

Sermon on Ex 25,8-9 (#1 of series on the tabernacle)

Denver, Oct 7, 2007

God makes his home with us

- He is its architect
- the tabernacle shows us Jesus Christ

Scripture Passage

“Then have them 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.” (Ex 25.8-9)

Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

While Israel is in the desert, Ruth is talking to her dad one day and asks him a question:

‘Dad, when we were in Egypt I always saw statues. People had them in their homes and temples and you told me that they thought these statues were gods. But were are the statues of our God? I don’t see him. We are just walking through the desert, and I don’t know if we will ever reach the promised land. All I see is this cloud that is always going in front of us.’

Her dad says:

‘You are right, God is invisible. But that does not mean that he is not with us. He wants to live very close to us, he wants to have a home here with us. And the gods in Egypt looked real, but they were only a piece of wood, nothing more. Our God is not just a piece of wood, he lives, and he brought us out of the land of Egypt. This powerful God wants to live with us. Look, do you see that tent over there? The one that’s different, with a white curtain all around it? It’s not a normal house. This is where our God lives. He wants us to know that he is with us. He lives in our midst. This is where you go if you want to meet him, ask for forgiveness, or thank him.’

This, brothers and sisters, is the wonder of the tabernacle.

It may not seem very impressive: just a small tent surrounded by a curtain.

But it is God’s house on earth. This is where you can find him: in the midst of his people.

God makes his home with us

- He is its architect
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1. God designs it himself / he is its architect

The book of Exodus gives us the beginnings of the Old Testament religion. It tells us about the covenant ceremony at Sinai, followed by all the laws they needed to keep. However, the laws only take up 6 chapters. Moses devotes 16 chapters at the end to the tabernacle, about as much as he needs to describe their time in Egypt and the exodus.

And he starts by telling us what God told him:

“The people must make a sacred tent for me, so that I may live among you. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.”

God found it essential to tell Moses precisely what the tabernacle should look like. Not only did he commission the tabernacle, but he told Moses exactly how to build it. He showed it to Moses while he was on the mountain with God for 40 days.

God designed every single part of it, every piece of furniture, like the intricate design of the lampstand, the colors of the curtains, including small details like gold rings and clasps. He did not leave it to the people to decide how they would worship the Lord. God himself was the architect.

Maybe you have seen buildings under construction in our city. Usually there is a sign telling you who the contractor is, but also the architect. For example, Daniel Liebenberg is widely known as the architect of the Art Museum expansion downtown.

If there were a sign at the tabernacle, it would read: Architect: God.

Therefore, when John Calvin explains the construction of the tabernacle in his commentary of Exodus, he places it under his discussion of the second commandment. God helped his people to obey this commandment by giving them precise instructions.

Then, God gifted Bezalel with special skills to make artistic designs, filling him with the Holy Spirit. And he appointed others to help him. The most skilled men were used to build the tabernacle.

These instructions for the building of the tabernacle are one of the most central aspects of God's revelation to Moses. They were important because God descended from heaven to live among his people in the tabernacle.

A copy of heaven

God showed Moses the pattern or model on the mountain. He tells him three times:

“See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain” (Ex 25,40)

You begin thinking of a scale model in heaven that showed what the tabernacle on earth should look like.

However, there is more going on. It is not only a matter of carrying out exactly what God wants. The tabernacle on earth will reflect a reality in heaven. Moses did not see a scale model of the tabernacle; he saw the real tabernacle. You read this in Hebrews 8.

This chapter speaks about Jesus and calls him the perfect high priest:

“We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.” (v. 1)

Comparing Jesus to the priests in the tabernacle, the chapter tells us:

“They (the priests) serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” (vs. 5-6)

That last sentence comes from our text. The Bible itself tells us that Moses did not just see a blueprint or scale model for a building on earth, but the real building in heaven, of which the tabernacle would be a copy and a shadow.

