

“God’s Dwelling”
Exodus 40:16-38

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From Passover to Sinai (Ex. 12-39)

One of the things I love about our current sermon series is that we’re covering huge parts of the Old Testament. One of the things that’s challenging about our current sermon series is that we’re covering huge parts of the Old Testament. There’s a really important story unfolding, and although we can’t pick up every detail, it does matter that we know how these stories connect from week to week.

Last week, we were in Exodus 12, where we learned about the origins of the Passover festival. We saw how God gave his people directions and then spared them from the worst of the plagues, the death of the firstborn. We also looked forward to Jesus, who became the ultimate “Passover lamb” whose blood saves us, just as the original Passover lambs’ blood protected the firstborn of the Israelites throughout Egypt. On that first passover night, we read, “there was a loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.” (Ex. 12:30)

Pharaoh calls for Moses in the middle of the first passover night and tells him to take the Israelites and leave. Moses had been asking Pharaoh to “let my people go” for a while, but Pharaoh kept saying no. Now, Pharaoh has had enough of the chaos and destruction and death that has come upon his people. This begins the namesake event for this book, the Exodus (or “exit”) from Egypt. Moses leads the people out, though God is very involved in the leading. Exodus 13 tells us, “By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.” (Ex. 13:21-22) We find out in the next chapter that it’s the angel of God who is in that fire and cloud. (Ex. 14:19)

It doesn’t take long for Pharaoh to change his mind, and soon the Egyptians are in hot pursuit. The Israelites see them coming and get scared. Moses tells them to call down because God’s got this. God tells Moses, “let’s get to work and get moving!” God gives Moses the power to part the Red Sea, the Israelites cross on dry ground, the Egyptians get drowned in the sea, and then there’s a whole bunch of singing and dancing. God delivered the people from their oppressors in a swift and mighty display of power.

Everybody in Exodus seems to have remarkably short memories. Not long after walking through a bone-dry sea bed, the Israelites start to grumble about not having food. God provides again, giving them manna and quail. And all the while, God is still sticking around in proximity to the people. While Moses' right-hand man, Aaron, is explaining what's about to happen with the manna, "they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud." (Ex. 16:10)

They continue on in fits and starts, and finally arrive at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19. Moses goes up the mountain with Aaron, and God gives them all kinds of regulations about how the people should relate to God and to one another. Most familiar to us, this is when we get the 10 Commandments - though there are a lot of other regulations too!

Then God starts to tell Moses that he's going to build a tabernacle. The tabernacle is like a giant tent (think of something more like the ones we had on the front lawn a few weeks ago, not a camping tent). He also tells Moses all about the Ark (kind of like a giant wooden chest) that needs to go inside the Tabernacle. The whole thing is moveable, but it's not a quick or easy process to assemble and disassemble it all.

Moses spends 40 days on Mt. Sinai with God, and walks away with an incredibly detailed plan for how God will live with his people. For five chapters, in what can only be described as excruciating detail, God details the size and shape of each part of the tabernacle. He describes the materials to be used and the specific placement of each item. What kind of oil goes in the lamps, what the priests wear (including what sort of edging goes around the head-hole!), and how all the different types of sacrifices will be made are all covered.

Finally, Moses heads down the mountain. When he gets there, he discovers that the people have again suffered from a short, flawed memory. In Moses's 40-day absence, they started doubting if God was still taking care of them and wondering if they should hedge their bets with some other gods. The people rebelled and built a golden calf to worship. Moses is furious when he discovers this. (Ex. 32:19). God is too. He tells Moses it's time to leave Mt. Sinai. Ominously, God says, "Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way." (Ex. 33:3) Go, but I will not go with you!

