

Sermon – October 10, 2021
“So that I may dwell among you”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Exodus 25:1-9; 35:20-29; 36:2-7

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning. Let me share several ministry moments for us to celebrate from this past week before we start this morning. The Good News Club at Northumberland Elementary School continues with 27 children this week. The children are very interested in learning about Jesus. Please pray for the club, volunteers, and children. Several of us were blessed to work on a house for a lady who had waited three years to have some ceiling fans replaced. It was a blessing to be able to serve in the community and to meet a new person. And finally, we have just a few more positions to fill for completion of our 2022 leadership plans. Please keep our preparations for the upcoming Charge Conference on November 6th in your prayers.

Let me provide some context to center us in today's text. We are back in the book of Exodus, and find ourselves at a pivotal time for God's people as they transition from slavery in Egypt to worshiping, serving, and giving thanks to God. The Law has been given at Mount Sinai, and Israel, to a person, has agreed to do whatever God requires of them. And we should not forget that they have asked Moses that they not have to hear God's voice again.

For those who are reading through Exodus, you may have discovered that the topic that occupies the majority of this book, almost a third, is the tabernacle. We may also have noticed that the level of detail about the tabernacle is very high. And most likely, we may also have noticed that we read the same words twice. We read the instructions for the tabernacle and then bump into the golden calf, and then we read the instructions for the tabernacle again. That repetition seems odd to us when we find it, and yet it tells us that something very important is going on around the tabernacle, something that if we are not careful will get lost in the details of using silver pegs to hold together frames for curtains, and we will miss the reason for the repetition. We might remember that when we read the creation account in Genesis there is very little detail about the creation activities there. God speaks, creation happens, and we are left struggling to know more about the “how” of God's creating

actions. In Exodus' instructions for the building of the tabernacle, we find the opposite. The level of detail given is extreme, yet if we were to try to build a tabernacle by following these instructions, we would struggle with some key missing information. My favorite example is whether there are tent pegs and ropes or just pegs holding the curtain frames together. You might say to me, well in my Bible there is a picture of the tabernacle and there are tent pegs and ropes all around it, and I agree that that makes sense, I just struggle to find tent pegs and ropes in among all of the details in the text. I will leave it to each of us to decide as we read and study the book of Exodus. And I think that as the tabernacle was built, there were times when Moses came to inspect the work and had to correct or change how they were following the instructions. But don't get lost in the details of the construction. Realize that the bottom line is there is a strong connection between the tabernacle and creation. Here in the wilderness God is recreating His presence with Israel. God is guiding the first step in reestablishing God's presence with humanity that existed after creation before the fall. One last aspect of the detailed instructions we should catch is that nothing is left to man. God directs all of the building of the tabernacle. Humans will provide the labor, but God is the source of the directions, and those working on the tabernacle must obediently follow God's directions.

Now as much as I might like to this morning, I am not going to cover all of the details of the tabernacle. We can leave that for an Exodus study. This morning let's focus on the offering the Lord requests for building the tabernacle. Notice the level of detail in the request for offerings, the specific metals, gold, silver and bronze items, and the different threads and woven materials as examples. And I will point out that there is a great deal of significance in this request. As an example, we might notice that the closer we get to the presence of God in the structure of the tabernacle, the more expensive the metal and the threads become. Bronze is at the entrance and gold is found in the presence of God. In the request for an offering, we also find the purpose statement for why God asks for this offering. It is given in verse 8 of chapter 25: "so that I may dwell among them." Israel is going to build a sanctuary not for them to worship in, but for God to dwell in among them. No longer will God show up every now and then, or appear to them on a mountain top, or call one of them up to the top of the mountain top to meet with Him. God will be among them! Again, we see this tabernacle reflecting creation in that God will be present with His people. Not only will God be present, but God will journey with His people as they move towards the Promised Land. This sanctuary is a portable structure. God will be with God's people as they journey.

Notice the people's first reaction to this request for an offering: they withdraw to their tents. They separate themselves from Moses, God's messenger. There in their tents they process this request

for an offering and their hearts are stirred. Willing spirits go to work with God and people begin to respond, and from all over the camp they bring their offerings. I think some of the most powerful words are found in Exodus 35:22 “So they came, men and women.” We can almost see in our minds’ eye, people beginning to come with offerings, stepping out of their tents, carrying an offering and coming, a few at first, and then more and more, and they just keep coming. Moses doesn’t take offering plates and go tent to tent. He tells the people what God requested, and they respond as their hearts are stirred. From all over this camp, those with willing hearts bring their offering, their contributions, with joyful hearts to help bring about a place for God to dwell among them.

