

God's Makeshift Home

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a four-part series

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Leviticus 16:1–2 (CEB)

After the death of Aaron's two sons, which happened when they approached the LORD and died, the LORD spoke to Moses: ² Tell your brother Aaron that he cannot come whenever he wants into the holy area inside the inner curtain, to the front of the cover that is on the chest, or else he will die, because I am present in the cloud above the cover.

2 Chronicles 6:1–2, 12–21 (CEB)

Then Solomon said, "The LORD said that he would live in a dark cloud; ² but God, I have built you a lofty temple—a place where you can live forever." . . .

¹² Solomon stood before the LORD's altar in front of the entire Israelite assembly and spread out his hands. ¹³ Now Solomon had made a bronze platform seven and a half feet long, seven and a half feet wide, and four and a half feet high, and he set it in the middle of the enclosure. He stood on it. Then, kneeling before the whole assembly of Israel and spreading his hands toward the sky, ¹⁴ he said:

. . . ¹⁸ But how could God possibly live on earth with people? If heaven, even the highest heaven, can't contain you, how can this temple that I have built contain you? ¹⁹ LORD, my God, listen to your servant's prayer and request, and hear the cry and prayer that I your servant pray to you. ²⁰ Constantly watch over this temple, the place where you promised to put your name, and listen to the prayer your servant is praying concerning this place. ²¹ Listen to the request of your servant and your people Israel when they pray concerning this place. Listen from your heavenly dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive!

Isaiah 7:10–16 (CEB)

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: ¹¹ "Ask a sign from the LORD your God. Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven."

¹² But Ahaz said, "I won't ask; I won't test the LORD."

¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Listen, house of David! Isn't it enough for you to be tiresome for people that you are also tiresome before my God? ¹⁴ Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel. ¹⁵ He will eat butter and honey, and learn to reject evil and choose good. ¹⁶ Before the boy learns to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned.

God taught his people to make a home for him, but it would never be more than a makeshift dwelling, a sign to what . . . or who . . . was coming.

This Advent we are talking about presence, about a God who abides, who remains and endures. As we briefly alluded to last week, God was present with his people from the time he called them out of slavery in Egypt. He would remain even as the Israelites gave God plenty of reason to abandon them. But he did not. He would stay. He would dwell with them even as they turned away from one "house rule" after another. Here is a more complete telling of the story of God's makeshift home.

Before Jesus: A tabernacle and a temple

The Judaism of Jesus' day was very different from the Judaism of today. Then, Judaism was centered on the enormous temple in Jerusalem and the priestly system of sacrifices conducted there. The truth is that it is hard for us to comprehend the significance of the temple in Jerusalem, and the tabernacle before it, to the lives of the ancient Israelites, but the books of the Chronicles can help our understanding. Writing long after the destruction of the temple built by Solomon, the Chronicler helps the people to grasp the importance of their work to rebuild the temple after their return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. He devotes 18 chapters to the story of the temple, its

construction and its dedication. So, let's take a brief journey through the story of the temple.

A "mercy seat"

The first stop on our journey is Mt. Sinai, to which God had led his people after they escaped from Egypt. There, Moses brings down from Mt. Sinai instructions for building a moveable dwelling place for God (the tabernacle) and for a box that will hold the stone tablets on which God has inscribed the Ten Commandments. God's dwelling place with his people is a large tent that can be easily moved, as the people are still nomadic. Inside the tent is a small area that is curtained off. Behind the curtain sits the box, the Ark of the Covenant, containing the stone tablets. The ark is covered with a "mercy-seat" on which sits two gold winged cherubim facing each other. God has said, "There I will meet you [Moses] and from above the mercy-seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites" (Exodus 25:22).

We can think of this place, the mercy seat, within the tabernacle and atop the ark as the place where heaven and earth met. It was where Moses and then the high priests would step within God's space and God's time. It was the place where God's world and our world would overlap. The key is to grasp that the ancient Israelites did not see this as some sort of metaphor, but more as a portal to the LORD God. Not surprisingly, this place was called the Holiest of Holies and could be entered only by the high priest and only on one day a year. This place, where God was present, was the center of Israel's worship.

Of course, in addition to telling the Israelites how to make a home for God, the Almighty also lays out a series of ten terse commandments. In these commandments, God begins to shape a people who will be holy, who will reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin God's instruction on how to live in right relationship with God and with one another. This entire passage (Exodus 20-31) is foundational to the biblical narrative, and there are at least three keys to understanding why this is so.

God's instruction

First, God's choosing and saving of Israel was never simply for their own sake but for the sake of the whole world. Looking back from Mount Sinai, the Israelites can remember God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). More than a thousand years later, Jesus would remind his disciples that they were to be the light to the world and not hide their light under a bushel basket (Matthew 5:14-16). But to be the light to the world, to be the ones through whom God would restore all creation, God's people had to grow in holiness. Their character had to reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin to show the Israelites what it means to love God and to love neighbor. The abstract commandment to love is made concrete by the Ten Commandments.

