

Put a Ring on It

Sermon for Shakin' and Bakin' Western Jurisdiction Disaster Training

Scripture: Exodus 25: 1-16

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Doubletree Hotel – Ontario, CA

Rev. Jan Wiley

East District Superintendent

California – Pacific Conference

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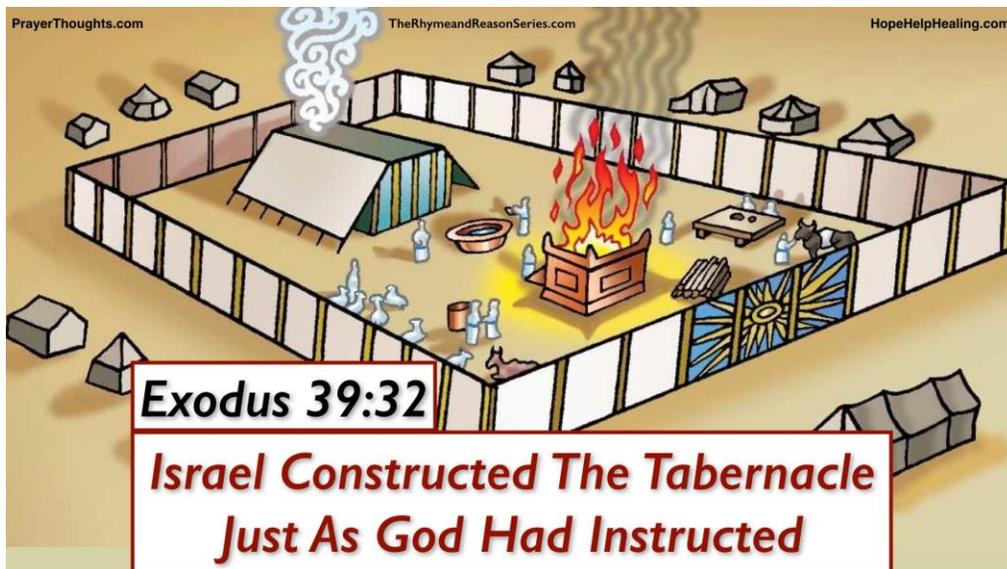
Offerings for the Tabernacle & the Ark of the Covenant 1The LORD said to Moses: 2 Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me. 3 This is the offering that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, 4 blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine linen, goats' hair, 5 tanned rams' skins, fine leather, acacia wood, 6 oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, 7 onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and for the breast piece. 8 And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them. 9 In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

10 They shall make an ark of acacia wood; it shall be two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. 11 You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside you shall overlay it, and you shall make a molding of gold upon it all around. 12 You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side. 13 You shall make poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold. 14 And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, by which to carry the ark. 15 The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. 16 You shall put into the ark the covenant that I shall give you.

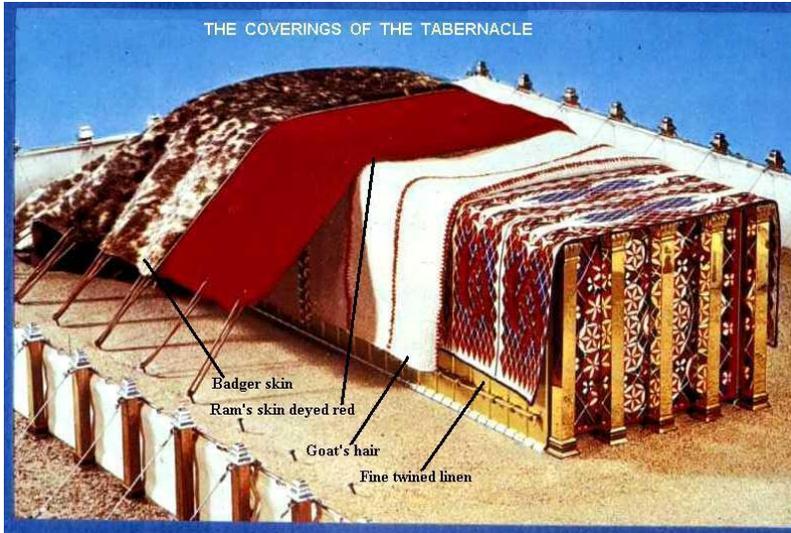
Put a Ring on It

Have you ever stayed up late on Christmas Eve trying to put your kid's new bicycle together? "Screw pedal in frame part C clockwise while holding part B in place. Be careful not to strip the screws while turning." Reading assembly instructions is tough work! You invariably end up with two screws left over and wonder if your kid's new bike is going to fall apart on their first ride out the driveway.

So then imagine what it was like for the Israelites to get instructions from God about how to build a moveable tabernacle. Because God tells them exactly what they are to do – it is the Bible's first instruction manual.

