

ON EAGLES' WINGS X. "God With Us"

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Exodus 25:8-9 *...make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.*

John 1:14 *The Word became flesh and made His dwelling ["tabernacled"] among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

INTRODUCTION

When we were in our former church in Ohio, one of my life dreams was fulfilled— I got to go to a concert by a world class symphony orchestra. Polly and I were given tickets to the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, and not just any seats, but some of the best in the hall. In case you're not up on things with symphony orchestras, the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra is considered by many the best in the world. And I will say, the experience of this concert in Severance Hall was even more wonderful than I had imagined.

But I noticed something about that experience. Entering into Severance Hall, the home of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, which is a magnificent, beautiful place, I had distinct feeling I was entering into something much bigger than my desires and interests. I was surrounded by history, immersed in traditions, and ready to experience something that was way beyond me. I entered with a sense of awe, wonder, and mystery at how all this comes together. Polly and I knew enough to dress up. And, we knew special rules apply to symphony concerts, like you don't applaud between movements and at the end, you don't whistle and carry-on like when a point is scored in a game. If applause is not enough, and you are carried away with appreciation, you can shout, "BRAVO!" You don't go into the symphony hall with boxes of popcorn and snacks. And, there were huge vats of Hall's Mentholiptus cough drops in the lobby available for the taking, letting you clearly know that coughing was not allowed during the concert. I was paying close attention to everything so I didn't come across as a country bumpkin. But all this served to cause me to let go of my agendas, the way I thought things ought to be run, and enter into something much, much bigger than me and my experience. I wasn't there to shape the symphony experience to what I wanted it to be. There was a humility, a letting go, and an entering into something large and wonderful.

I tell you this as a way to help us get a hold of reverence in worship. We can be too casual and careless in our approach to worshipping God— the Lord of all, the Creator of all things. Annie Dillard, in her arresting, imaginative way, speaks of worship in her book, Teaching a Stone to Talk.

"Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?"

“The tourists are having coffee and doughnuts on Deck C. Presumably someone is minding the ship, correcting the course, avoiding icebergs and shoals, fueling the engines, watching the radar screen, noting weather reports radioed in from shore. No one would dream of asking the tourists to do these things. Alas, among the tourists on Deck C, drinking coffee and eating doughnuts, we find the captain and all the ship’s officers, and all the ship’s crew.... The wind seems to be picking up.

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea of the sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

Using her poetic imagination and hyperbole, Annie makes a point. Do we really believe the living God is here in our midst this morning? If we believe it, how does that change our approach to worship? To use Annie’s phrase, “Are we sufficiently sensible of the conditions?”

The last half of the book of Exodus is here to sensitize us to the conditions of relating to God. We’re going to take three Sundays of January to finish the book of Exodus, discovering how it is we can rightly relate to God and enjoy His presence. Our text summarizes what God is really doing here: *...make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.*

THE BIG PICTURE

Since we’ve taken a break from our series of sermons on Exodus since Thanksgiving, I’ll take a moment to review where we’ve been because the overall flow of the book is important. The book opens with Israel in cruel bondage in Egypt. Not only are they slaves, but their existence as a separate people is also threatened when the Pharaoh orders all male children killed at birth. God raises up Moses to lead His deliverance. But, many of the Israelites don’t know God or believe in Him. After all, they have been immersed in Egypt’s culture for 400 years. So, God must deliver them in a way that will also cause them to know who He is and come to faith in Him. Ex 6:5-8 is a good summary as God speaks to Moses:

I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant. "Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.'"

God’s *outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment* are seen in the plagues that discredit Egypt’s pantheon of gods. Israel’s exodus is accompanied by miracles of provision: led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night; the parting of the Red Sea; miraculous daily provision

of manna to eat; and water to drink.

Now, they are camped in front of Mt. Sinai. Moses has gone up the mountain to meet with God and returns with this Word from the Lord for Israel, defining His plans for them:

'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' (Ex 19:4-6)

The rest of Exodus now is here at Mt. Sinai. First of all, Moses ascends the mountain and returns with the Ten Commandments along with other miscellaneous laws governing their behavior and relationships. The Ten Commandments are the cornerstone of all these other laws which continue on for a couple more chapters. Then there is the covenant ceremony in chapter 24 where the Israelites all agree to obey these laws. That's about where we left things Nov. 13.

