

Sermon – “God’s Presence and the Work of Human Hands”

Sunday, August 12, 2018

Scripture Readings: Exodus 35:30-35 and 36:8-30; Exodus 40:1-2, 16-17, and 34-35

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After the ancient Israelites left their captivity in Egypt, before they reached the promised land, they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Eventually, under King Solomon, they would build the Temple in Jerusalem. But that was in the distant future. For now, they were nomads with no permanent place to call home and no fixed place of worship, and the Lord gave them instructions to build the tabernacle: a mobile house of God, a great tent as a sort of temporary temple which they could disassemble and carry with them in their travels, then set up again whenever they stopped in a place. Today’s scripture, beginning with Exodus 35, verse 30, gives a partial account of the construction of the tabernacle.

35:30 Then Moses said to the Israelites: See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; ³¹ [the LORD] has filled him with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, ³² to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, ³³ in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. ³⁴ And [the LORD] has inspired him to teach, both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. ³⁵ He has filled them with skill to do every kind of work done by an artisan or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and in fine linen, or by a weaver—by any sort of artisan or skilled designer.

...and continuing with Chapter 36, verse 8:

⁸ All those with skill among the workers made the tabernacle with ten curtains; they were made of fine twisted linen, and blue, purple, and crimson yarns, with cherubim skillfully worked into them. ⁹ The length of each curtain was twenty-eight cubits, and the width of each curtain four cubits; all the curtains were of the same size.

¹⁰ He joined five curtains to one another, and the other five curtains he joined to one another. ¹¹ He made loops of blue on the edge of the outermost curtain of the first set; likewise he made them on the edge of the outermost curtain of the second set; ¹² he made fifty loops on the one curtain, and he made fifty loops on the edge of the curtain that was in the second set; the loops were opposite one another. ¹³ And he made fifty clasps of gold, and joined the curtains one to the other with clasps; so the tabernacle was one whole.

¹⁴ He also made curtains of goats’ hair for a tent over the tabernacle; he made eleven curtains. ¹⁵ The length of each curtain was thirty cubits, and the width of each curtain four cubits; the eleven curtains were of the same size. ¹⁶ He joined five curtains by themselves, and six curtains by themselves. ¹⁷ He made fifty loops on the edge of the outermost curtain of the one set, and fifty loops on the edge of the other connecting curtain. ¹⁸ He made fifty clasps of bronze to join the tent together so that it might be one whole. ¹⁹ And he made for the tent a covering of tanned rams’ skins and an outer covering of fine leather.

20 Then he made the upright frames for the tabernacle of acacia wood. 21 Ten cubits was the length of a frame, and a cubit and a half the width of each frame. 22 Each frame had two pegs for fitting together; he did this for all the frames of the tabernacle. 23 The frames for the tabernacle he made in this way: twenty frames for the south side; 24 and he made forty bases of silver under the twenty frames, two bases under the first frame for its two pegs, and two bases under the next frame for its two pegs. 25 For the second side of the tabernacle, on the north side, he made twenty frames 26 and their forty bases of silver, two bases under the first frame and two bases under the next frame. 27 For the rear of the tabernacle westward he made six frames. 28 He made two frames for corners of the tabernacle in the rear. 29 They were separate beneath, but joined at the top, at the first ring; he made two of them in this way, for the two corners. 30 There were eight frames with their bases of silver: sixteen bases, under every frame two bases.

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A second reading, from Exodus chapter 40, verses 1 and 2, 16 to 17, and 34 through 35:

40:1 The LORD spoke to Moses: 2 On the first day of the first month you shall set up the tabernacle of the tent of meeting.

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16 Moses did everything just as the LORD had commanded him. 17 In the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month, the tabernacle was set up.