The tabernacle was unique on earth, but it was only a copy. But because it is a copy of the real heavenly tabernacle, the tent Moses built became the most important building on earth!

You’ve probably heard cheesy songs with words like ‘heaven on earth’: the ultimate pleasure or joy.

The tabernacle is the one thing in the Old Testament that you can call ‘heaven on earth’ with good reason. It shows you what heaven is like: a place where God lives and is worshiped in his holiness and where his creatures can meet him – and this is what the tabernacle is all about.

The spiritual truth in it

This is the beauty of the tabernacle: God comes down from heaven, where he is worshiped perfectly, and wants to meet with his people on earth. He gives them a place where they can worship him and meet him.

And this place is not just a meeting place. The tabernacle is a sacred tent with the purpose “that I may live among you.”

God becomes a nomad, wandering through the desert, accompanying his people. He makes his home with his people and dwells in their midst.

God living with his people

This is God’s desire. He has saved the Israelites from Egypt, not in order to leave them in the desert, and not even in order to give them a good life in the Promised Land.

The history of Israel tells us something about the higher goal God has with his human creatures: he wants to be present in the midst of his people.

And he continues to do that today: he desires to be present in our lives, walk with us, live with us, and have fellowship with us.

What a surprise! What a beautiful message does the tabernacle contain: God meets you where you are and draws you to himself, to share his life with you. You can come to him and meet him.

And what a miracle this is!

The people he chose were not model citizens. They were not the most impressive nation on earth, that God liked to put them as a jewel in his crown. Rather the opposite: these people were stubborn, resistant, and never trusted him. They didn't bring glory to God by their name and fame in world history.

Actually, right in these chapters that give us the instructions for the building of the tabernacle, Israel bailed out of the covenant and turned to idolatry.

And yet, God wanted to dwell in their midst. The tabernacle is a showcase of grace.

His grace does not mean he makes concessions on his holiness. You see it in the design of the tabernacle:

- you see God's holiness in the fences he puts up: the tabernacle is fenced off by a curtain, separating the courtyard from the rest of the world.
- The Holy Place, where only the priests may come, is fenced off from the courtyard by another curtain. And finally, the Most Holy Place is shielded by a curtain and only the high priest can enter once a year.
- This Most Holy Place is God's throne, and the design shows you more precious materials as you get closer to this room. Outside, there are bronze furnishings; in the Holy Place the altar of incense, table, and lampstand are covered with gold. The atonement cover on top of the ark and the cherubim (angels) on top are made of pure gold.
- The closer you get to God's throne, the more precious the material and the more perfect the dimensions: the courtyard is 100x50 cubits (about 150x75 feet), the Holy Place has more perfect dimensions (20x10x10), while the Most Holy Place is a perfect cube: 10x10x10 cubits.

You will see **how special** the entire tabernacle is from this design, but also from God's rules regarding the sacred oil that was used to anoint all the utensils and objects inside. It was so holy that everyone who tried to make it himself had to be put to death (Ex 30:25).

And yet, this **holy character** did not mean that nobody could enter and have fellowship with God. Look at the way this fellowship happened: the believers had to bring a sacrifice if they wanted to enter: either as an atonement offering (to pay for their sins), or as an offering of gratitude.

God's house on earth reminded believers of his holiness and their sin and at the same time was a fountain of grace through the sacrifices that were being brought and accepted by God.

God lives among his people and he does not destroy them with fire when they repent and bring sacrifices for their sins.

Israel received proof that God accepted them when the tabernacle was finished. Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle (Ex

40.34). God took up residence in the tabernacle and accepted Israel into his house through the sacrifices.

2. The tabernacle shows us Jesus Christ

The tabernacle is long gone: Israel built it on their journey through the desert, about 4,000 years ago. But it was destroyed and replaced by the temple. (and the temple was later destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.)

What can we do with the building plans we read in Exodus?

Shadow of eternal truths: pointing to Jesus

The tabernacle is a shadow of what was coming.