WORSHIP

Up to this point, there has been considerable action, and the giving of the Ten Commandments is interesting to us because of their foundational significance. Now things slow to a crawl in Exodus as intricate instructions are given for the place of worship. A total of 16 chapters, close to half the book, are given to the ordering of worship, making the tabernacle (their portable place of worship), its furnishings, and the garments for priests. To get these directions, Moses ascends Mt. Sinai for forty days and forty nights. And, often in this part of Exodus is where our eyes glaze over and our mind begins to wander as we read,

"Make curtains of goat hair for the tent over the tabernacle— eleven altogether. All eleven curtains are to be the same size— thirty cubits long and four cubits wide. Join five of the curtains together into one set and the other six into another set. Fold the sixth curtain double at the front of the tent. Make fifty loops along the edge of the end curtain in one set and also along the edge of the end curtain in the other set (Ex 26:7-10).

After several chapters of stuff like this, it is understandable that you might wonder, "Why is this in the Bible?" I'd like to lift up three important things that help us in knowing how to worship and in entering into God's presence.

1. We come to God on His terms, not ours. There is so much going on today "to make worship relevant" to us, to our needs, and what we want. Churches can mirror our culture that emphasizes individual autonomy, choice, and entertainment. We want everything about church to fit our tastes, interests, convenience, and lifestyles. But, the whole point of worship is to shape our lives into being God's people. That means entering into something we didn't construct. It means a kind of awe, wonder, listening, and experiencing the greatness of God. We don't come to worship to get God to do what we want Him to do. We come to learn and be empowered to do what He calls us to be and do. Without this attitude, our worship will be me-centered and not God-centered. The me-centered worshiper leaves thinking, "How did I like it?" The God-centered worshiper leaves thinking, "Was God pleased with my worship?"

It is only God-centered worship that has transforming power in our lives. It begins with a surrendering of our hearts to Him— a "not my will, but thy will be done (Mtt. 26:39)."

2. God's presence with us. God is giving them a means to have His daily presence supporting and sustaining them in their midst. There's a whole series of verses through this last half of Exodus reiterating this theme (25:8, our text; 25:22; 29:42-46; 40:34-38). In this section, God's presence is spoken of nine times. God was determined to live among His people, a living, ongoing presence with them. The tabernacle was to be set-up in the center of the camp, with all the people's tents surrounding it. This is not God above His people, directing and judging. It is God immersed in their lives, their camp, their struggles—present with them in His power and glory. The tabernacle was to be His dwelling place, His sanctuary.

This reveals God's intention and desire from the beginning. And now we, as Christians, can know His presence right in the center of our lives—within us. This is all because of Jesus' coming. John 1:14 affirms, *The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* The Greek for “made His dwelling” is connected to the same word used for tabernacle here in Exodus. So, in Jesus, God “tabernacled among us.” And, with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, He is “tabernacled” within the Spirit-filled believer.

3. Foreshadowing Christ. All the instructions are important for they all prefigure the fullness of redemption Christ's coming brings. Here we must briefly note the layout and furniture of the tabernacle to appreciate this. The book of Hebrews, chapters 8-10:25 go into detail here. But here is a quick overview of the big picture. Please note on the overhead:

- **The Outer Court** surrounded by tent walls, but open air. It was always set up so the entrance faced east, the rising sun. Entering here, one encountered a **bronze altar** where animals were sacrificed, blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins. From the beginning, God made it clear that sin separates us from God. So, as we come to worship, we need to confess our sins. In the Old Testament, animals were the substitute to die for a person's sins. With the coming of Christ, His sacrifice and shed blood provide the perfect sacrifice for our sins for all time. But, we still must come to the altar and confess our sins and receive His grace.

After the altar we come to a huge **bronze basin** filled with water. This was for the symbolic cleansing of hands and feet—hands for serving God and feet for following God. Titus 3:5 refers to “the washing of rebirth,” the new life in Christ.

- The Tabernacle** is a covered part and divided into two sections. The outer part is the Holy Place occupying two-thirds of the tented structure and then the smaller room at the end was the Holy of Holies. **The Holy Place** contained a lampstand, a table for the bread of the Presence, and an altar for incense. **The bread of the Presence** was twelve loaves, one for each tribe. It was eaten by the priests. In this we see God's Presence sustaining, nurturing. And we remember Jesus' words, *“I am the Bread of Life (Jn. 6:35).”* **The lampstand** was the only source of light, fueled by oil. Oil is often a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Here the priests carry out their work illumined by God's light. And, we think again of Jesus saying, *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in*

darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12) And finally, there was an **altar for incense**. This was a place of prayer and intercession for the people—prayers offered with incense to God.

