

February 16, 2005
Midweek Lent Service 1
Exodus 40:17, 20-30, 33-35
Pastor Ott

We See Jesus Bringing Us Into God's Presence

Have you ever seen the movie, "Raiders of the Lost Ark"--a Steven Spielberg film? Harrison Ford is an archeologist searching for the Ark of the Covenant that I just read to you about in Exodus. If you have seen that movie, don't rely on it as your source of knowledge about the Ark of the Covenant. There is a lot of silly stuff in there--a lot of things that aren't really true about the Ark of the Covenant. In fact, at one point in the movie Harrison Ford talked about one of the bad archeologists that was looking for the Ark of the Covenant and this bad guy described it as a radio for speaking to God. At that point, Harrison Ford replied to the bad guy, "So you want to talk to God?", as he started to pull out his gun and threaten the bad guy. Of course, the implication is the only way we can talk to God or see God or come into His presence is at death.

Most people today don't expect to talk to God as they go through this life. Our society generally accepts that if you ever get to meet God at all, it is going to be after you die.

But is that the case? How can we come into God's presence as we talk about God this evening? In reality, as you look at these words from Exodus Chapter 40 and look at what God set up for the Israelites in the tabernacle, you can see he was teaching them something about coming into His presence. And as you and I look back at what God said about the tabernacle, as we peer into these shadows of this ancient edifice, as we look at it more and more closely, we see what God is really teaching the Israelites about how to come into God's presence. He is teaching something to us about Jesus. As we look into these shadows, as we peer into it, the picture gets more and more full and we see more and more details about Jesus. We see Jesus and this evening we see Jesus as we look at the tabernacle bringing us into God's presence.

As we consider that tonight, one of the things we see is that God's presence is near—it is right among His people--both then and now. But the other thing that we see, just as at the time of Moses and at the time of Jesus on the earth and our time today, although God's presence is near, His presence is also hidden. Both of these truths teach us something about our Savior.

Last year during the campaigns, the candidates, the President and Senator Kerry, both made numerous stops in our area. Did you ever get caught up behind one of those appearances? Did the route you were going to take, let's say in Appleton, cut you off because the President was going to be driving down it with his motorcade and all these cars and all these flashing lights? You might not have been right next to him and shaking his hand, but the one thing that all of that security said to you was, the President is near. It was something that was obvious. You knew it even if you couldn't see him.

In much the same way, that is what the tabernacle was for the Israelites. It was to say that God is near. God lives among us. God is with us. He is not a distant God, but He is a God that causes His presence to dwell among His people. To teach this, to teach how close He was, God caused His presence to be incorporated into the temple in a couple of ways.

First of all, we are told Moses took the testimony and placed it in the Ark, attached the poles to the Ark and put the atonement cover on it. The Ark of the Covenant was a wooden box that was covered completely in gold. Poles were attached to it so that no one would ever touch it. So that they would grab the poles to carry it when the Israelites would move from place to place and then set up the tabernacle. It was covered completely in gold, but the cover that was on it, the atonement cover or the mercy seat as it was translated in the KJV, was made of solid gold. And this also had angels that had their wings outspread over it. And inside of the Ark it says was the testimony. This wasn't a deposition. This was the law that God had given to Moses—the tablets. Not the one God had carved because Moses had broken that--the one that God had Moses carve into stone. It was the testimony that was put in there. That Ark of the Covenant, we are told at different times through the books of Moses, God caused His glory to appear above the Ark of the Covenant. God's voice would speak to Moses from above the Ark of the Covenant. God's people were conditioned to see that God caused His glory to dwell over the Ark of the Covenant there in the tabernacle that was in the middle of their encampment as they wandered in the wilderness.

God also caused His presence to be in the tabernacle in another way. Moses also told us—*“then the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled upon it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.”* The glory of the Lord as it is depicted in Moses' books is a dense cloud of smoke and fire. It was there to show His people that it didn't appear to the people very often, but at this time it was seen. It was there to show God's people that He wasn't a God that was far off, but that He was real. He was not a carved idol. He was a real living presence that moved and that dwelled there in the tabernacle.