The building and all its contents speak about **God's presence** coming to us. God wants to live among his people.

God repeated this in Jesus.

John describes Jesus' coming to our world like this:

“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.” (John 1,14)

This gives you a hint, not the full picture. The Greek text makes it crystal clear, it says: 'the Word **tabernacled** among us'. Jesus pitched his tent among us. What God did with a tent in the Old Testament, he did again when his Son became like us. He lived among us not just in a tent but with flesh and blood.

God's fullness lived in Jesus, as Col 2,9 says. So looking back you could say that in the tabernacle in the Old Testament, Jesus was present with God's people.

Hebrews 8 called the tabernacle a shadow of the heavenly reality, where Christ is. The shadow of Christ falls on the Old Testament because he stand between the Old Testament and the bright light of the dawn of salvation.

Maybe you thought: the believers in the Old Testament at least had something visible: a tabernacle they could go to, a sacrifice going up in flames, and a priest telling them: 'your sins are forgiven'. What do we have?

Those things were important for God's people at the time.

Yet, Paul calls them "only a shadow of things in future; *the reality is Christ*" (Col 2,17).

If the reality is **Christ** we are more privileged than those believers. We can see more in those ceremonies than any Israelite ever suspected, because we live in the bright light that Jesus brought to us. We have seen the fulfillment of all these shadows.

What is this fulfillment? How do we receive it in Jesus?

God lives in the church

Jesus himself is God in person, present on earth. No longer is his presence symbolized by a cloud and a tent with furnishings, but he has come in person.

Therefore Jesus called his own body the temple, when he said:

“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” (John 2,19)

Now, however, Jesus is here all the time. He lives in our hearts and we live in him now. All the time. Whoever believes in him lives in him and is united with him.

God is present in the person of Jesus. Jesus is God’s presence on earth, and he lives in our midst. He enters our lives. He dwells in your living room, he sits at your table. He is with you when you suffer and he is there when you have joy.

Jesus opens our eyes for a new reality, something the Old Testament believers could not imagine.

They could only go to the tabernacle at certain times. God dwelled among his people, but access to his house was still limited. You could not *live* there.

But now we are always in Christ and he calls us God’s temple. Our hearts are the temple of the Holy Spirit because he dwells there (1Cor 3,16).

And believers together, the church, he calls “God’s temple”:

“we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (2Cor 6,16)

[As we celebrate Jesus’ presence at the table this morning, let us realize this is special. It is a privilege that he comes so near, that He is here with us.

Jesus is the host at this table and we receive life at his table.

He is the tabernacle in person, God inviting us to himself.] *(this paragraph only in a sermon before a Lord’s Supper celebration)*

Because of Jesus, we are no longer all by ourselves, individuals trying to make it in this world. Because we belong to Jesus we belong together as his church, the temple of the living God.

Here we serve him through his Spirit.

This means that we need to realize who we are and who we are supposed to be: a people belonging to God. We show this by our faith and trust in Jesus and by our response in holy living. Paul’s beautiful statement about the church is part of his teaching about a holy lifestyle, which means being separate from the world:

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” Therefore come out from

them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.” (2Cor 6,14-17)

The tabernacle is the symbol of God’s holy presence in our midst. Everything about it is holy and is a reminder of the holiness that must become visible in our lives since we are meant to reflect Jesus’ image.

It will never stop

The tabernacle points even farther into the future. It returns in the book of Revelation, all the way at the end.

This is the beautiful perspective God opens for us in Jesus:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’” (Rev 21,1-3)

This is the full fulfillment of the truth of the tabernacle: God dwells with us and will live with us on earth. No longer does he need a visible tabernacle or temple to show his people. We will see him with our own eyes.

John cannot hide his surprise in v. 22:

“I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.”

First we saw the tabernacle and the temple.

Then we saw Jesus Christ, God in person.

In the end, we will see God.

Sin will be removed completely and all separation from God will be taken away. We will see him, face to face!

Amen