– **The Holy of Holies** was behind a thick curtain and contained the **Ark of the Covenant**. This was a rectangular box (see OH). The top was **the mercy seat** framed by cherubim with outstretched wings. Inside the box were placed three items: Aaron's rod, the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments, and a jar of manna. These items were perpetual reminders of God's provision: Aaron's rod used in delivering Israel from Egypt's power; the law revealing God's truth; and the manna that sustained their lives. Remember Jesus' words, *I am the way and the truth and the life* (Jn. 14:6). As "the Way" He embodies all the delivering, guiding power of Aaron's rod. As "the Truth" He is the full revelation of God's law. As "the Life" He sustains us as did the manna in the wilderness. The Holy of Holies was set apart, so only once a year, on Yom Kippur, a priest would enter and make atonement for the sins the people committed in ignorance by sprinkling blood on the mercy seat.

Later, when Israel built a temple, it was just a permanent reproduction of all the elements of this traveling tabernacle. When Jesus died on the cross, the veil in the temple between the Holy place and the Holy of Holies was supernaturally torn in two, from top to bottom (Mk. 15:38), thereby saying that through Christ, we all have direct access to the mercy seat of God at any time. Christ's death made atonement for our sins.

Well, there is a lot more to the tabernacle than we're getting into. The late Dr. M.R. DeHaan of Radio Bible Class fame gave 24 sermons on the tabernacle! I have the book. But in all of this God was providing a way for His people to be in fellowship with Him.

Of course Israel didn't understand how all this was a foreshadowing of God's plan of salvation through Christ. It was much bigger than they imagined. They were enacting something that wouldn't be *really* understood fully for another 1300 years. I'm sure people questioned why they had to do things this way. I can imagine people thinking, "Why do I have to sacrifice an animal for my sins? I'm really sorry, isn't that good enough?" "Why can't we just all go into the Holy of Holies and see the Ark of the Covenant?" "A lot of this ritual seems dumb— it doesn't make sense to me." "This doesn't fit my ideas of what worship should be."

As we gather together to worship God, we too must keep in mind that what we're doing is far greater than any of us will fully comprehend. But the book of Hebrews tells us we are even foreshadowing things in heaven in our worship (Heb. 9:25 ff). You may not feel the need to gather with other believers in worship, but God commands us to do so. You may not see the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper as meaningful, but God says, "Do this." Praising the Lord in the congregation or corporate prayer or the proclamation of the Word may not be "your thing". But, in the doing, in the participating, we are part of something huge— in fact, we're part of bringing forth the kingdom of God in ways we won't understand until we get to heaven. And, as we let go, relinquish ourselves to God's way, we enter into His marvelous, refreshing presence.

CONCLUSION

The book of Exodus begins with Israel in bondage, serving an evil empire, unable to free themselves. God intervenes and delivers them. He shows them His ways and provides a means for them to worship Him— a way for the living God to dwell in their midst. After they have built everything exactly as God has instructed, *Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting* [the tabernacle] *and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle* (Ex. 40:34). They are now serving God.

While in Christ we have the fulfillment of all the elements of the tabernacle and sacrificial system, the holiness of God has not changed. The reverence with which we need to approach Him are still the same. While we enjoy His mercy and grace, we must not presume upon it and misuse it, thereby cheapening it (to use Bonhoeffer's phrase).

We don't approach God on our terms, but on His terms. But the good news is that He has provided abundantly for us and our salvation in Christ Jesus. Yet, every time we worship God, we need to be "sensitive to the conditions." When we are, there will be times so powerful in our encounter with the living God that we will feel as though we should be lashed to our pews.

But it all begins with reverent hearts, coming in faith, letting go of ourselves, and immersing ourselves in worship that is God exalting and faithful to what He teaches us about worship.

Our closing hymn is "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty!" I know I've told you this before, but it bears repeating. Former President, Teddy Roosevelt, once said,

"After a week of perplexing problems, it does so rest my soul to come into the House of the Lord and sing and mean it, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty!"

Worshippers from his church reported that he was a vigorous, but raspy hymn singer whose voice could be heard above the rest of the congregation.