Of course, God doesn't dwell just in one spot. Even when Solomon dedicated the temple later that was the permanent place of worship of God instead of the tabernacle, at that time Solomon even said, *“But will God really dwell on earth?” The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!”* We know God is everywhere at all times—no place could hold him. That is what He says. But God caused His presence to dwell in a way that the Israelites would be conditioned to see it and conditioned to think of it as being there—that He was near—that He was among them.

The same is true for us. God teaches us to know that He is near us, that He is among us. He caused His son to become one of us—to walk on the face of the earth to face all the things that you and I face, except to do it without sin. He is near to us yet today. He doesn't come and talk to us in a big cloud over the top of our altar. He comes and He talks to us through the Word. He comes to us through a splash of water and that Word connected with that water to wash our sins away. He comes to us in bread and wine—

in His very body and blood to wash away our sins. Our God is very near to us wanting to talk to us at all times, in every day. Not just inside of a worship service.

Even though our God is that near to us, think of how often we find other things to do. Think of how often we can fill our time with other things so that we don't have the time to gather as a family around our family altar and have home devotions. So that we don't have time to pick up scripture and read it on our own, because we've got other things to do. We act as though the nearness of God is no big thing at times. You and I know we do this. We take it for granted. At times we even find ourselves sitting in church thinking as the Word is being proclaimed, "What have I got to get done later today?" Or "What do I have to do tonight?" "What do I have to do tomorrow?" Pretty soon, we recognize that we didn't hear a thing that was said in that reading or in that part of the sermon. God was near to us as we worshipped, but we were thinking about something else.

God is near. When we realize how often we neglect that truth, how often we despise His Word, how often we let other things crowd it out, then the truth that God is near might send a shiver down our spine that God is near and He knows what I am doing and He doesn't like it. But you and I know that because of that cross and because of Jesus' perfect life while He was near and on this earth, our sins have been taken away. Because of that, when He says, "*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ*", we don't have to be told over and over—we want to because He has forgiven us and He has taken away these sins. It is not a have to—it's because I want to get to know my God better. Any God that loves me like this and loves me in spite of myself and who I am and what I am, why wouldn't I want to get to know Him better?

The tabernacle held the real presence of God. It wasn't just symbolic. God was really there. But God was also teaching something as His presence was hidden from the Israelites. They didn't see His full glory. They couldn't enter into the most holy place any time of the year because they wanted to see what the glory of the Lord looked like. The tabernacle also taught something by hiding the presence of God.

You could almost think of the whole tabernacle complex, the courtyard and the two other rooms, as three circles. You had to go through one to get closer to the other to get to where God's presence was hidden. The courtyard was a curtain going around a large area. There was gate. And not anyone could walk into the gate. If you were ceremonially unclean, you couldn't go in. You had to wait until the time of cleansing was over. If you were not of the children of Israel, you couldn't go into the court of meeting. And then, even after you were inside that first circle, the next one was in the two rooms that were there—behind that big altar and behind the water basin—then there was another curtain, another entrance, another gate you went through to get into the Holy Place. On one side there were the seven candles on the seven candlesticks. On the other side there was the table with the twelve loaves of bread—the twelve tribes of Israel—that God was there among the twelve tribes of Israel. As you came in the door, right in front of you was an altar of incense where incense would be offered to the Lord--the incense and the candlesticks depicting the praise of God's people. But you couldn't just walk in there. Even if you could get into the courtyard, only priests could go

in and only certain priests at certain times could go in there to light the candles, to place the bread, to offer the incense.

