, who had no formal training in ministry, was leading worship that morning. This lay preacher, unaware of Spurgeon’s attendance, preached one of Spurgeon’s own sermons. When this lay preacher finished the service, Spurgeon approached him with tears streaming down his face and thanked him profusely. The lay preacher, however, was mortified. “Mr. Spurgeon, I don’t know how to face you. I’ve just been preaching one of your sermons.”

Spurgeon was undeterred. “I don’t care whose sermon it is,” Spurgeon said. “All I know is your preaching this morning has convinced me that I am a child of

God, that I am saved by grace, that all my sins are forgiven, that I am called to the ministry and I am ready to go back and preach again.”

It took a lay preacher in a country chapel to convince Spurgeon of God’s presence. Let it be known, even preachers of Spurgeon’s caliber get the blues. God is present even when He seems absent.

I’m talking today about God’s presence in the Tabernacle, but first, let me orient you to where we are in God’s Big Story. We are created to live in relationship with God. Sin destroys this relationship. God, however, takes the initiative through something called a covenant to restore the relationship. The Ten Commandments teach us what it means to live in covenant relationship with God. Even when people become enamored with false gods, God keeps His covenant. If this is too much to keep straight, just remember these three words: creation, fall and redemption. God creates, sin destroys, God restores.

The tabernacle mediates the presence of God. God issues a call in Exodus 25 to take an offering to build the tabernacle: “Take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt this to give” (25:2). There’s nothing compulsory about the offering. It’s strictly voluntary, a freewill offering, Moses calls it (36:3).

We’re told later in Exodus 36 that people give so enthusiastically

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that Moses has to ask them to stop giving (36:3-4). Just once before I die, I'd like the privilege of standing before you one Sunday morning to ask you to stop giving, because we already have more than we know what to do with.

Chapters 25-40 of Exodus detail God's blueprint for the building and furnishings of this tabernacle. Imagine, two chapters on creation and 16 continuous chapters on the tabernacle. This ought to tell us something!

Mathematicians ought to love this stuff, given that all the constituent parts of the tabernacle are in exact numerical relationship to one another. Engineers ought to be in their element, also. Every part of the tabernacle is symmetrical. The use of metals—bronze, silver and gold metals—is carefully graded in terms of each one's proximity to the Most Holy Place.

But for people like me, these Biblical blueprints seem boring. I'm tempted to skip over this portion of the Bible, but soaking in the text this week has given me a new appreciation for the tabernacle. The aesthetic experience of entering the tabernacle stands in stark contrast to the drab confines of the Sinai desert. Its rich composite of texture, color and design offers an oasis for the senses compared to this brown, monotonous terrain.

The tabernacle divides into three parts: an outer courtyard with a bronze altar, a Holy Place consisting of a table of showbread, altar of incense and large menorah

candelabras, each overlaid with gold, and a Most Holy Place. The only piece of furniture in this Most Holy Place, called the Holy of Holies, is the sacred Ark of the Covenant, containing the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. Above the ark is a mercy seat where the priest offers atonement for people's sins.

Here's how the tabernacle works. The people offer their sacrifices in the courtyard. The priest then enters the Holy Place offering people's sacrifices on the altar of incense. Once each year, on Yom Kippur, the high priest enters the Most Holy Place to make atonement for people's sins.

The inner curtains of the tabernacle are adorned with fine linen and colorful embroidery depicting palm trees and budding flowers. The tabernacle serves as a replica of the Garden of Eden. It represents creation as God intends it to be.

As I was thinking about how one thing can replicate something else, my mind flashed back to an amusement park we visited, when our kids were young, in Maggie Valley, North Carolina. On top of Buck Mountain, in the Great Smokey Mountains, is a replica western town, called Ghost Town in the Sky. It contains 40 replica buildings, including the Red Dog saloon, a schoolhouse, jail and church. A staged gunfight broke out while we were there. When I asked my adult kids about this memory, both of them remembered the ensuing gunfight, especially the outlaw who was shot and fell off the roof of the house. I recall our younger daughter

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telling our older son, who was thoroughly enraptured in the drama, “Andrew, it’s fake.”

