

God With Us | The Tabernacle and the Advent

The Axis Mundi (or Christmas, Easter and Beyond!)

Exodus 25; John 20.12; Revelation 21.3

Week Five

12.24.15 (Christmas Eve)

Exodus 25 "You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and one and a half cubits wide. ¹⁸ "You shall make two cherubim of gold; make them of hammered work at the two ends of the mercy seat. ¹⁹ "Make one cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim *of one piece* with the mercy seat at its two ends. ²⁰ "The cherubim shall have *their* wings spread upward, covering the mercy seat with their wings and facing one another; the faces of the cherubim are to be *turned* toward the mercy seat. ²¹ "You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony which I will give to you. ²² "There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel.

John 20 But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; ¹² and she beheld two angels in white sitting, one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. ¹³ And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around, and beheld Jesus standing *there*, and did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher).

Revelation 21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer *any* sea. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them

Over the last four weeks, here at St. Andrews, on Sunday mornings we've been looking at how John the Apostle wrote his account of the life of Jesus Christ.

He was really fixated on the fact that he was an eyewitness...he uses this kind of forensic and legal evidentiary language in his writings. When it comes to the birth of Jesus Christ, John doesn't go the way of Matthew and Luke – he doesn't give us those images we love and that have sometimes...sometimes...become sentimentalized – the manger, the shepherds and angels and the Magi... John is more interested in the "WHY?" of these events.

John wants his readers to see the significance and meaning of these facts (not that he doesn't

CARE about the facts – HE DOES! – He’s an eyewitness and he wants the reader to know that!) but what do the events MEAN?...why did they happen? What do they mean for the human race and HOW DO THEY FURTHER GOD’S PURPOSES for planet earth?

And John saw that in the Baby of Bethlehem God came into the world ... that God came among us in a unique way... God came (so to speak) where we could get our hands on Him (1 John 1.1-3). The infinite, eternal, unchangeable Spirit became...localized.

And to help us get a grip on that (or that IT would get a grip on US!) John uses a phase in the development of the Hebrew Church. When the Israelites we’re set free from generations of slavery in Egypt and they were journeying toward the Promised Land...and THEY were commanded to construct a dwelling for God, a portable sanctuary where they could relate to God... the Tabernacle ...

John saw that the ancient Tabernacle from 1500BC was telling a story that Jesus Christ, the final and PERFECT Tabernacle would fulfill. The furnishings of the Tabernacle said something about Jesus Christ...and as theologian Warren Gage helped us see...John sort of walks us through that ancient worship space...and beginning with the words, “The word became flesh and ‘tabernacled’ among us...” And from that intro... we imagine the furnishings of the Mosaic Sanctuary...the features and furnishings are pointing to Jesus Christ. We’ve been moving back and forth between the Exodus Tabernacle and the Gospel According to John.

So, we imagine the Altar of sacrifice when John the Baptist points to Jesus and says, “Behold the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world...” When at the Wedding in Cana and Jesus Christ turns all that ceremonial wash water into wine – our frustrating obligation to make and keep ourselves clean becomes joy... 150 gallons of wine...really good wine...AND we think of the Washroom in the ancient Tabernacle...it was pointing to Jesus.

The Table of Bread in the Tabernacle comes to mind when we hear Jesus say, “I am the Bread of Life...the True Bread that gives life” ...Another furnishing, the Dining Room Table was pointing to Jesus Christ!

And we think of the ancient Menorah/Lampstand... that 7 Branch Tree that was always glowing...speaking that God was always home...the light was always ON! God dwelling at the Center of His people and again we hear Jesus say, “I am the Light of the world...” who gives sight to the blind...and BLINDS the ones who THINK they see (John 8-9).

And pressing IN to the inner chambers of that ancient dwelling of God...we come to the Altar of Incense...a potent symbol for PRAYER...and then...in the depths of John’s account we hear Jesus Christ...the final and perfect High Priest offering His prayers...like costliest incense floating before the Father’s throne...and Jesus Christ is praying for US...and for everyone who believes in every age and in every nation.

And finally we come from start to finish...from Birth – the Mind/Heart of God Tabernacles among us... “the Word became flesh and dwelled among us...(1.14) to the end of John’s account... and as we come to the deepest interior of the ancient Tabernacle to the end of John’s Gospel and ... the FORMER is realized I n the later.