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34 Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. 35 Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

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About thirty-five hundred years ago, in the wilderness near Mount Sinai, something happened, something so important that it was included in a holy book of scripture and read by millions of people today. What happened was this: Workmen, under the charge of someone named Bezalel, assembled ten curtains, made of fine twisted linen and blue, purple, and crimson yarns. Each curtain was twenty-eight cubits by four cubits. This guy, Bezalel, coupled five curtains together, and the other five he also coupled together. But wait; he wasn't done yet! He made fifty loops of blue on the edge of the outermost curtain of the first set, *and* he made fifty loops on the edge of the curtain in the second set, and he made golden clasps and coupled the sets of curtains together!

Not only that, but he was just getting started. He made curtains of goat hair for a tent, thirty cubits by four cubits, and more loops, more clasps, and he made frames of acacia wood, and...he went on like this for four whole chapters! We didn't even hear a quarter of it; we just got the merest glimpse of all the tantalizing action in that brief, tiny little scriptural reading I did

moments ago. A tent, coverings, a table, an ark, hangings, utensils, various garments with all sorts of crazy features, he made thing after thing after thing after thing, and every exhilarating detail explained at length.

Who ever heard such an exciting story! I'm astonished nobody has made it into a movie! It would have a catchy title, like *The Building of the Tabernacle*. Surely people would be lining up outside as far as the eye could see to buy tickets to witness it on the big screen: Bezalel and his apprentice Oholiab cutting and sewing cloth, hammering gold into various shapes, assembling wooden structures...it would be the blockbuster of the year, and certainly it would spawn sequels. *Tabernacle II: The Temple*. "Now it's permanent!" Coming soon to a theater near you. No doubt it would inspire an entire genre. Maybe we'd get a hit TV show where each episode carefully scrutinizes some part of the genealogies of the house of Israel out of the book of Numbers. I'm sure you would all make sure to record that one every week.

This might all happen, in some universe. In this one, obviously no producer would ever touch such a screenplay. In fact, no such screenplay would ever be written, since no screenwriter—for that matter, practically nobody else, either—bothers to even read these sections of the Bible, much less write an adaptation for the big screen. These are the "fly-over" chapters. People don't pay much attention to the endless, rambling, nonstop, long-winded, drawn-out, lengthy, tedious details of the building of the tabernacle, not even Christians. (Except you, of course: I'm sure you were all on the edges of your seats, hanging on every word as we read the scripture today.)

But not most people. Even the many Biblical commentaries written over the centuries have hardly anything to say about this stuff. For that matter, even in the midst of writing a sermon on it, I can hardly read it without my eyes glazing over. Indeed, this is not only boring, but perplexing. Why is this in the Bible? Who cares how many golden clasps it took to attach how many loops on how many curtains to how many others and how many cubits long each one was?

Well, that's hard to say. But let me tell you about another event that happened about thirty-five hundred years ago, just a little bit after the first story was over. What happened was this, from Exodus 40: "[T]he cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle."

Now here's something. Something indeed. We've gone from an event that could never be portrayed in a movie because it is so incessantly tedious, to one which could never be fully portrayed in a movie because it is so far beyond human imagination. "The glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle." God's actual, real presence, in fearful, almost tangible form, taking up and occupying space right here on earth, just inside the flap of a tent. Just on the other side of that curtain of cloth, the Being who Created the entire universe, whose righteousness is so perfect and terrible that nobody could stand before it.

What is the link here between these events, such that one leads to the other? How is it that all of those insanely boring details, those apparently banal and pointlessly specific blueprints add up to something so incomprehensibly awe- and fear-inspiring? And why do we have all that Biblical space devoted to Exodus chapters 36-39, rather than just, say, summarizing them all in a few quick paragraphs and skipping straight to the LORD's presence in chapter 40? What do we get out of all those details?

Maybe a couple of things. For one thing, we can see the dedication and focus with which this artisan Bezalel, called and gifted by God, applied himself to his craft—every piece of the whole tabernacle, built according to specification lovingly and carefully by the master craftsman. He was called by name and given his abilities by God, the Bible tells us, and he doesn't get sidetracked by anything else.

