

The Tabernacle and OMC's 20th Building Anniversary

Exodus 25:1-9 by Patty Friesen (May 21/17)

Hymns 1 & 2, What is this place and In thy holy place

In our scripture today, God wants to live in a home, a physical dwelling and presence among the people. No longer will God live in a cloud that wanders about the wilderness. No longer will God live on Mount Sinai and occasionally visit the people through Moses and Aaron. God will come and dwell right among the people, right in the middle of their camp. God says, "It will not do to worship me on every hill and under every tree like the other nations worship their gods. I want a home among you and I want to be able to meet you there."

God wants to live in a tent like the people themselves but a very fancy tent that is separate from the people a bit. God is separating out a special place and special activities for worship. God is separating out a place and rituals that are different from the daily life in the people's tents. God is also separating out a special day of the week, the Sabbath, which is different from other workdays, a day for rest and reflection. The forms of divine worship are not a matter of human invention or effort. God is the architect and contractor of the Sabbath keeping, of worship and of the tabernacle itself.

God specifies that the tabernacle will be made of curtains that are seamless, so that the tabernacle may be one whole. The tabernacle itself reflects the oneness of God that is recited in Jewish worship, Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one. The elements in the tabernacle are made from the offerings of the people. They brought the best of what they had in gold jewelry, tapestries and metals. God gifted Ooliab and Bezalel to be

artists of the gold, silver and tapestries. Art in worship is to remind the people of the characteristics of God.

The ark of the covenant is a beautiful box with four angels on it that holds the 10 commandments, the jar of manna and Aaron's rod to remind the people of how God led them out of Egypt and provided food in the wilderness and gave them Torah to teach them the ways of God. The lampstand reminds them that God is their light and led them through their darkest night in the Passover and crossing the Red Sea. The table and bread remind them that God desires to eat and commune with them. The basin of water reminds them of their salvation through the Red Sea and God's provision of healing water in the wilderness and their need for purification and cleansing before coming to God. The altars and incense remind them of their need for repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

The worship of the golden calf comes in chapter 32, right in the middle of the instructions on the tabernacle and serves as a stark contrast to the worship of God in the tabernacle. Whereas the instructions on the tabernacle were precise and deliberate, the golden calf was thrown together hastily as a last minute idea to appease the mob. Whereas Aaron demanded the gold earrings to build the golden calf, the tabernacle was built on freewill offerings. Whereas Aaron invented the worship of the golden calf, God created worship through festivals of thanksgiving. Whereas worship of the calf was a big chaotic party of debauchery, worship in the tabernacle was orderly and silent. Whereas the calf would not hear their prayers, God promises to hear the prayers of the people.

God's move into the tabernacle is an important theological move. God no longer dwells on the mountain where Moses comes up to meet God. Instead, in the tabernacle,

God is literally moving in with the people, co-habiting as it were, sharing meals and bank accounts. God is moving from being an occasional presence to being an ongoing presence with the people. It's a big step of commitment on God's part. God chooses a place to live because God has entered into relationship with a people for whom place is important. If the people need a home in the promised land, then God too needs a home, a place for making meals and memories that will bind them together. The tabernacle provides the tangible place and the rituals provide the tangible actions for encountering God.

Spirituality writer Wendy Wright, says we Christians are now familiar with the metaphors of journey and wandering in the wilderness to describe our spiritual walk with God. And indeed the desert wanderings of the Israelites with their doubting and complaining and moving in and out of intimacy with God certainly have given us language and description for our own faith struggles. But Wendy Wright says what we lack as a Christian community is a language for the spiritual life that also speaks in terms of settled habitation. We need freedom to imagine ourselves not only as journeying in faith but also as dwelling in faith. We need not always enter new landscapes in order to grow in God. We can also cultivate a settled space and make it richer and more inhabited with meaning. (Sacred Dwelling, p. 12)

We cultivate settled space by living in a house for years that we have renovated and decorated to meet our needs. We cultivate space inhabited with meaning when we worship in a church building for years that over time holds memories within its walls and we are nurtured within its art and design. Twenty years ago, the congregation was outgrowing the old church and needed accessible space for Tena Kruger in her

wheelchair. It was a difficult and controversial decision because the old church was settled space inhabited by deep meaning for the first generations, who were ready to move out of worshipping in homes to their own building. They built it during the dry farming years of the Dirty Thirties and it had held many worship services, baptisms, weddings and funerals. It was hard to imagine a new building that could mean as much.

But the building committee met with donors and architects and began to imagine a building all on one level with the sanctuary at the center with acoustic design for the heart of Mennonite worship in singing. Around the center of the sanctuary would be Sunday School rooms to the west and a fellowship hall to the east with a well designed kitchen. It was built during dry farming years and paid for in 3 years by the vision and generosity of the congregation. Over the last 20 years, this building has become settled with memories of joyful and sad occasions in our lives. Just after it was built, Judy McKinnell passed away and hers was the first funeral in this space – 600 people and the piano was donated in her memory.

It is a place of memory that people from town come to Christmas Eve services for, even if it's the only service they ever come for. It is a place of memory for those who have moved away to come back to for weddings and funerals. We have envisioned more use of our building for community need and that will happen naturally as people look for a place for their rituals of marriage and death.

Sometimes we worry that the gift of this building may become a bit of a burden to maintain in the future. As it ages, it will require more resources. As we celebrate our 90th anniversary next October, we may want to envision an OMC Heritage Fund that helps cover future maintenance needs. But an OMC Heritage Fund may also help cover

financial aid for students who will be the human maintenance of our future church. Do we even need a building to be church together?

In Exodus, the people need a physical, centrally located space for worship in the tabernacle. The tabernacle provides stability and assurance of divine presence in the midst of the wilderness. The tabernacle provides a fixed place to meet God but it is important to remember that it is not a permanent place. God will not be confined merely to a single space. It is a place to meet God but it does not confine God. The tabernacle is not holy in itself but is holy because God meets the people there. At one point, Israel takes the ark of the covenant into battle, believing that it contained God and therefore would help them win the battle. They found out that God had left the ark and had left them. The divine presence is not to be presumed upon. God dwells entirely on the divine initiative. The divine glory fills the tabernacle in God's own time. God is both near and yet far, present and yet separate, accessible, yet holy.

Let us give thanks for God's dwelling with us as a congregation for these last 89 years and with us in this building for the last 20 years. I'd like to open this time for sharing of favourite memories of this building and then we will close with a prayer and a song. Sharing...

God of sacred spaces, thank you for the gift of this space these past 20 years. Thank for all the special important events that happened here, all the funerals, all the weddings, all the baptisms, all the concerts, church conferences and all the Christmas Eve services. Thank you for all the ordinary events that have happened here too, the Sunday after Sunday worship services that have sustained us these past 20 years. Continue to meet us in this place every time we come here seeking You. Amen.