The God who has led these people out of slavery, protected them through plagues, walked them through the sea on dry ground, provided rich food in the desert now says, "It's time to move on, but you're doing this on your own." I have to imagine that for Moses more than any of the rest of them, this was devastating. To different degrees, we have all had the experience of losing a loved one and needing to find a way to move forward without them. You may have experienced the end of a relationship, the death of a loved one, the retirement of your pastor. You've had to go on alone, when you would have preferred to keep your person with you. But none of us has heard God say, "I'm going to stay here; you go on." This is so foreign to us that it's hard for me to wrap my head around it completely. But Moses had been given a glimpse of dwelling with God while he was on Mt. Sinai. He spent 40 days enjoying an all-access pass to God. Moses

knows what the rest of the Israelites haven't yet discovered; he knows the transformational power of dwelling with God.

As he's done several times before, Moses again intercedes before God on behalf of the Israelites. As a result, the covenant with God is renewed, and they're back on track. God's not going to leave them, and they still are tasked with building God's dwelling place. If the details interest you (we're not going to dive into the specifics today), go back and read Exodus 35-39 to see how the pieces of the tabernacle are prepared. If you like details and process, it can actually be an interesting read. And there are quite a few Bible studies on the Tabernacle that you can find easily in bookstores or online.

What matters for our story today is the summary statement that comes in Exodus 39:42, "The Israelites had done all the work just as the LORD had commanded Moses." All the puzzle pieces had been made, all that remained was to assemble them. God had made very specific plans and shown Moses precisely what needed to be done. And finally, the Israelites have listened to God and have followed the plans step by step, without wavering or questioning or innovating. After all that disobedience and mistrust in the first part of the Exodus, this is a refreshing change of pace!

The Tabernacle (vs. 1-33)

Where we pick up the story today, in Exodus 40, about a year has passed since the "exit" from Egypt. It's been about nine months since they first arrived at Mt. Sinai. They've lived for a year in the knowledge that God was sending them somewhere, and in the hope that God would be with them in that unknown land. Now, at long last, they're setting about building the Tabernacle that will be God's home among them.

For months, the people have labored and toiled to follow God's exacting designs for all the components of the tabernacle. And in the preparation, they've been practicing their obedience by following God's directions exactly. The completed tabernacle will be an impressive structure, but every bit as impressive is the preparation of the people getting ready for God to dwell in their midst. And boy, does it take some work to get ready for God to move in!

If you read all of Exodus 40, a few words and phrases are likely to jump out at you. In the first half of the chapter, there's an unusually large amount of anointing and consecrating. In the first 15 verses, we see the commands "anoint" and "consecrate" nine times! God tells Moses... "Anoint the tabernacle and everything in it; consecrate it and all its furnishings." (9) "Then anoint the altar... and all its utensils; consecrate the altar." (10) "Anoint the basin and its stand and consecrate them." (11) "Anoint [Aaron] and consecrate him so he may serve me." (13) "Anoint [Aaron's sons]... so they may serve me." (15) That's a lot of anointing and consecrating. We don't do a whole lot of anointing and consecrating these days (though we still do some!), so it might be unfamiliar language and practice. Anointing usually means marking something with oil,

symbolically making it holy. Consecrating means to set something or someone apart for special, divine purposes. A lot of times these overlap, and you consecrate something (in part) by anointing it with oil.

And when it comes to the anointing and consecrating, we see in verse 16 that “Moses did everything just as the LORD commanded him.” This not only echoes what we heard about the people making the preparations just as the Lord had commanded Moses, but it introduces the theme of the second part of Exodus 40. Between verses 16-33, we see Moses doing things “as the Lord commanded” eight times. Moses anointed and consecrated things just as the Lord commanded. (16) He spread out the covering of the tent, as the Lord commanded. (19) He put the ark in the tabernacle, and put up a curtain, as the Lord commanded. (21) He set out a table with bread on it, as the Lord commanded. (22-23) He set up a lampstand, as the Lord commanded. (24-25) He burned incense on a gold altar, as the Lord commanded. (26-27) He offered burnt offerings and grain offerings as the Lord commanded. (28-29) He set up a washing station, as the Lord commanded. (30-32)

There’s a lot more to understanding the Bible than doing word studies, but the cumulative weight of this repetition matters. In Exodus 40, we’re supposed to understand that this tabernacle that’s being built is holy and set apart, and that all of this happened just the way God wanted it to. God demands a perfect dwelling, and the people have perfectly followed his directions.

