

Sunday February 9, 2020
Lesson 11: Holy Presence
Scripture: Exodus 40: 16-38

Context:

We continue this quarter's lesson focuses on holiness. Last week we examined how God appeared to Moses on holy ground and called him to go and lead God's people out of bondage. We continue on in the book of Exodus as we read of the tabernacle and God traveling with the people in the wilderness outside of Egypt.

This second section on holiness deals more with the tabernacle and the place of worship where God is honored and glorified. As we read this description of the traveling tabernacle, we are not to get lost in the details by describing how the people or Moses were responsible by what they did to honor the Lord. The tabernacle is for God for the sake of Israel, not for human beings, however important they may be to the tabernacle being set up.¹ The details are meant to show the reverence given to God and how having a designated space for God reminded people of the respect they were to have for God.

While reading this passage, we are reminded of how the tabernacle traveled with the people as they moved through the wilderness. Even though God is transcendent and immanent, the tabernacle helps to remind people of the intensity of God. The tabernacle may thus be said to be a kind of material "body" for God.² One of the reasons the New Testament focuses on the "body" of Christ is to focus on God coming in the flesh and having a body people could see.

As the tabernacle travels, the people are reminded that even though God cannot be confined, God is there with them. The tabernacle acts as a physical reminder that God dwells among them wherever they may go. As the group travels, the tabernacle stands with the key moments of Israel's life. Yet there is another purpose as the presence of the tabernacle reminds the people that God is accessible. God is not just in isolated moments like the burning bush nor is God only available to the key leaders, but is present to the community as a whole on an ongoing basis.³ God comes to the people as a whole and wants all to know of God's constant presence.

The closing part of the passage describes the cloud over the tabernacle. The cloud acts as a navigator of sorts, helping to tell the people when God wants them to move and when God wants them to stay. The cloud also helps to tell people where the tabernacle is located in the camp and how people can get there. As such, the people are reminded that God is never far away from them, even in the wilderness.

Application:

The focus of today is on the holiness of the presence of God, using the tabernacle

¹ Fretheim, Terence E. "Exodus," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2010), 315.

² Ibid., 315.

³ Ibid., 316.

as an example of where God can be found. The tabernacle is meant to be a place where people can experience the holiness of God and be in awe and wonder. Even in the chaos of the wilderness, God is always there.

One cannot help but appreciate the symbolism that we find of the tabernacle to the local church where we find ourselves. The prayer we as Christians pray is one where the church will reveal to us a glimpse of the glory of God and will give us peace and awe. When we come to worship, we come to glorify and give thanks to God. We also seek peace and refuge in the midst of a chaotic world.

As a preacher I have often discovered that God shows up in worship even when we feel like things are falling apart or worship does not follow every cue we expect. Somehow, God comes in and someone feels the Holy Spirit show up even if the preacher's voice cracks, the liturgist butchers the pronunciation of a word in the Bible, or the organ blows a pipe in the prelude. God shows up and people experience the awe of God.

Often, I have found the people who complain about worship or things that they do not like during the great hour also struggle in other places of their walk with Christ. They struggle with seeing we don't call the Holy Spirit anywhere or God is at work in various acts of worship and not just one. They want to control the presence of God without seeing God is everywhere and worship is not about us or what we deem as excellent.

The more I have worshipped, the more I have seen God even in the things that seem messed up or hit a stitch. Just this past Sunday, we had the children come forward to receive Holy Communion. One of the little girls struggled with the cup coming out of the tray, and before you knew it, the little cup splashed onto her eyes and all down the communion rail. There was a lull in worship.

Now of course the easy thing to do was to declare that the worship service was messed up. Those sniggling should have been silenced. Maybe children should receive Communion after the service. And the list goes on and on of changes that could rectify the situation before it happens again.

Yet in that moment, I saw the presence of God that was truly holy ground. Before the children came down the aisle, our youth delegate was showing them how to cup their hands to receive the bread and stayed with them as they received instead of her returning to be served with her youth peers, who usually all come to the altar rail together. Our Lay Leader serving the juice went and put his tray of cups down to pull out his handkerchief and wipe the juice off the little girl's face before he continued to serve others. Yes, the service did go over an hour and Holy Communion took longer than usual. But in the midst of it, God show showed up. God raised up servant leaders who took the call seriously to help our little ones receive the means of grace.

Being in the presence of God whether it's an ornate historic sanctuary with traditional worship or fellowship hall or gym transformed for contemporary worship, we are reminded of God's holiness. We are also reminded that the worship is not about us, our preferences, and that even our perfect excellent standards do not mean we will conjure God there. God will show up and be God, revealing God's presence in ways we cannot calculate. In the midst of the chaotic world, God shows up and surprises us. The presence of God is not something we control or quantify.

How have you seen the holiness of God be present? Why is important to watch out for unexpected glimpses of God in worship? How can we be more receptive to the

Holy Spirit and the presence of God in our midst? Why is it important for us to have sacred spaces and symbols to remind us of the holiness of God?

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