

A Holy Place

Series: Out of Egypt - Exodus

Date: 20 September 2026, 15th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Exodus 25.1-22, 39.42-40.38, John 1.14-18

I loved my time studying theology. But there were some unexpected gaps in my education when I came to parish ministry. Coming to St George's, I discovered that part of my job was looking after this beautiful church building. Where was the unit on church architecture in the curriculum? Why didn't they put that in the course? And yet, at the same time I know that the beauty of our building is something that speaks to us and something that draws people here every day.

We've been reading through the book of Exodus together, and today we come to the building of the Tabernacle. God gives Moses the instructions on how to build the Tabernacle in chapters 25-31, and then these are basically repeated as the Tabernacle is built in chapters 35-40. But unless you're an architect, my guess is that your eyes will glaze over a bit when you read these sections. After all the action of God's dramatic rescue of Israel from slavery, after the laws to build a just society, why would God make basically $\frac{1}{3}$ of the book so boring with endless descriptions of how to build curtains, with clasps and frames and bases and so on?

If you've been with us in the series so far, you may remember those 3 big themes of Exodus: Redemption, Covenant, and PRESENCE. Exodus is about God redeeming his people from slavery in Egypt. He makes a Covenant with them. The goal of his redemption and his covenant was that he could be PRESENT with his people, and live among them. The Tabernacle is where God will dwell among his people. We're used to reading stories, but with this section, we have to get our visual imagination into gear.

Today we're going to look at that theme of God's presence among his people. We'll look at the design of the Tabernacle and what this teaches us. And then we'll trace the story of God's presence through the Bible and see how the design of the Tabernacle can still speak to us today.

Last week we left Moses on the top of Mt Sinai. The glory of Yahweh settles on the mountain. Moses waits 6 days, and on the 7th God finally speaks to Moses. He tells Moses to invite the people to give him an offering. And he is to receive from "everyone whose heart prompts them to give." And then we read, in 25.8:

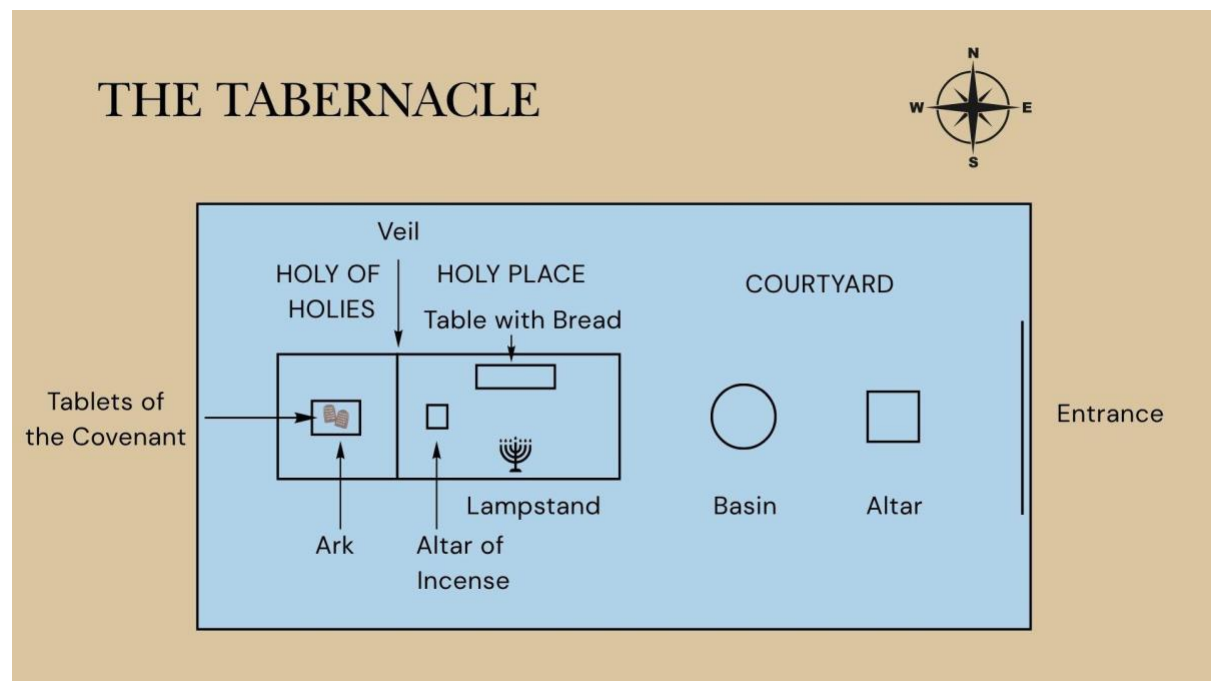
“Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.” Later, in chapter 29 we read:

“”There I will meet with you and speak to you; there also I will meet with the Israelites, and the place will be consecrated by my glory. ... Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the LORD who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.”

29.42-46

Here we learn three things about the Tabernacle.