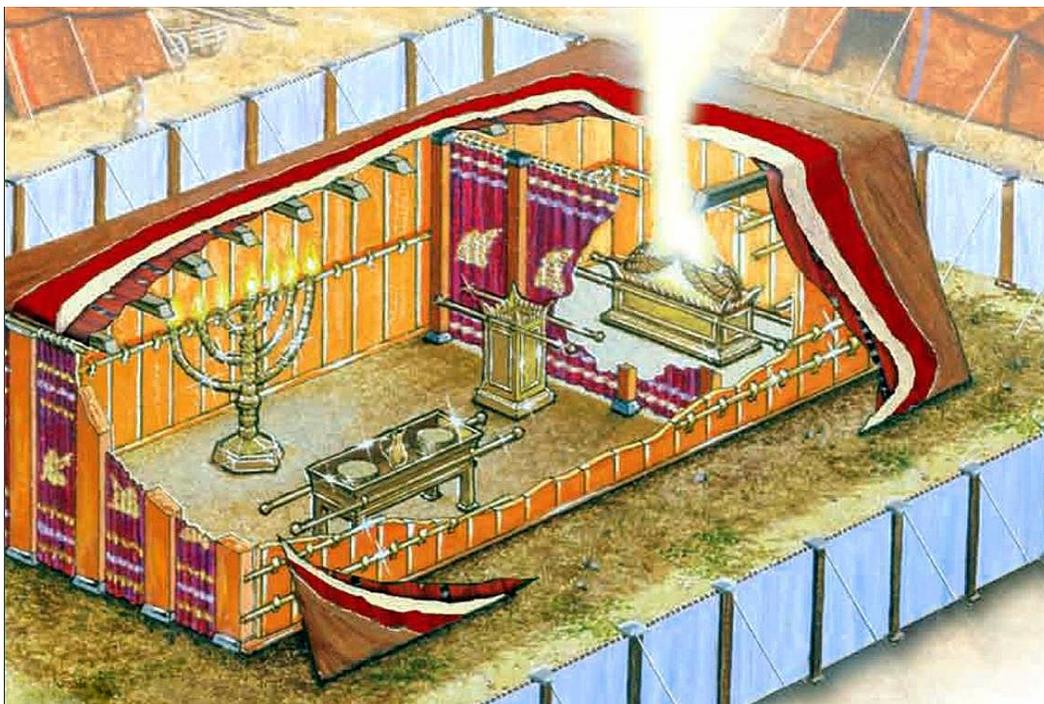


You can see in diagram what the scripture describes in both Exodus 25 and then in chapter 39. It creates an area set apart with poles and fabric which creates a perimeter. The entry would be where the yellow sun is against the blue background. When you enter you see the area where the animals would be prepared for sacrifice and the fire. Then a ritual washing place and then you enter the actual tabernacle with white slanted side and white smoke coming from it.



Now you can see a different vision of the tabernacle or sanctuary itself with the special animal skin coverings described in today's reading on the outside that were layered to provide protection from sun and rain for this sacred gathering space. Everything was to be done as God instructed.

This is what the inside might have been like.



On the right, the light, which emanates from the Ark of the Covenant, holds the most sacred things. Now we see a closer look.



You're probably still wondering why I chose this scripture. And here's why. The Ark of the Covenant, once it was made, was not to be touched with human hands but it was to be carried from place to place. How could they accomplish that?

They put a ring on it – in fact they put four rings on it, attached to the upper legs of the ark and then slid poles through the rings so the ark could be portable. It was beautiful. And it was sacred.

And of course I have to show you how it was portrayed in the 1981 movie Raiders of the Lost Ark.



The actor on the right is, of course, Harrison Ford, who is trying to outwit Nazis who are also searching for the Ark. It is believed to contain the Ten Commandments, which in this movie, Hitler believes will make his army invincible.

Now you may not see the resemblance in the next picture I show . . .



but the portable Ark reminded me of the UMCOR Trailers that travel from place to place all across this country to respond to disaster needs of all God's people. The trailer doesn't have rings – but it has wheels for the same purpose.

In its own strange way, I believe the trailer with its United Methodist cross and flame represents the presence of God in the communities through which it travels and where it locates itself in the midst of communities devastated by disaster.

Not because it exactly matches the ark in Exodus but because it symbolizes God-on-the-move. The UMCOR trailers allow teams of Spirit-filled, God-sent, kinda crazy people of faith to be in ministry. It allows the teams to live into their mission, their calling from Jesus, carrying tools or offering showers and the ability to wash their clothes.

In Matthew's Gospel, chapter 22:36 the disciples ask Jesus,

³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

And those that embark on Disaster Response or as Volunteers in Mission, RVer's in Mission, Nomads in Mission are living out Jesus' commandments as they roll down the highways and then plant themselves in a community to "love their neighbor."