I can’t say that I blame him. It was as close as you could get to the Wild West without actually being there. The tabernacle serves as a replica of creation; life as God intended it to be.

God’s people in the Old Testament are nomads in search of the Promised Land. They live in tents. Imagine what it was like for God to pitch His tent and live among them. God lives in the same kind of houses they live in. When they arrive at the Promised Land and move into permanent residences, so does God. God takes up residence in the temple.

The tabernacle serves as God’s dwelling place; God’s house, if you will. The Egyptians built bedrooms in their temples for their gods to sleep. This tabernacle, however, doesn’t contain God. God cannot be domesticated. God is not limited to houses made with hands. The whole world serves as God’s tabernacle. “Heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool” (Isaiah 66:1-2).

The tabernacle provides the place for people to meet God. In the tabernacle, God meets people. That’s why it’s called the “Tent of Meeting.” “Make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell with them,” God says (Exodus 25:8). God’s dwelling is not in some faraway heaven. God’s home is among people.

We talked last Sunday about making a golden calf idol (Exodus

32). This whole sordid affair takes place between the blueprints for the tabernacle and its construction. I take it to mean God can forgive a transgression as grievous as the golden calf.

Let me show you how this tabernacle fits into God’s Big Story of creation, fall and redemption. I’m getting ahead of myself in God’s Big Story, but I want to show you something. In John’s gospel we read “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14). The Greek word for dwell is the same word for tabernacle, so literally this verse reads, “The Word becomes flesh and tabernacles among us.” Eugene Peterson translates in *The Message*, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” At this climactic moment in redemption history, God takes up residence through Jesus Christ. God pitches His tent to live among us.

There is no more persistent theme in Scripture. God is with us. God is not against us. God is with us

We are introduced to Jesus in the gospel of Matthew with the name “Emmanuel,” meaning “God with us” (1:23). In the last words of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, “...I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20). So you see, from beginning to end, God is with us.

Manfred Gutzke grew up in a farming community in Manitoba, Canada. He lived in a community where everybody went to church, so his family went to church, too. They sang the hymns slow and long. The Scripture reading was unin-

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telligible to him. The sermon went on and on about nothing, or so it seemed to him.

When he was nine-years-old, a new neighbor, Mr. Caruthers, moved into the farm next to them. He was a farmer like his dad. He came to church the very next Sunday, carrying his Bible. He wasn't even settled in, but he came to church. He came to church every Sunday after that like clockwork.

The church had an annual offering to support world mission in Sunday School. The total offering amounted to \$3.85. Mr. Caruthers personally wrote a check for \$40. That's the price of two cows. The boys in Sunday School were baffled. Why would anyone give that much money to send the Christian message to South America?

Manfred became agnostic in his young adult years. He joined the Canadian army and later returned to the same farming community to teach school and help on the farm. One night, as he was walking the cows to the barn, he had a revelation. "Suddenly, it came to me just as clear as anything. If God is real, He sees me right now. I am in His presence. So, it came to me how about turning to Him? How about just asking Him? So, I stopped there in the wheat field and the cows went on toward home. I stood and looked up into the starry sky. I cleared my throat and took off my broad-rimmed hat. And then I prayed, 'God, I do not know whether You are there or not. And I don't mean anything bad by that. I just don't know. But I want to

know, and You know that, too. So please show me that You are real.'"

He put his hat back on and headed home. But he writes, "You know, I had the strangest experience. I felt as if I had been heard. I was still half afraid I was fooling myself; at the same time, there came into my heart a quiet joy."

The next morning he awoke, wondering what had happened? "Was it real or not? How could God show me His presence? Then I had an amazing idea. Maybe this is what the church is about. Maybe that's what they talk about when you go to church. I made up my mind right then I'd go to church every Sunday and find out."

Manfred went to church with a newfound zeal. He started asking questions and reading the Bible. He subsequently gave his life to Christ. He served for years as a teacher of preachers at Columbia Seminary. He wrote a commentary series on the Bible called *Plain Talk*, one of the first books I purchased when I became aware of God's presence.

Manfred proved the claims of Jesus: "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you shall find; knock and the door will be opened for you" (Matthew 7:7).

