

Freedom To: Tabernacling Among Us

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Peter Jonker

Exodus 40:17-38

There's no other way to say it: most modern readers find the last 15 chapters of Exodus tedious. It's the truth: to most modern readers, the last fifteen chapters of this book seem a little dull and seem to have no application to our modern life.

Everyone loves the stories at the beginning of Exodus. The rescue of Moses! The ten plagues! The Red Sea crossing! They make movies about that part of the book. The laws from chapter 20 to 24 are a little less dramatic, but at least with laws you can read most of them and make some application to your life. God tells Israel to take care of the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow and it doesn't take a whole lot of imagination to see that these laws still have something to teach us today. But the end of Exodus, chapters 25 through 40, is all about the building of the tabernacle. From Exodus 25 through 40 God gives Israel detailed instructions about how to put their worship tent together. And I do mean detailed! "Build the lampstand exactly this way. Make sure the table is exactly this height. When you make the holy anointing oil make sure you use exactly this many shekels of myrrh." Here are actual instructions about how to frame the corners of the tabernacle tent.

"You shall make two frames for the corners of the tabernacle in the rear; they shall be separate beneath, but joined on the top, at the first ring; it shall be the same with both of them; they shall form the two corners. And so there shall be 8 frames, with their bases of silver, sixteen bases; two bases under the first frame, and two bases under the next frame."

Wow! That reads like the assembly manual for a gas grill. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I think that's an honest assessment. You can see why people skip this part of Exodus for their devotions. When people read Exodus they skip the tedious assembly instructions and they seek out the stories of fire and deliverance.

It strikes me that the reason people skip over these chapters in Exodus is exactly why so many people skip over the institutional church. What's the mantra of people today with respect to faith? I love spirituality, but I don't like the church. I love faith, but I hate organized religion. I love Jesus, but I despise the institutional church. And there are many people who call themselves Christian, but almost never darken the door of a church. Why? Because when you make yourself a part of the institutional church, when you become a member of a church like this one and really throw yourself into it, there is a lot of tedious stuff!

Have you ever been to a committee meeting? I've been to a few. It's not a place where you go for inspiration. It's about as exciting as those instructions for framing the tabernacle corners. Let me give you a snapshot. I had a meeting last Monday. It was the Welcoming committee. Here are some of the things we talked about. We talked about the welcome center and how it's getting a little messy behind there. Whose stuff is back there? How might we clean this up? We reviewed a memo role of the greeters and the welcome center volunteers in the church's security program. We reviewed a new set of instructions about how to use the two-way

radio at the welcome center. This knob turns the unit on. Push that button to talk. Exciting stuff, eh? Active membership in the church is full of this kind of stuff. Active membership in the church is full of making schedules and writing agendas. It's recruiting volunteers and sending emails. It's getting your grumbling children dressed and ready for church Sunday after Sunday after Sunday.

And just like all those tabernacle instructions at the end of Exodus, because the institutional church seems tedious and dull, folks try to skip over it. They try to have the fire and the excitement of spirituality, without the committee meetings and the church politics. They become something like independent spiritual contractors. Many moderns cobble together their own set of religious experiences like they are patrons at a Sunday brunch buffet. 'I'll take a little of this YouTube channel, and a little of that yoga, and here's a podcast that makes me tingle, and I'll try some of this new prayer technique and see if that floats my boat.' There is a large, well-documented trend in modern western faith, away from institutional commitments with their constraints, and towards whatever we can find out there that gives us a zippy religious experience.

Actually it's not just modern people who want the experience without the tedium, the Israelites tried the same thing. I said the last 15 chapters of Exodus are all instructions for the tabernacle. That's not quite true. In the middle of that stretch, in Exodus 32, you have the story of the Golden Calf. That's a story where Israel tries to be spiritual, but not religious. Israel gets tired of the tedium. They get tired of waiting for Moses, they get tired of journeying in the desert, so they pursue something with a little more zip. Exodus makes a clear contrast between tabernacle worship and Golden Calf worship. Tabernacle faith is disciplined. Tabernacle faith follows repeated rituals; daily patterns weekly patterns, yearly patterns. Golden calf faith was wild. 'The people got up to engage in revelry.' The people let loose and give in to the wild hot pulse of life. Israel wants a jolt of experience without the discipline and order of the community. There is nothing new under the sun. This urge to skip the committee meetings and the tedious tabernacle instructions is as old as Exodus 32.

It's not a good urge. It's the spiritual equivalent of what you see in relationships when people want romantic passion without commitment. There's lots of people in our world who do that too, right? Who wants to spend all that time dealing with another person's insecurities and weaknesses? How much easier to just do the romance and the passion and as soon as things start to tie you down, you bail. People who want spirituality without the church are a little like people who want passion and romance without marriage. It doesn't work that way. It doesn't work in relationships and it doesn't work in faith. God has constructed this world in such a way that you cannot build anything meaningful, anything substantial in this world without walking the path of discipline and commitment and (sometimes) tedium.

