

Exodus 40:1-38
A Guiding Presence
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
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“When God gave the people the Ten Best Ways to live, they loved them so much that they wanted to have them always with them. God told them to build a box called an ark to keep them in and to cover the ark with gold. It had poles on the sides, so the people could always carry it with them wherever they went.

“You can’t just walk up to something as precious as the Ten Commandments. You need some way to get ready. They wondered what they could do.

“God told them to put an altar of incense in front of the ark. They could burn the incense to make a good smelling cloud of smoke. You could walk through the smoke and smell its aroma. That could help you get ready. But that was not enough.

“God told them to put a table with twelve pieces of bread on one side and a seven-branched lampstand called a menorah on the other side.

“People would walk between the table with a piece of bread for each of the twelve tribes of Israel on one side and the menorah on the other side. That could also help them get ready, but that still was not enough.

“Next they decided to put the walls of a tent around the ark, the incense altar, the table and the menorah to keep this place set apart, to help get ready to come close to God’s presence. Inside the tent they made a place called Holy of Holies.

“Over the roof they put four coverings. One was linen, with purple and red figures of cherubim woven into it. Another was made from woven goats’ hair. The third one was ram’s skin dyed red, and finally the outer one was tanned goatskins. But that still was not enough.

“Now only the priests could go inside.

“Next they put in front of the tent an altar covered with bronze for sacrifices. They also made a huge bowl of bronze that the priests could wash in to get ready for prayer, and put that in front too.

“Then outside the whole tent and courtyard they put a fence made of cloth that could be rolled up and carried with them when they traveled. It marked the whole, special area called the tabernacle. This was not all. The priests began to wear special clothes to help *them* get ready to go inside this special place.

“When all of the tabernacle was finished, Moses blessed it. Aaron and all of his sons were made priests, and they took the tent and the ark wherever the People of God traveled.

“I wonder...what part of this story you like best?
I wonder...what part of the story is the most important part?”

We've long known that human beings are multi-sensory beings. We have five senses that enable us to experience and make sense of the world around us. A single smell or sound has the power to conjure up entire scenes from the past. Our children have the opportunity to discover these stories from Scripture with the touch, sound, sight, and taste through their Godly Play experience. Even though it is our gift to our children, I think people of all ages can encounter the wonder and wisdom of the grand story through them, as well.

Researchers claim that memories relating to an event are scattered across the brain's sensory centers but corralled by a region called the hippocampus. If one of the senses is stimulated to evoke a memory, other memories featuring other senses are also triggered. The biblical stories embrace this idea and present to us a God who is not distant, disconnected, and theoretical. But God who is with us in our full experience of life.

Exodus chapter 40 brings to a close one chapter of Israel's life as the People of God, and it readies them for the unwritten future ahead. And I don't know if the chapters of your life have played out in this way or not, but I think that transitions from one era to the next often come after a time of greatest stress and hardship. Case in point, our twenties. Honestly speaking, how many of you had a trauma- and drama-free twenties? Those of you who say yes may be back in the story a bit, at a place called denial.

By way of summarizing, the last 8 or so chapters are a fascinating description of how and why God comes so close to his people, and his people are brought so close to God. What we read in these chapters that outline in painstaking detail, not only what God wants them to build (ark, tabernacle, altar), but also the way in which he wants them built, is a bit like your favorite HGTV show (Fixer Upper, Rehab Addict, Home Makeover). We are invited into the intricate details of the process of God making a residence for himself with his people.

But sandwiched in between the instructions and the construction of this holy dwelling place is one of the most unholy and sad chapters in the Bible.

Having led the people out of Egypt by Moses, through the Red Sea by Moses, providing manna from heaven when they cried out for hunger, water from the rock when they thirsted through his servant Moses, and revealing himself in a terrifying theophany (God revelation) at Mt. Sinai, Yahweh then goes silent for 40 days or so and there's no sign of Moses. What do we do now?

What the book of Exodus tells us, among other things, is that we need daily intimate experiences of God's presence in our lives. And when we don't feel it or experience it, bad things start to happen—we start looking for more tangible things to worship in God's place. It doesn't take long for us to begin making a pretty long list of things we worship when God's presence seems to be gone. GK Chesterton says, "In the absence of God, we don't worship nothing; we worship everything."

Now what's interesting about this is that when the Israelites melted down all their earrings to make the calf to put on the altar to worship, Moses and Yahweh were still up hammering out the Ten Commandments. They hadn't even heard the first and second commands not to make idols and to worship God alone. So maybe it's not that Israel was abandoning God, but they were anxious and fearful that God had left them.