And then we see another part of the response of God’s people to God’s request for an offering. We see the skillful women at work spinning the needed materials: blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine linen, women whose hearts were stirred to use what they had in their hands to make what was needed. The text in Exodus 35:22 tells us, “all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun the goats’ hair.” (Judy spinning here) The giving of offering is clearly not just a man thing. The text repeats that Israelite men and women, whose hearts made them willing, brought what they had made as a freewill offering. They used their skills to make what was needed that they did not have. Moses does not collect, there is no command to donate. The response here of the people is giving from the heart from the resources God had provided to them as they left Egypt or from the skills they learned while slaves in Egypt and the materials they have in hand, and they bring an offering to God. Now there is a lesson here for us. We also are to give our offering not from an obligation, but from a heart that is willing and joyfully supporting the presence of the Lord in our community and in all the places God is at work that our hearts are stirred to support. Notice that there is no mention of a tithe as Abraham gave to Melchizedek or a fifth of all they have as Joseph collected in Egypt. It is what their hearts desire to give for the building of God’s sanctuary. Part of their willing response is tied up in their worship of the golden calf, which we will talk about in another sermon in more detail. This morning, I want to encourage us each to let God stir our hearts and willingly give to bring God’s presence in this place. If your heart isn’t stirred, if you are not willing to give of your possessions or the labor of your hand, then don’t. There is no negative for those not giving in the text. We are to give as our hearts are stirred by God. Jesus does not mention the tithe when he talks about the use of money, but makes the point that the widow’s mite was all she had and she gave it to God as her heart was stirred.

If you are following along in your Bible, let’s turn now to Exodus 36. Notice that there are two men named here in the scripture, Bezalel and Oholiab. Rarely do we find the names of people in the

scriptures, so when we do, we want to pay attention. We are also told these men are filled with the Spirit of God for the work they have been supernaturally strengthened by God to do, to follow God's instructions and use their gifts and skills to build the tabernacle. Along with these two men are others whose hearts are stirred to come and do the work. The point here is that God's call to men and women is not just as pastors, but God also calls those gifted in the arts and those with artistic skills to tasks for God. Don't miss this. Calling is not just to ministry. It is also into work with skilled hands, and God's call includes those with gifts in the arts! Those in the entertainment industry, whose actions are often damaging to Christians and their faith, are also called by God to use their gifts for God's glory and God's purposes. If you have children in your family who are gifted in one of the arts or a skill with their hands, encourage them to use their gifts for God and God's glory.

Now I am going to tell you a secret about Exodus chapter 36 that you might not know. It contains many pastors' and church leaders' favorite verses in all the Bible. You will not see them walking around with this on a tee shirt or on their coffee cup, and they will not put it on a list of favorite verses, but deep down all who are aware of these verses are thinking how great it would be to be able to stand in a pulpit on a Sunday and share the words from Exodus 36:5-7 with their congregations. Anyone have a guess which verses they are? Let me read them, "So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp: 'No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.' So the people were restrained from bringing; for what they had already brought was more than enough to do all the work." By contrast, it can seem that our needs as a church and our offerings are too often the opposite of the response of the people for the building of the tabernacle. We seem to need a few thousand more to get the roof repaired, support a ministry, fix something in the kitchen, or reach out to people in new ways and new places. Let me stop here a minute and share something that I think needs to be shared with this congregation. As I think about how our congregation is moving through COVID, political turmoil, and economic crisis, these verses summarize how I see the people in this church responding to God. They have had their hearts stirred and have met the needs of the ministries God has called us to in this place at this time. It has been humbling for me to witness the response of the congregation in these days of stress. Members have died, moved away, quit coming, and stayed away for good reasons, but hearts are still stirred and people have willingly supported the needs of this church. Let me say thank you for what you have done and continue to do. We have a new budget for 2022. We have new needs that have been identified, so I am not saying, as Moses did when he commanded Israel to stop bringing your gifts, to stop giving, but I want to praise God that your hearts have been stirred throughout these stressful times

and that you have given extravagantly, supporting the church even when we could not come and be together in this sanctuary. I thank you for your support and faithfulness.