Nor does the dreamy, abstract notion of the greatness of the whole, finished Tabernacle filled with God's power distract him from spending all the necessary time delving into all those microscopic pieces of the endeavor, the logistical problems, the most minute details. He apparently hears his calling and wastes no time fooling around with anything else, but dives in and lives and breathes every bit of his building project. We could hear what that teaches us about calling, about distraction, about focus, about an attitude of willingness and enthusiasm for every aspect of the work God puts before us.

But there's something else, too. Another story. This one took place a few weeks ago at about 10:30 A.M. one Sunday morning in the sanctuary of a stone church building somewhere in the Midwest. A couple hundred people all sat in the pews of Westminster Presbyterian Church of Springfield, Illinois, and they each watched some trays carried along the aisles, reached out and grabbed things from those trays, chewed and ingested some cooked wheat product or a gluten-free substitute for it, poured some grape beverage into their mouths from tiny glass cups, and then fitted those cups into little holes in the wooden seats in front of them. That's one thing that happened.

The other was that they *partook of the body and blood of Jesus Christ*.

What made the one event into the other?

There's a funny word that we throw around in the church, a hard-to-understand word: "Sacrament." God has chosen, defying all that makes sense to our matter-oriented minds, to be actually present within physical reality. As somehow God was really the human being named Jesus, God was really there in the bread and wine, and God was really there in that physical place known as the Tabernacle, too. For four chapters, Exodus drags us through the material details of the building of the Tabernacle. We see everything, and it means nothing to us. Nothing, that is, until God arrives. What this story does is carve open the physicality of a sacramental reality. It shows us every facet of the material facts, like taking the communion bread and examining it under a high-powered microscope. We see every piece, every particle, and there is nothing special there. Just a collection of matter, arranged in such-and-such a way.

But the glory of the LORD was in it. Where? Not in *any* of those details. Not in any physical pattern, any material ordering, or any human construction procedure. The LORD is present as the LORD chooses to be present. We can take it apart and put it together again, and we can't find God in any of the pieces, no matter how small we break them down. But God is there. God was there in the tabernacle, God was there in the Lord's Supper we celebrated in this church, God was there in Bezalel's acquisition of his craft and in his execution of it, and God is there in our calls as well. This is a mystery. Bezalel did not build God into the tabernacle, and neither can we build God into anything we construct.

Maybe you notice this sometimes in your own life. I know I do in mine. Some time back, I spent several years in seminary. Now, from the outside, a person might picture a seminarian and imagine that his or her day is filled with holy things. But from the inside, I knew that my days were often filled with things like attempting to catch up on my sleep, paying bills or running errands, trying to get the computer printer to work so I could turn in the paper I spent most of the night writing, running from class to class, and even when I was doing the actual work of studying theology or church history, it sometimes seemed like merely a collection of busy and not-especially-sacred activities: reading, writing, learning, studying. All kinds of vocations and lives offer the same kind of question.

Parenthood, for instance—rearing children into mature, capable, wise, and faithful adults—is clearly a good, God-given calling. It sounds grand and noble. But sometimes in the midst of it, as people who have spent much time around children can testify, all the details a person can see are runny noses and dirty diapers and taking a half-hour just to get everyone's shoes on, making meals and buying school supplies—not all of these details necessarily being unpleasant—but neither can someone, looking at the list of individual things one is busy with, always point to exactly where God is to be found in all of it.