Second, God is going to dwell with his people; he will be present with them in a way that he is present nowhere else. But just how does a holy God live with an unholy people who remain very much the children of the rebellious and disobedient Adam?¹ As we saw above, in Exodus 25, God gives them instructions for building a tabernacle, a moveable shrine in which God will dwell. To reiterate, the Israelites didn't imagine that God could be contained in a tent, but they knew that God's presence would be with them in a way that he was not with other peoples. God would dwell with *them*! Imagine that God came to you and told you that he would live upstairs in your home. What a privilege; what a responsibility.

Third, God sets up a system of rituals, priests, sacrifices, and festivals so that the people can begin to learn that some things are holy and some are not. They must learn that the

¹We are all children of Adam in the sense that we are all sinful, failing to love fully God and our neighbor. It is the separation and estrangement created by "sin" that must be fixed by Jesus.

two do not mix. The priestly system teaches the people that God cannot be approached by a sinful and unholy people; though Aaron and his sons forgot this (see the Leviticus passage above). Thus, the entire priestly system, including the sacrifices, was meant to accomplish, after a fashion, the reconciliation of God and his people. But still, all the rituals, priests, and sacrifices were only signposts to the real thing; they could never be the “real thing” itself. That will await the arrival of God’s own son, Immanuel.

And so for hundreds of years the Israelites attended the large tent structure known as the Tabernacle, the place where God dwelt with his people. But more than a thousand years before Jesus, King David conquered Jerusalem, made it his capital and the eventual home of God’s temple, the tabernacle made permanent . . . or seemingly so.

Jerusalem

So about a millenium before Jesus, Solomon built and dedicated a permanent dwelling for God, a marble and bronze version of the moveable tabernacle. Within this temple, sat the ark with the tablets and the place where heaven and earth met.

But if we fast forward four hundred years to about 600BC, we find Jeremiah standing on the steps of the temple, calling it a den of thieves. The people have come to believe that they can ignore God’s command to love their neighbor so long as they wrap themselves in the majesty of the temple (Jeremiah 7:1-15). Even more foreboding is Ezekiel’s vision of God’s glory departing from the temple (Ezekiel 10). Not long after, in 587BC, the temple was burned to the ground and the ark of the covenant lost forever.

Our next stop is the rebuilding of the temple in the fifth-century BC, though it would only be a shadow of the temple Solomon had built. The people had no money, but more importantly, they had no ark and no tablets and no “mercy-seat.” They had refashioned a temple of sorts, but had God really returned? Could there be a meeting of heaven and earth without the mercy seat? After Jesus, the apostle Paul concluded that the answer was no, God did not return to a place of marble.

Finally, we move forward another few centuries to the time of Jesus, who, invoking the words and actions of Jeremiah, pronounced judgment on the temple (Mark 11:15-19). Despite the temple’s central role in the religious life of the Jews, it had again taken them away from God, not toward God. And as it was centuries before, the temple is destroyed; this time by the Romans in 70AD. It has never been rebuilt.

In the end, homes of cloth and marble could never really be a proper dwelling place for God; they could only point to the need for more. That more would be Jesus – God now face-to-face personally and physically present as God had never been before and has not been since. The glory of the incarnation – God made flesh – is that all could see God had stepped into time and history to put things right, to call his people home, and to bridge the gulf called sin. Advent is the time we ready ourselves for the astonishment called Christmas.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. I’m sure we’d all agree that no single building is God’s dwelling place, as the ancient Jews believed was the case with the temple. But still, most of us would agree that some buildings, such as our own sanctuary, have a sacredness that other buildings do not. Do you agree? What makes a building sacred? The purpose to which it is put? What difference does architecture make? What feeling do you have walking into some churches and not others?
2. The NT teaching on the church is clear. It is the body of Christ, the community of faith, the people of God, which the New Testament writers mean when they refer to the church (*ekklesia* in the Greek). They do not mean any buildings. Indeed, Paul refers to the church as God’s temple. What do you think he might mean? What kind of “home for God” do you think we make most of the time?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, 1 Chronicles 15:25-16:3 David brings the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Chronicles 17:16-27 David's prayer to God for his dynasty.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Chronicles 1:28-26 David prepares to build the temple, but he will not. His son, Solomon will built it.</p>	<p>Thursday, 2 Chronicles 5:2-6:11 Solomon dedicates the newly constructed temple in Jerusalem. It would stand for nearly 400 years.</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Chronicles 29:1-19 King Hezekiah orders the cleansing of the temple.</p>	<p>Saturday, 2 Chronicles 31:2-21 Hezekiah institutes reforms in the kingdom.</p>