We live in the most anxious, worrisome, self-conscious time in history. Literally on a moment to moment basis, we are reminded by what we have and what we don't have. We see the cars our neighbors drive and the clothes they wear and we wonder if ours are ok. We check our social media pages and see so-and-so taking another vacation, and we wonder if our social lives are ok. We turn on the TV and we're reminded of the life we don't have. Can you see that blessing of instantaneous access to the world is also a curse? Anxiety levels are at an all-time high—which is one of the reasons why our preschool curriculum review is intent on providing a place where children can play and imagine, and discover on their own the joy of safety, security, and unconditional love.

Sometimes it feels as though God is not immediately present with us, which is part of our walk of faith just as it was a part of Israel's walk of faith. But when there are so many golden calves competing for that place in our lives—the place that gives us our contentment, our safety, our purpose—you can see how easy it would be to walk away from the mountain and put something more convenient on the altar of our lives.

It's not necessarily that we abandon God, but that we are anxious that God has forgotten or abandoned us.

If you have ever felt anxious, wondering *Is God really here with me?*, these closing chapters of Exodus are a beautiful reminder for you.

I want to point out two wonderful truths that you can hang your hat on in your time of struggle.

1. Do you know what happens immediately after Israel commits one of the most egregious acts of sin and betrayal and receives the consequences of their actions? Moses goes before God once again and receives the Covenant of the Law yet again, then goes before the people and in an act of ceremonial sealing, sprinkles them with the sacrificial blood of the offering. Then, God tells them to resume construction of the ark, altar, and tabernacle.

The psalmist reminds us that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. The prophet Isaiah writes: "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (2 Chronicles 7:14). God says to King Solomon, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

Here we have a beautiful expression of God's steadfast love and grace in the midst of a chaotic and disobedient time. If you are worried that something you've done, or not done, would preclude you from being one of God's children, beloved and chosen.. If you're concerned that God may not welcome you back, stop right there. Even in the Old Testament, the part of the Bible we stereotypically reserve as the wrath and judgment part, hear that God's grace reaches back into the pages of Israel's darkest history. And God can do that for you, as well. There's no chapter too dark, no act too shameful, no word too harsh that God can't forgive and restore a repentant heart.

The second beautiful act of this passage is what we read about in this morning's passage. God gives himself to Israel in such a way that they now know and are reminded that God is with them each step of the way.

Old Testament commentator Peter Enns puts it this way: The fact is God is still present with his

people, and in such an intense way, reminds the people of something else: all is forgiven. God has led his people out of Egypt with fire and cloud, and he is still at work. The mission, at least the first stage of it, has been completed and the plan is proceeding full steam ahead.

Thus, the first phase of Israel's story comes to an end. Throughout the book we have seen the author's concerted attempts to remind his readers that Israel's deliverance should be seen in light of the events of Genesis. Now, one chapter of this grand story is closing and another is beginning, so our gaze is directed forward to the next phase in Israel's journey.

As they set out into the wilderness with the ark as God's footstool, and the tabernacle to signify his presence, the smell of incense, and the altar of sacrifice were the tangible, visible expressions of God's presence with them. But more than that, this was God's story that was being carried out. It was God who made the promise to Abraham. It was God whose power was challenged by Pharaoh. It was God who brought Israel to his mountain. Israel is not free to go wherever they please and do what they want. That is not what they've been redeemed for.

And lest they forget whose journey this is, every so often the cloud, their guiding presence, rests upon the tabernacle and they were unable to go anywhere because the presence of Yahweh was in their midst. We need to be reminded to stop, as well. We need to be reminded to step back and marvel at the glory of God in our lives—no matter how grand or how miniscule. We need to stop and be reminded who our redeemer is.

Only unlike Moses there is one who is worthy of more glory than he, the author of Hebrews says, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son, and we are his house.

This, and every other sanctuary (indoors, outdoors, old, new, gothic, contemporary, traditional, and modern) where God's word is read and sung and where prayers and offerings take place is a sacred place. We need it on our journey, you need it to keep your life anchored. Let us not treat it with such familiarity that we lose that striking reality.

In this room and in the rooms of our hearts is where we take orders and begin to learn what it means to follow our holy Redeemer as he guides us to the Promised Land. Admittedly, there is no cloud overhead, but we have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in us. He brings us to the goal of our salvation just as surely as the cloud guided the Israelites to their ultimate destination. This should bring us great comfort. The God of the Exodus is still guiding. God is present with his people wherever they go, for he still leads them and guides them, not to Canaan but to a "better country—a heavenly one."

Exodus is not just the end of the story, but the beginning of many others—for us too. Onward and upward.

In the closing page of *The Last Battle*, the final book in Lewis' Narnia Tales, he writes this, and it's appropriate for us today. "Now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever; and which every chapter is better than the one before." This is the Exodus message; this is the Gospel message.