I know that some of the youth have gotten face-to-face with that question recently. If we looked only at a dry, factual description of the recently-concluded high school mission trip, we might tell a story like this: Once upon a time, thirty-some people got into a bus and some vans and drove to West Virginia. They spent a week there. They slept, they made some sandwiches, they ate, they cleaned. They heard some stuff read from the Bible and talked about it a little bit. They went from place to place and did assorted tasks every day, some okay, some kind of fun, some boring, some intensely boring, some involving awkward conversations with strangers. A couple of people spent literally hours just slowly, endlessly inching along making one single, long cut of the material from the side of a building with an oscillating tool. Or I could speak of last year's trip, where one whole work crew spent days picking up big cinder blocks, dragging them through the mud of a crawlspace, picking up cinder blocks, crawling them through the mud, picking up cinder blocks, crawling them through the mud, and on, and on, and on. (Some of these kids had enough training in persevering through monotony just in one day that any of them present here today probably didn't even notice that the scripture reading this morning was unusually long and boring; after all, that was only about three-and-a-half minutes.) Thusly all the groups carried on their work, day after day. After all their labors, everyone got into a bus and drove back home. The end.

Of course, there's another way of telling the same story. Once upon a time, a couple dozen people who couldn't provide themselves or their children safe, dry places to live received the gift of transformed homes at the hands of teenagers who had gone hundreds of miles to bring the love of Christ. Little children met new friends and saw examples of what they could be like some day. Lonely people had visitors who talked and prayed with them. Teens learned about, and connected with, lives outside their own experience, and experienced the blessings of working for good together in fellowship. Through prayer and discussion, everyone examined in their own hearts what it might mean for all of us to hear and be sent by God. *Then* everyone got into a bus and drove back home.

Your jobs, your occupations, and all of the ways you try to follow the Lord likely encounter this pattern from time to time, and the same is true even of our participation in the church. Our callings are many. Sometimes we may even take up those callings unreservedly and enthusiastically, as Bezalel seems to have done while building the Tabernacle. Some days it feels like we're doing the work of the Lord...and some days it feels like we're just doing chores.

On either kind of day it is usually hard for us to pinpoint exactly where God is in the details of what we are doing. Perhaps Bezalel, after completing his fifty clasps of gold or his four sets of five curtains, scratched his head and wondered in which of those fifty clasps or twenty curtains God could be found. And we might do the same if we were to sit down and read through the minutes of all the church meetings we've ever attended, or start listing all of the individual tasks we've done as deacons or volunteers: getting together supplies for Sunday school, setting up chairs in Parish Hall, driving over to volunteer at Helping Hands, herding children around at Bridges or Compass, all the phone calls or work projects we've taken part in; or indeed, in all the work we've ever done in our lives. Where is God to be found in the work of our hands?

There is a popular saying: "God is in the details." Of course, there's another version of the saying which says, "The devil is in the details." But neither one of these claims is strictly true. We can list all the works of our hands in all of the detail we wish, and nowhere in that list could we find something we could point to and say, "There, in that piece, that molecule of what we have built, God is located." And so sometimes, seeing and knowing, in a day-to-day, minute-to-minute, piece-by-piece way, the details of our lives and supposedly God-given callings, it can be hard to believe that God is really there at all.

But let us never despair over this, for we know the details of the tabernacle, too, and God wasn't in those details, either. We cannot, any more than Bezalel could, build God into our work like we can build a doorframe into a wall. But that does not mean God is absent. Sometimes, on the mission trip, we got to see people thanking God for something meaningful they had been given which, to us, until that moment, looked like mere, laborious tasks we had to perform. Somewhere in the wilderness in ancient times, "the glory of the LORD filled the Tabernacle," took all those material details carried out faithfully by Bezalel and added something beyond Bezalel's comprehension. The presence of Christ fills our Communion table with something far greater than bread and the juice of grapes. And the Holy Spirit fills our lives,

makes them real, makes them meaningful, makes them eternal, and makes them glorious, even many of the chapters of our lives which, until we reach the part where we see the glory of the LORD enter in, seem just to go on endlessly with unexciting detail after detail. It is knowing this that we as Christians can go on seeking after God in hope, working in the world and praying in our hearts, trusting in the LORD's presence in our lives even when we don't know quite where it is.

Let us pray: O God, guide us in the tabernacles you have us building. Let us delight in every detail you set before us in our work, but let us never expect that it is from those details you will come; rather it is into them that you will enter, we pray. Let your glory fill the work of our hands. Amen.