First, it's to a sanctuary, a holy place for God. That is, it is set apart for him. Second, it's the place where God will dwell among his people Israel. And third, it's the place where God will meet with his people. This is why its other name is the Tent of Meeting. We'll hear more about these three points later.



Let's have a look at the design of the Tabernacle. We'll work our way from the outside in, following the order of construction in Exodus 36-40.

First, we learn in Numbers that Israel is to **camp** on all four sides of the Tabernacle, with 3 tribes on each side. Then between the tribes and the Tabernacle are the 4 clans of the priestly tribe of Levi, on each side of the Tabernacle.

Next there is the **Courtyard** surrounding the Tabernacle. The courtyard is surrounded by a wall of linen curtains erected on bronze bases. The closer you get to the centre of the

Tabernacle, the more precious the materials used. So you go from bronze, to silver, to gold. The courtyard was accessible to all Israelites.

Entering the courtyard from the east the first thing you will see is the **Altar** for burnt offerings. This is made of wood covered in copper or bronze. The altar had poles attached to it so that it can be carried, something we will see for all the other furnishings.

Heading west next there is the **Basin**. This was so that the priests could wash. They had to be ritually clean before entering into the Tabernacle itself. But since the daily work of the priest was performing sacrifices, they would be slaughtering and handling the bloody carcasses of animals and so a place to wash was also essential!

At the halfway point in the courtyard we come to the Tabernacle proper. The word Tabernacle simply means tent. It is the same word the Old Testament uses for the tents Israel travelled in. From the outside this tent wouldn't look that impressive, you would see the outer layer made of durable cloth. Once you entered into the Tabernacle you would see the beautiful inner curtains dyed blue, purple and scarlet with cherubim embroidered in them.

Going through the curtain inside the Tabernacle you would enter the **Holy Place**. Only the priests could enter the Holy Place. On the north side of the Holy Place stood a **Table** made of wood overlaid with gold. On this table was placed 12 loaves of bread, one for each of the tribes of Israel. It was replaced each Sabbath, and eaten by the priests.¹ This bread was called the Bread of the Presence. Also on the table were plates and dishes and jugs made of pure gold. The jugs held wine used for libations, ritual offerings of wine.

What was the meaning of the Bread and Wine? As well as being actual food for the priests, it was a symbolic reminder of that moment when the leaders of Israel had met and shared a meal with God. It was a sign of perpetual hospitality from God. A reminder that Yahweh was the God who provided daily bread for his people.

On the southern side of the Holy Place was a **Lampstand**, the Menorah. This is one of the most iconic symbols of the Jewish faith to this day. One of the most famous pictures of this is the arch of Titus in Rome which depicts the Menorah being carried in the emperor Titus' triumph after his capture of Jerusalem in 70AD. The lampstand was made of pure gold. It

¹ Leviticus 24.5-9

was designed to have a central trunk with 6 branches. The top of the branches were shaped like almond blossoms.

We have an almond tree in the rectory garden, and I can tell you, it is the first tree to blossom at the end of winter. The Lamstand then was made to look like a tree bursting with new life. Sound familiar? We're back in the garden of Eden with the Tree of Life. Obviously it was also a source of light. And the priests were to keep the lamps burning from "evening till morning" every day.² So the lampstand pointed to Yahweh as both the source of life and light in creation.

Turning west again, standing in front of the inner curtain was another smaller altar, the **Altar of Incense**. This was made of wood overlaid with pure gold. The high priest was to burn incense on this altar every morning and evening, at the same time as tending to the lamps.³ The burning incense was a picture of the prayers of God's people wafting up to heaven. The smoke of the incense was also a symbol of the cloud which both revealed God's presence and concealed his glory.

Behind the altar of incense was the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the **Holy of Holies** or the Most Holy Place. Again this curtain was made of blue, purple and scarlet fabric with cherubim woven into it. The curtain is described as a shield for the ark that lay inside. Inside the Holy of Holies was the **Ark of the Covenant**. The Ark was a wooden box overlaid with gold. The significance of the ark was what lay inside it and what fitted on top of it.

Inside the box were the two stone tablets, with the covenant law, the 10 commandments inscribed on them.⁴ The ark embodied the Word of God upon which Israel's relationship with God was based. Unlike all other temples in the ancient world which at their heart had a statue of the god, the sign of Yahweh's presence dwelling among his people was his written word. The Ark of the Covenant embodied the truth, "that it is only through his Word that the true knowledge of God, the understanding of his essential nature" is revealed.⁵

On top of the Ark was what is called the **Atonement Cover** or the Mercy Seat. This was a lid with two golden Cherubim facing each other with their wings touching. Cherubim were sphinx like creatures, with animal bodies, human faces and wings. They first appear when

² Exodus 27.21

³ Exodus 30.1-10, cf. Leviticus 16.11-19

⁴ Exodus 34.28

⁵ Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, Schocken Books, New York, 1996: 209

God places them at the entrance of Eden, guarding the path to the tree of life. They are spiritual beings who attend God, and their appearance symbolises his presence.