The Glory of the Lord (vs. 34-38)

When Moses finally finishes the work of assembling the tabernacle, anointing and consecrating its contents, all just as the Lord commanded, something amazing happens.

“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.” (Ex. 40:34-35)

At long last, the tabernacle is filled with the glory of the Lord. In visual form, like a cloud by day and fire by night, the presence of the Lord is right in the midst of the people. In the past God has sent angels, or led them from afar, but now, God has come to live with his people. For Christians, that might seem unremarkable, but try to imagine yourself as an ancient Israelite. This is huge! Until now, God has existed nearby and God has appeared sporadically to some people. But now, God is here, and God has a place to live! And that dwelling place is so holy that even Moses, who has long been God’s chosen man, can’t enter it. Functionally, the Israelites, at God’s direction, have made a portable Mt. Sinai. The tabernacle is God’s new dwelling place, and it can move when they move, so God will remain in their midst.

“In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.” (Ex. 40:36-38)

This is a game-changer, and the Israelites know it. Having God with them changes everything. It transforms every dangerous journey - like the one they're on now - and every uncertain situation. God is with them. You can see this comfort and reassurance in places like Psalm 23:4 (“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...”).

This seems like incredibly good news, doesn't it? God is with his people, and God is directing their comings and goings. God is protecting them, and God is making a home among them. It's good stuff. But if you're familiar with the Jewish story, you know that this doesn't go particularly well. At least, it doesn't go well for very long. The creation of the tabernacle is a beautiful picture of God sharing space with his people, and as people often do, we messed it up.

Tabernacle to Temple

The most holy part of the Tabernacle is the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was something like a large wooden chest. Exodus 40 tells us that the Israelites kept the tablets containing the 10 Commandments in the Ark. If we look to the book of Hebrews, we also learn that Aaron's rod and a jar of manna were also kept in the Ark. These are all things that demonstrate God's holiness and provision and guidance. The Tabernacle moved with the Israelites as they moved from place to place, and the people held the Tabernacle, but especially the Ark, in the highest of reverence.

1 Samuel 4 tells the story of how the Israelites took the Ark out of the tabernacle and brought it to the battlefield with them. The idea was that they needed help in battle against the Philistines, and by bringing the Ark, God would be with them on the battlefield and give them success. God is not a genie in a bottle, and things didn't go the way they planned. The Philistines won that battle and captured the Ark. We might think “who cares, it's just a symbol.” We're big into symbols that way. But that's not at all how the Israelites thought of the Ark. There's something mystical, almost magical, about the Ark to the Israelites. It's not a symbol of God's presence, it's the actual vehicle for God to dwell with them. It's in and through the Ark that God is in their midst. When they lose the Ark, they haven't just lost a box filled with stone tablets and a jar of food and a rod... they've lost the presence of God.

When Eli the priest heard the Ark had been captured, he fell off his chair, broke his neck and died. The news that Eli's sons had died in battle sent his pregnant daughter-in-law into labor. She died immediately after giving birth to a son, but not before... “She named the boy Ichabod, saying, “The Glory has departed from Israel”—because of the capture

of the ark of God and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband. She said, “The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.” (1 Sam 4:21-22)

This grief-stricken woman has just agonized through labor pains (without an epidural or modern medicine!), is grieving the death of her husband, and is grieving the death of her father-in-law. But right up there at the top of what has ripped her heart to shreds is the realization that the Ark has been captured, and the presence of God has left her people. Her dying agony isn't over her husband; it's over the Ark.

