

The First-Ever Capital Campaign!
2 Corinthians 9:6-11 and Exodus 25:1-9 and 36:2-7
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To this point, we have followed the action in Exodus chapter by chapter, often verse by verse. This morning we are biting off a large chunk of the text in one sitting. Following the Ten Commandments which we looked at last week, is a section of Exodus commonly called “the Book of the Covenant” or the “Covenant Code.” The function of the Covenant Code is to expound on the Ten Commandments, to get specific about how the commandments are to be lived out. So, the Covenant Code contains case law that deals with dozens of issues as diverse as what to do if you borrow an animal and it gets injured or what to do if a fire destroys crops, what constitutes a capital crime, how servants are to be treated, and how to deal with lending money. As we have seen before, the emphasis is on maintaining right relationships within the community which means that caring for the poor, respecting property and helping one’s neighbor as well as one’s enemy are not primarily matters of morality; they are theological concerns. These things are part of God’s agenda for the world; therefore, they are integral to the relationship Israel has with God and their mission and identity as covenant people.

At the end of the Book of the Covenant, God calls Moses and Israel’s leaders to ascend Mt. Sinai in order to worship. Before they do so, Moses builds an altar at the foot of the mountain where the people gather to make sacrifices and offerings to the Lord. Moses takes the book of the covenant and reads it in the hearing of all the people, to which they respond: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” Moses sprinkles the altar with blood from the sacrificial animals and says, “See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.” With the covenant properly ratified, Moses, Aaron and 70 of Israel’s elders then go up the mountain where they share a meal in God’s presence before God calls Moses further up the mountain where he will stay for the next 40 days and nights.

Exodus devotes approximately two chapters to narrating the escape of the Hebrews from Egypt, two-thirds of one chapter to the Ten Commandments and thirteen chapters, nearly one-third of the book, to the building of the tabernacle to which we now turn. The tabernacle, or Tent of Meeting as it is also called, was a portable tent that, once constructed, would serve as God’s dwelling place among

the people during their travels. At each new location, it would be pitched in the center of the Hebrew camp. A large open-air courtyard surrounded it, and beyond that were the people's tents. The tabernacle was divided into two rooms, one larger and a smaller room that was the throne room, the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant rested.

Detailed descriptions of what was to be constructed occur twice: in chapters 25-31 when God commands Moses how to build the tabernacle and then in chapters 35-40 when those commands are actually executed. God specifies the dimensions of each compartment and object, including details about curtains, clasps, beams and pegs. God specifies the materials—what kind of wood, which different fabrics to use, and gold and silver everywhere. All objects to be placed within the structure are described—the ark, mercy-seat, altar, lampstand, table and other ritual paraphernalia, as well as items pertaining to the priests and their ministry—sashes, headbands ephods and on and on. There are even precise recipes given for anointing oil and incense. God's instructions for building and furnishing the tabernacle constitute the longest divine speech in all of Exodus.

Thirteen chapters dealing with the tabernacle is a long stretch of what, to modern readers, can feel like an interruption in the flow of the narrative and a lot of detail that seems of marginal relevance to us. It can begin to feel like we've gone from the miraculous events of chapters 1-17, to the mandates of chapters 19-24, to the minute, mundane, and meticulous. But, the result of this attention to detail is spectacular. Without question, this space for worship is a stunning place, but what makes it so compelling is the presence of God. No Israelite ever walks away from the Tent of Meeting after worship and says, "What a beautiful bronze altar!" or "What curtain flaps!" or "Best incense I've ever smelled!" or "Nice turban on the rabbi's head!"

Devoting this much of Exodus to the intricate details of the tabernacle demonstrates the importance of worship and the value God places not only on the people's obedience to the law they have just received but also on their fellowship and communion with God. It also signals a fundamental change in the way God will be present with Israel, a change that impacts both God and people. The *occasional* appearance of God on the mountain will become the *ongoing* presence of God. The *distance* of the divine presence from the people will no longer be associated with the remote top of Mt. Sinai but with a dwelling place in the center of the camp. God comes down to be with the Hebrews at close, intimate range; they no longer need to ascend to God. And, the divine dwelling will no longer be a

fixed place. God's dwelling will be portable, on the move along with God's people.

Even with all this detail, the narrative is not lost. It highlights the movement of Israel's story from slavery to worship, from service to Pharaoh to service of God, from their enforced construction of Pharaoh's buildings to the glad and obedient offering of themselves for the building of God's sanctuary.