The lid was called the atonement cover, because once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter the most holy place and take some blood from the sacrifice and sprinkle this blood on the atonement cover, and in this way make atonement for himself, for his family and for the whole people of Israel.⁶ The space between the cherubim was the place where Yahweh was invisibly seated on his throne, hence why this was also called the Mercy Seat. This was the white hot site of God's presence on earth. So, God says to Moses, "There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the covenant of the law, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites."⁷ It was also why the ark came to be known as Yahweh's footstool, with his throne being in heaven. But only Moses could enter the Most Holy Place and then after him, only the high priest, and only once a year and only after making a sacrifice of atonement. The whole Tabernacle was a symbolic microcosm of the meeting of heaven and earth, the place where Yahweh, the Creator of all things, the Redeemer of Israel, dwelled among his people on earth.

I hope as we've stepped through the building of the Tabernacle you've been able to see something of it in your mind's eye and the meaning of its different parts. Let's pan the camera back and look at how the Tabernacle fits into the whole storyline of the Bible.

God's Presence through the Story of Scripture

Right back at the start of the Bible the story of CREATION reads like the building of a temple where God can live in the midst of his creation, and especially with the people made in his image. But because our first parents doubted God's goodness and disobeyed God's word, they were cast out of the garden of Eden, and out of the presence of God.

The making of the Tabernacle by Israel in the wilderness mirrors the creation story in all sorts of different ways. The Tabernacle is like a new Eden in the wilderness. The Tabernacle brings the holy presence of God to earth so that God can again dwell amidst his people and they can experience his blessing. It's a powerful moment in the story of God's plan to undo the curse of the Fall. Exodus finishes with the glory cloud that the Israelites had seen on Mt Sinai now settling over the tent of the meeting, the Tabernacle. God's presence would now go with Israel and lead her in her journey in the wilderness.

⁶ Leviticus 16.16-17

⁷ Exodus 25.22

Fast forward hundreds of years and the Tabernacle is replaced by the Temple in Jerusalem. When Solomon dedicates the temple, the glory cloud again fills the temple, like it did when Moses completed the Tabernacle. And the nations start coming to Jerusalem to the king to receive the blessing promised to Abraham. But Israel's kings were unfaithful and led the people astray. And so we read in Ezekiel that the prophet has a vision of the glory cloud of God's presence departing the temple. And then in 586 the temple itself was destroyed by the Babylonians and the ark was lost, and the people were again cast out.

When the people returned to Jerusalem the temple was rebuilt, but things weren't the same. But then we come to the New Testament and John's Gospel opens with these words:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.⁸

Do you remember how the Tablets of the Covenant were in the Ark because God reveals himself by his Word? Here John calls Jesus, the Word of God, here he is, come to reveal God to us. And the verb translated "made his dwelling among us," it literally means "pitched his tent" or "tabernacled" among us. The glory cloud that descended on the Holy of Holies, so that not even Moses could look, here John says, "We have seen his glory!" And he goes on in verse 18, echoing Exodus, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and in the closest relationship with the Father, he has made him known." In Jesus God has tabernacled among us. He is the holy presence of God. He is the place where we meet God, the one through whom we come to the Father. In his death, he is the high priest and the sacrifice and the curtain through whom we are brought into the Holy presence of God.

But the New Testament doesn't stop there. Christ has ascended to the right hand of the Father, and at Pentecost he poured out the gift of the Father, the Holy Spirit. And just like the glory cloud descended upon Sinai and looked like a consuming fire, so at Pentecost tongues of fire came to rest upon each of the disciples and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the holy presence of God, now poured out upon all who trust in Christ, upon the Church. Jesus says, "when two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them." So when we come together, like right now, Jesus is PRESENT with us by his Holy Spirit. So the apostle Peter says we are living stones built into a spiritual house, and Paul calls the Church the temple of God. And astonishingly he says as individual Christians our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. We are like the burning bush, the holy fire of God's Spirit lives in us, and because of his mercy we are not consumed. And that means that we

⁸ John 1.14

carry the presence of God with us wherever we go. That's why our vision as St George's to be the Light on the Hill, because we are sent out to shine the light of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. People encounter God through us as we speak of his glory and as we serve others doing all the good God has called us to do.

As amazing as all this is, there is still more that God has for us. As we read the closing chapters of Revelation we see a vision of the future that God has planned when Jesus returns. That day will be the true marriage between heaven and earth. In that vision there is no tabernacle, no temple, because the whole earth will again be God's temple, and his glory will cover the earth and God will live among his people, and he will wipe away every tear from every eye. And there will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain. And we will see him face to face.

Do you long for that day?

The Tabernacle in Exodus was glorious. It meant that God could live among his people. But only the high priest could go into his presence. Now, in Jesus, what the Tabernacle pointed to has come. In Jesus, God has tabernacled among us. He is the Word who makes the Father known to us. His cross is the mercy seat. Through his death the curtain has been torn open and we are brought to the Father. The holy fire of his Spirit lives in us and makes us his temple. And he will bring us home to glory. Will you trust him? Will you listen to his Word? Will you worship him?