In time, Israel recovers the Ark, and they bring it to a more permanent place - the Temple. This story is in 1 Kings 8. When King Solomon finishes overseeing the construction of the temple, the ark is brought into the most holy part. Then, “When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple.” (1 Kings 8:10-11)

If we were paying attention in Exodus, we know this means the glory of the Lord has returned to Israel – though Solomon himself in his prayer of dedication realizes the tension that the Temple may be God's dwelling place, but the Temple can't contain God.

Dwelling With His People

For nearly 400 years, the Ark was in the Temple, so the Temple was understood to be where God lived. Then Solomon's temple was destroyed in 586BC by the Babylonians. We don't know what happened to the Ark at that time. Some traditions suggest that it was carried off into Babylon as plunder; others suggest that Israelites must have hidden the Ark so it wouldn't be captured again. Either way, the destruction of the temple in 586BC is the last we see of this Ark, which was God's dwelling on earth among his people for about a century. After Solomon's Temple is destroyed, God's home on earth is gone. This is terribly bad news for the Israelites, but it's not the end of God's story.

We're calling this sermon series “Jesus in the Old Testament.” So where is Jesus in the story of Moses, the Tabernacle, and the Ark?

When we get to the New Testament, God's dwelling, the Ark, has been missing in action for nearly 600 years. God, who gave such detailed instructions to make a way to live with his people, has not been living with them for the past six centuries. This tragedy sets the stage for God's greatest victory, the greatest form of this plan to live with his people: Jesus.

The gospel writer John described Jesus' birth in this way – “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) God, who had been working to dwell with his people from the very beginning, was no longer dwelling among

them in the form of cloud and fire. This is personal. This is intimate. This is dwelling among the people in the flesh – a walking, talking, breathing God. This is Jesus.

What started in the Tabernacle finds its fulfillment in Christ. The Ark, the Tabernacle, and the Temple were also sort of like bodies for God. They were the places where God's holiness resided. But they were also man-made, inanimate objects. And so those bodies were insufficient. God had a better dwelling in mind. Colossians 2:9 tells us that "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form."

The plan of course was always Jesus – but can you grasp the orders of magnitude of an improvement Jesus is over the Tabernacle? God's dwelling in the Ark in the Tabernacle is a foretaste of what he's going to do in the future. It's a pale shadow of God's inbreaking in the world through Jesus, and a faint comparison to the intimacy of God taking on flesh and dwelling among us.

The thru-line of God's story is that God desperately wants to be with his people. And the trajectory we see is that God keeps getting closer and closer and closer. He began as fire and cloud in the distance; then he set up camp as an intangible object amidst the people; next he took on flesh and walked among his people as Jesus. But God's plan wasn't over 2000 years ago on a cross outside Jerusalem. God continues to close the gap between himself and his people. Jesus gives his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is God living *inside* us.

From the beginning, God has been trying to dwell with his people. And now, as believers, we have the Holy Spirit of the living God living in us. And just like the Tabernacle and the Ark needed to be anointed and consecrated just as God commanded, the Holy Spirit now does the work of sanctifying us, making us a holy, appropriate dwelling place for God. Sometimes (often?) this is painful work, because we humans tend to like our humanity more than we like God's holiness. Yet God persists in trying to get ever-closer to us. This is a long work that doesn't get finished in this life. We learn from the story of Moses and the Tabernacle that God can't live just anywhere. It's why the Holy Spirit is working in us to sanctify us and make us more and more like Jesus – the only perfect human dwelling God has ever known.

Finally, we know that God's ultimate plan, his ideal for eternity revolves around living among his people with no barriers, in complete holiness, where there is no more need for consecrating and anointing, because we have finally returned to being the true image of God, which we were created to be. This is the vision of the new heaven and the new earth that we see in Revelation 21:3-4, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

God has never been interested in a long-distance relationship. All of history has been the story of God moving closer and closer and closer. God led his people from afar, God

took up residence in the Tabernacle, God took on humanity in Jesus, and God indwells believers through the Holy Spirit. And we have the sure promise that God is planning to spend eternity in perfect fellowship with his people. That's where we see Jesus in this part of the Old Testament. Amen.