When you are willing to walk that path, the rewards are significant. In the middle of the tabernacle instructions, you can be excused for wondering, what's the point of all this? But at the very end of our passage you see the reward for all this tedious preparation: *the cloud of glory comes down from the mountain and God comes to live in the midst of His people.* This is an enormous moment in the history of God's people. Back in the garden of Eden God used to walk with his people in the cool of the day. After human beings sinned, those walks came to an end. There was a separation. *But now God has come to dwell in the midst of Israel.* Those 15 chapters of assembly instruction may have been tedious, but Israel was building something glorious. They weren't just building a tent; they were building the gate of heaven!

That's what the tabernacle is! It's the gate of heaven. Let me try to explain. The tabernacle is like a portable replica of the mountain of God. Back in Exodus 24, right before the tabernacle construction begins, Moses and the 70 elders of Israel have an encounter with God on Mount Sinai. The trip up the mountain has three stages. It starts on the bottom of the mountain where all the people gather and Moses makes a sacrifice for all the people. Then Moses and the 70 elders of Israel go part way up the mountain where they meet God and have a feast with him. When that's done, Moses goes all the way to the top of the mountain by himself to meet with God and receive the law. Three stages: all the people, the 70 elders, Moses by himself.

If you know your Tabernacle architecture you will know that the tabernacle was constructed to reflect those three stages of Mount Sinai. The outer court where people could go, the most holy place where only priests could go, and then the Holy of Holies where only the high priest could go, and only on the day of atonement. It's the same three stages. The tabernacle is like the fiery glory of Mount Sinai collapsed down into Israel's midst so God's glory could go with them. It's the gate of heaven. One more detail to underline this parallel. What was embroidered into the curtain between the holy place and the most holy place? A cherubim, one of the heavenly creatures that Ezekiel and Revelation picture surrounding the heavenly throne. The cherubim were like the attendants in the courtroom of the living God. When the high priest would see the cherubim embroidered on the curtain of the Holy of Holies, he knew he was about to enter the presence of the living God. Building it may have been tedious, but his tabernacle is the gate of heaven.

That tabernacle is not the gate of heaven anymore. Where do we find our gate? In Jesus. Jesus says, "I am the gate." Jesus fulfills the tabernacle. As John says, the word has become flesh and tabernacled among us. Christ's tabernacle will be a little different, instead of a golden tent he will come in a stable. And instead of the glory of the Lord hovering above the Ark of the Covenant, the glory will be a small child laid in a manger. Instead of a fancy blue curtain embroidered with cherubim; his glory will be wrapped in bands of cloth. And it's now just the purified high priest allowed into the temple; now even dirty shepherds, covered with the grime of the fields are allowed into the holy presence of the living God. Jesus is the new temple.

Or more precisely, Jesus is the cornerstone of that temple, and we are built onto that cornerstone to complete the temple. The rest of the New Testament shows us that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are added onto the temple of God. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit descends on the church just like the cloud descends on the tabernacle in our passage. Now, in Christ, this community becomes the place where God's glory lives. Ephesians 2 says: *"In Christ you are being built together, along with the apostles and the prophets with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone, to become a dwelling in which God lives in his Spirit."* In 1 Corinthians 3:16 Paul says *"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and the Holy Spirit dwells in your midst?"* Congregation, in Christ, you are God's glorious temple!

Really? Us? We awkward people? The same church with those tedious committee meetings? The same church where we fight about the color of the carpet in the narthex? This place where it's sometimes hard to stay awake in the minister's sermons? This is the dwelling place of the glory cloud of God? Yes. Right here. This is the place.

Craig Barnes is the president of Princeton Seminary. He wrote about an installation service he conducted for a graduating student he mentored. The student had accepted a call to a small-town church off in a forgotten corner of a Midwestern state. Barnes said the town was so small that it didn't show up on his computer map. As the ordination service began, Barnes looked out over his student's new congregation. It was full of worried farmers, exhausted

mothers and bored teenagers. A plain congregation. The sanctuary was plain too. It was lit by fluorescent lights. One of the lights hummed through the whole service. When he first approached the pulpit, the microphone squealed with feedback. As Barnes led the service, he thought that his student had never faced an exam as hard as the one he would face every Sunday morning in this little church.

After the service, everyone went down stairs for the obligatory potluck. The potluck took place in the church basement. It was as plain as the sanctuary: a low ceiling, linoleum floors and walls covered with old Sunday school papers. The fellowship committee done their best though. They decorated the tables with red gingham table clothes and little clusters of flowers. Food was everywhere: ham casseroles, rolls spread with Country Crock, fried chicken and Jell-O salads with fruit suspended in them. Around these tables sat the people talking with each other about the weather, the schools, how business was going. The children ran around squealing and playing. As the evening progressed Barnes noticed something remarkable was happening: around the pastor a steady stream of people formed. All the tired mothers and anxious farmers were gathering eager to meet their new charge. One by one they came up to him and shook his hand, or patted his back, or gave him a hug. Some of them had tears in their eyes. As Barnes sat watching this with his plate of fried chicken and Jell-O in front of him, he realized something: God was in that room. This wasn't just a church basement; this was a tabernacle. This wasn't just a potluck; this was a holy feast. 'The holiness of the room was so apparent, I almost took off my shoes.' We may be plain people, and the work of the church may be tedious, but we belong to Jesus, and the glory of the Lord is here in this place.

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