The third gate, the third courtyard, the third curtain to go behind, was the thick curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place—where the Ark of the Covenant and the testimony was—where God caused His glory to dwell. And only once a year when this edifice was set up could anyone go in there. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would go in. He would go in first of all with the blood of a bull to atone for his own sins. But before he went in, he had to burn incense so that the incense would cover the mercy seat. Otherwise, it says in Exodus, he would die if he didn't do this because he would be looking upon the glory of the Lord. Then as he went in, he went in with the blood of the bull for his own sins and then the blood of the goat. He would be sprinkling blood on all of this gold that was there to atone for the sins of the people. Only once a year could he go in, and he could never go in without blood.

God's presence was there, but it was hidden. They knew it was there, they were conditioned to know that it was there, but it was hidden from them. Only one person could even approach it, and that was only with blood. Why did God hide His presence? What was He teaching them? He was teaching them that the way to heaven was closed to people because of their sin. The only way to approach God was how God said it had to be done. The people could not do it on their own. And God said it had to be done with the shedding of blood.

Sin separates us from God. As a child, did you ever have to take the garbage out? Was that one of your tasks? Maybe you didn't like it that much because when you lifted the garbage can lid up, maybe it smelled bad. But also, maybe at times there were some maggots or other bugs crawling around there that just sent a shiver down your spine as you looked down at that. It made you throw it in quick and cover it up quick and get away before one of them got out on you. When God looks at us, he sees beyond our pretty facade. He lifts the lid off of us and he sees our thoughts, our words and our actions. He sees the maggots of sin crawling around, which is us. That is what God sees. That's how God views sin to us. That's what hides God's face from us.

But here is the incredible thing about our God. Even though He knows our sins, even though He knows the sins that you and I commit—and think about it, you and I would sit here and say, “Okay, I have sinned, but it's not really like I've ever done anything that deserves to be put in jail for. I've never killed anyone. I've never murdered anyone.” And then when I see things like this on TV or on the news, do you ever see that and think to yourself, “I would never do anything like that.” “I would never leave my child in a window-rolled-up car in the middle of summer.” “I would never kill anyone.” Well whenever those thoughts start coming into your head or into my head, it is really a reminder of just how far sin has got control over us, because that is sinful pride. The truth of the matter is what sin makes of you and I are people who are capable of any horrific thing. If we think we would never do that, it is sinful pride. We are kidding ourselves. We are sinners, and we are capable of any sin within us. It is a very true statement “There by the grace of God go I.”

That is why God has to be hidden from us--because as sinners, we could never stand in the presence of His holiness. But this is the incredible thing about our God. All the maggots of sin that He sees on you and I, He took all of them and dumped them on Jesus as though He were that kind of sinner. He pours out His wrath on Him and hides Himself from Him so that Jesus has to cry out on the cross, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" The Father hid Himself from the Son because of your sin and my sin.

Now God says to us, we are forgiven. How do we know that? How do we know the payment was enough? Do you remember what happened when Jesus died? After He cried out, "*It is finished.*" Do you remember what happened? There was the earthquake, tombs opened, dead people came out, the centurion said, "*Surely this man was the Son of God.*" But do you remember what else happened? That curtain that divided the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place in the temple was ripped in two from top to bottom to show us that God is not hidden from us in the sense that our sins separate us. Jesus' life and death paid for all sin. That barrier has been removed. You and I can come into God's presence now. Yes, His presence is still hidden from us because we are in a sinful world, but we come into His presence and we know we are there because His spirit shows us this truth. And now we come and we receive His very body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Now we don't have a big curtain separating you from the symbol of the presence of God here in the front of the church—the altar. That barrier has been removed by Jesus Christ. The fact that you can walk up to the altar, the fact that you can come up to it and look at it and all the symbolism, is a reminder that we can approach God. We can come into the presence of God.

Indiana Jones was right. We don't see God right now—He is hidden from us, but His presence is very near to us. It isn't hovering above the altar in a cloud, but it is here in His Word, it is here in His Sacraments, and it is here with the message that He loves us. It is here with a message that reminds us that there are people that are still living hidden from the love of God. They don't know Jesus. And we who have had our sins removed have the privilege to reveal that God is near to those who are still living in the darkness of their sin.