Let me pull one last thread this morning that is key in these passages in Exodus. We should remember that what is making hearts so willing to participate in the offering is that the people of Israel are seeking the presence of God to be among them. And we will see as we complete our journey through Exodus, that God does come and is present with them in this new sanctuary they are building. The garden of Eden is in essence recreated as the tabernacle is built and God once again comes and is among His people. It is not a perfect presence as God must be separated from His people, and only one person, once a year, may go into God's presence with the blood of an animal. And they go seeking forgiveness of sins for the people. But this moment marks a beginning, a reconnection to God, a first move to reestablishing what once existed in the Garden of Eden, but as great as this presence will be for Exodus people, there is more of God's presence waiting for God's people.

Let's move forward in time to the arrival of a baby in a manger and we find the beginning of a better version of God's presence with His people: the Word made flesh who walks in a human temple or tabernacle, who breathes our air and who is God in the flesh, whom one could see, hear, touch, and follow. This new presence comes among people, men and women. In human form, Jesus will reveal God's love to us more fully, more completely, than ever before. To make this new revelation of God's love complete, Jesus will die on the cross as the perfect Lamb, his blood shed and his body broken that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. People, that is presence, that is a more complete revelation of God to God's people. Then Jesus goes even further and is resurrected, ascends to heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father.

Yet even then we are not left without Jesus' presence because when he ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit is poured out and the Holy Spirit takes up residence in believers. Jesus is present in us, in our hearts, with our spirit. God is not with us in flesh but is in our flesh. We become tabernacles, recreated people, recreated into the people of God, people with the presence of God, not in a tabernacle shielded from view by the walls of a tent, but present with us, dwelling in us. And with this indwelling presence of God, we are spread out all over the world, taking the love of God and the presence of God throughout the world. As we go to the places Jesus leads us, we take our bodies with the indwelling presence of God into those places, and darkness is driven out. When Jesus walked the earth, he was limited to one place at a time. Now that the people of God walk the earth with Jesus present in them, Jesus is all over the world at the same time. This is a new and growing presence of God with God's people.

Yet there is one last version of this growing presence of God. There is yet a coming time when Jesus will come in power and God will dwell among us. There will be no temple, no tabernacle, no Ark of the Covenant. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more pain, no more death, just the presence of God as it was always meant to be and as it was at creation. Our mission until that time is to be those who bear the presence of God within and are going to all of those around us and to all the places we are sent by God, and as we go, we are willingly, with stirred hearts, sharing the Good News of the love God has for us as seen in Jesus Christ. We are to be those who are taking God's presence, and through the love we have been given, sharing that love with others that they also may receive Jesus into their lives and be filled with his transforming presence. We are to be learning who Jesus is and to be taking him to all of the places in the world that lack Jesus' presence, one life at a time, making of ourselves an offering to God by sharing the love we have with another person who lacks that presence in their tabernacle. Remember those words that describe the people's response from God for an offering, words that are so powerful, "and then they came" with hearts stirred and willingly bringing their offerings that God might be present among them.

I am going to pray a closing prayer, but before I do, I want to ask that each of us during the closing hymn begins to let God stir our hearts and open us to willingly seek out a person whom God places on our hearts to receive our offering of Jesus Christ. You may already have someone on your heart and just need courage to go to them and begin to share the love of Christ with them. You may not, but like the people of Israel, let us go to our tents and let God stir our hearts, and then from all over this place, let us be seen taking God's offering in the form of love to the one Jesus directs us in the power of the Holy Spirit to go to. You can come to the altar and start here. You can sit in the pew and pray. You can wait until you get home. But spend some time in prayer asking God what you have in your hand that He has placed there for an offering of love to another person. If you want, come to the altar and pray. If you want me to come and pray with you, then turn your palms up as you pray, and I will come and pray with you.

Pray with me: Come, Holy Spirit. Lord Jesus, come and dwell in us. Let us be transformed by your steadfast love into your people. Lord, help us to be heralds of the great good news that God is present among us. Open our hearts to the love you have for us that we may in turn comfort those in despair and darkness with this great Good News, this great love. Come, Lord Jesus come. Come and dwell in us. Amen