And offer their gifts and themselves, they certainly do. Bezalel and Oholiab, who are said to be full of wisdom and God's spirit, are two master craftsmen selected as overseers for executing the creative and elaborate design of the tabernacle while the people are invited to begin making offerings to enable its construction. Moses asks people to give from their hearts as generously as they feel led to do—there is no coercion involved here. As they remember all that God has done for them—their rescue from Pharaoh's slavery, God's daily provision of water and food, the gift of the law and their new identity as God's covenant people, they are only too happy to respond. As they do, we get a glimpse of just how large a haul they took out of Egypt when their neighbors sent them away with parting gifts. Precious metals, gems, fine leathers, fabrics and wood are given in such abundance that eventually, the craftsmen come to Moses and say, "No more! The people are giving way too much for the work the Lord has commanded us to do." So, Moses says something that every pastor since can only dream of saying: "Stop making contributions! You've already given too much!" The first capital campaign in history is a smashing success.

Far from being random and repetitious information about something that doesn't matter to us, this section of the Hebrews' story is part of a theme that is woven throughout Scripture, appearing again and again in sometimes surprising places. Think about, for example, how tabernacle language is connected to:

1. The ark of Noah. Both the ark and the tabernacle are commanded by God, whose precise directions are communicated to a human leader, who then carries out the directions in obedient, exacting detail. Both Noah and Moses are said to find favor with God. And, the same Hebrew word is used for both the ark and the basket in which Moses, like Noah, was set afloat on chaotic waters. Floodwaters and wilderness are the two most prominent symbols for chaos in the OT and the ark and the tabernacle are portable sanctuaries from that chaos, one on sea, one on land, carrying people to safety. What we are invited to see in this analogy is that the tabernacle is part of God's re-creation. The ark was a symbol of God

beginning again with the world after the flood. The tabernacle is a symbol of God beginning again with Israel on the far side of apostasy.

2. Tabernacle language is also linked to creation. Bezalel executes in miniature the divine creative role of Genesis 1. The spirit of God which fills the craftspeople as they complete the tabernacle project is a sign of the living, breathing force that also lies behind creation. Their intricate craftsmanship mirrors God's own work. The precious metals they use are the very products of God's hands. Just as God created a world from chaos in which he would dwell, so now the craftsmen re-create a world in the midst of chaos where God may dwell once again in a setting suitable for the divine presence.

In addition, the importance given to shape, order, design, intricacy and the visual aspects, including a variety of colors and textures, in both structure and furnishings, corresponds with the orderly, colorful, and artful creation of Genesis 1. The end product in both cases is a material reality that is precisely designed, externally beautiful and functionally suitable. There is careful attention to the relationship between form and function. And, God is present and active in both creation and tabernacle, not simply in the verbal word, but also in and through what is tangible. Heavens and earth and tabernacle show forth the glory of God.

On the sixth day of creation, God looks at the finished world and sees that it is very good. Moses sees and judges the finished Tent of Meeting as being exactly as God had commanded it to be. At their completion, an act of blessing occurs in both creation and tabernacle. All of this points to the tabernacle as a microcosm of creation which is the beginning of a macrocosmic effort on God's part. In and through this covenant, worshiping people God is on the move to a new creation for all. God's presence in the tabernacle is a statement about God's intended presence in the entire world. The glory manifest there is to stream out into the larger earth through God's people.

3. Finally, the tabernacle points us forward to Jesus Christ who is the Incarnation of God. John's gospel says that, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." A more literal translation is, "The Word took on flesh and 'tabernacled' among us." The God of the Hebrews is a God who takes up residence with his people, who tabernacles with them. This God dwells, not at the edges of Israel's life, but right at the center of things. This is a God who is committed to the journey, who is with and for the people for the long haul, not just for the highs of the mountain-tops. It is a commitment to intimacy rather than remoteness. The

tabernacle tells us all that and points us to Jesus who will be the tabernacle in flesh. God will come so close that we can touch him, hear him, smell him.

Thirteen chapters of minute detail about the dwelling place of God, the place where God will meet his people. If you think God is unconcerned with what we do with and in our worship space, think again. Clearly, God has a lot to say about worship, because worship is serious business. It's joyful, extravagant, spectacular business, but serious all the same. We are standing on holy ground when we gather here for worship, and that calls forth our best. Think about it this way—have you ever seen a really vibrant, Spirit-filled, growing congregation that worships in a dump? No. Vibrant congregations want their worship space to reflect the life-giving relationship they are experiencing with God. One of the first signs of renewed life in a church is that the people roll up their sleeves and clean it up, start making repairs, getting rid of clutter and the like. Our space speaks volumes about what is going on in us.

That does not mean that the building becomes an end to itself. It means we honor God and we honor the legacy we've been given when we take care of our building. That's why we pursued the organ and put in new A/C. It's why we've made upgrades to bathrooms and floors and the kitchen. It's why it matters that we occasionally paint the baseboards or pull weeds. Because this is where we worship. This is where we form a community of faith. This is where God meets us all together. As we experience God in real and meaningful ways, we can't help but want others to have an opportunity to do the same. That's what undergirds our generosity of time, talent and treasure. It's what keeps us connected to one another, keeps us serving the Kingdom, and keeps us worshiping God in spirit and in truth. May it ever be so. Amen.