There is something important about remembering that we have been a travelling, journeying people of faith. For many years the Israelites wandered in the desert. They moved from place to place and they knew that God was with them (even though at times they grumbled).

Even in Jesus time, Jesus moved from place to place and never stayed too long in one location. And Paul travelled even further abroad spreading the Gospel and planting new churches – making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

In our day, we have become not only planted in our churches but rooted to that spot. We have gotten perhaps too tied to the visual image of our sanctuary, the stained glass windows, the communion table, and the pew in which we always sit in the same place. If someone new comes on a Sunday morning and sits in Bessie's pew, she might even ask them to move because they are in her seat! Some of our folks grumble if they have to move one pew forward or backward. Imagine how they would handle the moving tabernacle in the wilderness! We often have brass nameplates to mark a special gift and everything is locked - seemingly forever. We have tied God to our sanctuaries.

Last summer we had a lot of brush fires in Southern California. I remember three here in the East District where I am Superintendent. I remember most vividly paying careful attention to the fire up near Wrightwood, one of the two mountain churches I supervise and resource.

But I kept in touch with the pastor and with the manager of our Cal-Pac Camp Wrightwood just up the hill from the church. And the fire drew ever closer. The pastor called me on the third day of the fire when they called for mandatory evacuations of Wrightwood. Pastor Dave said everyone in the congregation had

a way to get down the mountain. He said he and hi wife had loaded up the car with stuff from their house and we stopping for a few minutes at the church before heading down to a friends' house in Hesperia.

Then Pastor Dave said, "Jan, is there anything I should take from the church?" I'd never been asked that question before. I said, "Well, the computer brain from the office if it has important stuff and maybe insurance papers."

And then I said, "Pastor Dave, I would go into the sanctuary and choose something important and recognizable from your worship life -the candlesticks or the church bible, a portable cross or the communion chalice and paten. Whatever you can fit in the car which would be a tangible reminder to your congregation of the ongoing love of God and God's presence among you. In the tragic event that you lose your sanctuary, it would be good to have a symbol of God's presence with you as the congregation regroupes."

Pastor Dave thought that was a great idea. The blessing was that the next day or so the fire was turned back from two different directions and the church and the camp and most of Wrightwood was saved by the incredible work of first responders on the ground and in the air. I don't think I ever heard what he took with him, but I love the mystery of imagining what it was.

But the fires made me think how important it is to remember that as special as our buildings are, even if we were to lose them, we do not lose God and God never loses us.

Those of you who have done disaster response teams know the depth of pain and grief when people lose their home or it is badly damaged and all their worldly items are gone. It is devastating. But then slowly, they begin to recover, to have hope, to rebuild their lives.

We would go through that same process if we lost our church sanctuaries. Yet we have to be able to put a ring on our faith so that it can travel with us, no matter the circumstances. And we have to be able to move, and dare I say, let go of our fixation on our buildings.

In a larger context as a District Superintendent, I am so aware of the burden that many of our buildings have become as they have aged and as we have aged. In recent decades most of our congregations have decreased in size and the buildings are sometimes more than we can maintain or afford. And yet, we are so tied to our buildings and their memories....

It's where we were married
It is the place our kids were baptized
Where our parents' memorial services were held
Oh, and we have our pew.

We forget we too are on a journey.
We need to be willing to go where God leads us.
It may be with a disaster response team, a short term volunteer in mission team.
I've done both and it is life changing and wonderful.
But maybe the lessons we have learned on those journeys will also help us to
move our home congregations to invest more fully in our own neighborhood just
outside our sanctuaries.

Or maybe to even envision that God could have a radically different plan for our
lives or the life of our congregation if we put the poles back through the rings and
carried to our neighborhood the word of God, the heart of compassion, the
proclamation of hope, the passion to push back injustice, and the laughter of joy.

If we truly followed God, we might even be willing to sell the church property and
find something that works for today so that our resources are used not to
maintain outdated buildings but to be about transforming lives. Or we might
understand that in some of our very small congregations that have dwindled
down to 11 people in worship, it may be time to close that congregation and let
the building go fallow for a while. Then do a restart with all new people to meet
the needs of the community as it is today, not as it was decades ago.

We are a journeying people. We need to put the poles through the rings and be
ready to follow whenever and wherever God leads us!

In closing, let me share the words to a now familiar hymn. Written in 1985 by
United Methodist pastor Julian Rush it is entitled, In the Midst of New
Dimensions. Buried within it, I hear the call to put a ring on our faith, and be
ready to move to follow God.

♪♪ In the midst of new dimensions, in the face of changing ways. Who will lead
the pilgrim peoples wandering in their separate ways?
God of rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagles soar,
We your people, ours the journey, now and ever,
now and ever, now and ever more. ♪♪