In the former, the ancient Tabernacle, Moses was commanded to make a chest, a box or ark that would be the last piece of furniture ...the only furnishing in the Holiest Place...the Ark of the Covenant. Inside, three articles: the Rod of Judgment against Egypt, the Testimony (i.e. their marriage vows with YHWH), the Ten Commandments and a jar or manna.

The top would be called the Cover of Atonement or Mercy Seat...not a seat...not a throne...more a lid but of pure gold ...it means covering...kippur in Hebrew (as in Yom Kippur – Day of Covering or Day of Atonement). It covers the broken marriage vows...the commandments contained under the cover ...a stage or platform of mercy triumphing over judgment. It would be sprinkled with blood on the Day of Atonement...symbolizing that the animal was being sacrificially substituted for the people...the sacrificial victim gets the Rod of Justice...and the worshiper gets mercy... God speaks to the worshiper on the basis of ...from the platform/foundation/stage of mercy.

On both ends of this gold cover, sculpted angels...facing one another...facing the atonement and the mercy of God...and the presence of God...the dwelling of God in the heart of the tabernacle (“the Axis Mundi –Center of the World”)...with wings stretched toward the center...with eyes turned down... “cherubim, with sleepless eye, veil their faces to the presence...” They face a hollow space because THIS God cannot be depicted like the idols of the nations...a space representing His infinite Presence.

And at the end of John’s Gospel...moving from Christmas to Easter...we are taken into the deepest and holiest place. A woman looks into the tomb...a kind of mausoleum or vault carved into a cliff...She is a defiled woman. She was once possessed by seven unclean spirits (the number SEVEN being important – a completely defiled woman!). Men have looked into that tomb and found NOT a crime scene...not a tomb ransacked by grave-robbers ...but the wrappings where they were...as if the Body just came right through them...the facial cloth neatly folded and laid to the side (no evidence of vandalism or haste or theft)... and those men walked away one believing that something had happened...but both wondering what it all meant (20.8-9)... they went back home.

And then this once defiled woman...is left there weeping when she herself enters the tomb...and there on the bench/shelf where she expected to see the body...instead...a sight that looks a lot like the Ark of the Covenant...angels at the head and foot...and in the center...atonement has been made... the bloody wrappings are there...but the Sacrifice itself is NOT...He, the Lamb of God, the sacrifice for sin is accepted... ATONEMENT is made...

A seven-fold defiled woman is the one who got to go into the Holiest of Holies...she has seen the mercy of God...she has been infinitely privileged to see the sins of all God's people are done away... "Why are you weeping?" the angels ask...and are they pointing to the open space...where He, the True Dwelling of God was? Mercy has left His seat and gone OUT into the world!

And just then...she sees One she thinks is the Gardener...because she is IN a garden (19.41) and she thinks that this is the Gardener (and little does she know, it really IS the Gardener...it's the last Adam...in the New Garden...come to cultivate the whole world and turn it all back to Eden where God dwells with His people forever...)

And she asks this Gardener...where have you put Him?...and He says her name, "Miriam" He says...and she at once recognizes Him...and says, "My Teacher"

And what it all means...what John wants us to see is that THIS is the great culmination of the Mercy of God...He came among us...He pitched His tent...He dwelled...He stayed...the Glory has departed from our religious efforts (1 Sam 4.21) but on Him the glory dwells...shekinah...remains.

Through Jesus Christ we have the ONE SOURCE of atonement...a way for your guilt to be taken away...He takes defiled people (like this seven-fold lunatic) and He ushers her right in to the Holy of Holies...if there is hope for her...there is hope for YOU.

Christmas is heart-warming...and the shepherds and wise-men...but it's also heart-rending...there is a way for the guilty and defiled...people like you and ME...there is a way for us to be freed from our guilt...but for that to happen...God must come...He must be born like we were born...must live the life we failed to live (keep all the Commands that we have not kept) then must take the Rod of Judgment I deserved...then must rise...leaving the Mercy Seat stained with blood...and His sacrifice acceptable.

In Christmas it begins...at Easter it is finished...and in the end...God because Jesus Christ came and atoned for his people...in the end the great purpose of history will be realized...God will once and for ever DWELL...Tabernacle among His people...without barriers and in perfect intimacy...

He holds out the gift to YOU...even tonight...don't leave it under the Tree...unwrap it...take it for yourself...give Him your past, present and future... believe.

We are going to give you some time to think, now...to reflect and pray and respond to God. If you would like to give, we'd welcome that but MORE IMPORTANT is that you prayerfully

consider God and the Gift of Mercy and newness that can actually begin...the moment you get thirsty enough to believe. (As the USHERS come...I'll pray)