

Sunday November 5 2023

Lesson 10: A Place of Hope in the Wilderness

Scripture: Exodus 29:42-46

**Context:**

Today we continue our fall curriculum, “God Provides.” The third and final unit is titled “Shelter,” with several lessons focusing on shelter and what physical security means theologically. Today’s lesson is the first in the unit and is found in Exodus. The focus of today’s lesson will be to discern and celebrate how God’s faithful presence changes our lives.

The book of Exodus is most famous for its narrative of the Israelites leaving Egypt and making their way to the Promised Land. During their travels, God constantly reassures the Israelites of how they will not be abandoned on the journey. One of the developments in the text is the tabernacle, Israel’s wilderness sanctuary. Nearly one-third of the book of Exodus is devoted to considerations regarding the tabernacle with two descriptions occurring twice in the book: when God commands Moses how to build it and when that command is being executed.<sup>1</sup> All the various materials are given exact measurements and there are even details for vestments worn entering as well as the amount of incense and anointing oil. Worship and ritual are extremely important as the tabernacle is a living home for God to dwell.

As one reads, there is also a transition in the identity of the people. The movement in the book of Exodus is from slavery to worship, from service to Pharaoh to service of God.<sup>2</sup> The tabernacle will help them understand their identity and help them to understand God. In the earlier chapters of Exodus, we read how the Israelites had forgotten the identity of God and what it meant to be God’s people. The actual description of the tabernacle and the process of being built would create an active sense of hope that this would be the shape of the future for them: God would dwell among his people once again.<sup>3</sup> The scripture passage we study today describes these details with an active focus on how God will meet them in the tabernacle and remind them of God’s presence with them.

Over the years, there has been a great focus on the tabernacle and its elements. There are several ways to dive into the tabernacle as both historical, symbolical, and allegorical. A recent read is the literary portrayal it brings. Contrast the tabernacle to the building of the golden calf in the same book. With the tabernacle, God initiates its building, a willing offering is requested, there are painstaking preparations, a lengthy building process, a safeguarding of divine holiness, and God is both invisible yet active. On the other hand, the golden calf is the people’s initiative, Aaron demands gold, there is no planning, it is made quickly with immediate access, and it is a

---

<sup>1</sup> Fretheim, Terence E. “Exodus,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 263.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 265.

visible god yet it is impersonal.<sup>4</sup> The tabernacle shows us God's character and reveals a true shelter for a wandering people.

### **Application**

Places of worship are extremely important to any religious tradition. There is no exception for a wandering group of people who are in the desert. Even if it is mobile, a place of worship centers them and reminds them of God's presence on their journey.

The tabernacle is initiated by God to remind them they do have a shelter with the Lord and the Lord will be with them. During the movement and transition, the tabernacle will be the same from place to place. As such, the people will be reminded of God's abiding presence with them.

Although we must be careful with becoming attached to objects or even buildings, there is something to be said for places where we feel the presence of God. There is a trust of however things may shift around us and we may even change, God does not and God's Spirit resides in a place to remind us of God's presence. We are reminded God will be the same from age to age, generation to generation.

I hope all of us can name places where we have felt God's faithful presence whenever we go there, a shelter amidst a busy, changing world. When I was in college, I heard of my peers often talk about Sumatanga, a camp in North Alabama, as a shelter for them. The same goes for how when I have students or young adults come home, they sometimes even cram a visit to worship in their busy schedule because the church where they were raised was and is still "home." It is a beautiful thing as we can name those places where we felt the Lord whether it is the physical space or we felt the Spirit shining through the people there.

What stands out to me in this text is the tie to worship. As someone who truly loves the part of their call to serve as an Elder with Word and Sacrament, I believe everything in worship gives us a pattern from the Lord for how we are to live our lives. It is in worship, even as we praise God, we are also formed for daily living.

Yet it is there we are also reminded God goes with us wherever we go. The closing of any Christian service usually includes a "Benediction," or a blessing. It is in the Benediction, we hear how the place we worshipped is indeed lovely and a taste of heaven. Yet now, we are placed to go forth with God's presence into the world. While we may not always feel "safe" or "secure" there, we are reminded God is with us. And when we return back to the worship place, we are rejuvenated and perhaps even challenged for how God wants us to see the work to be done in the kingdom.

For me, worship has always been a place where I felt God's faithful presence. As a preacher's kid, I still remember the first "freedom" I had was to visit churches in college. For me, it was strange to look around and search for a new temporary home away from home. To no one's surprise, including my parents, I ended up in a United Methodist Church with a traditional service. While I might have had speaking engagements or preaching opportunities, the place became a shelter, home away from home.

The answer for the decision came because the services reminded me of how I was formed

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 267.

as child and a teen. While a bit bigger than the churches I grew up in, there were the same acts of worship where I felt the Spirit. You might resonate with some of the same things I did with some of the same reasoning.

Reciting the creeds reminds me of how the ancestors of the faith before me searched the scriptures and saw the great truths there. The Lord's Prayer reminds me of how Jesus taught us to pray even when we think we do not have the words. And the music reminds me of the creative ways God gives us to praise the one who loves us. Hearing the Word proclaimed always both comforts and challenges me especially when it preached, taking one text and proclaiming the gospel to the world. Coming to the table reminds me of the beautiful grace given by Jesus and how his words and presence fills us when we eat at his table.

While I know others feel God's faithful presence in different ways, I think for me worship will always be at the top of the list of where I am reminded of God's abiding presence in my life. As I read this passage in Exodus, I thought of my own worship spaces and thought of how God always promises to be with us in the "house of the Lord." My prayer is we might continue to honor those sacred spaces and to also be good stewards of what God has given us. God is faithful and God will be with us.

What are sacred places you see as a refuge to find God? Why do you think God wanted the Israelites to have the tabernacle even in the wilderness? How do you tie worship to faithfulness with God? What are experiences you've had in worship to remind you of God's faithfulness? Why are sacred spaces so important to the Christian faith?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh  
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge  
PO Box 71  
Brantley, AL 36009