

August 4th: Tent

Welcome to another meditation, my traveling companions. We've been on a new journey together—our summer sermon series titled “Dis[place]d: Finding Home Together.” This series is meant to be a sojourn into the biblical story, and a tool to help each of us identify the displacement in our own lives, so that we might find comfort in God's promise of a future home.

When Pastor Heather introduced this topic, she defined this concept of displacement for us, saying that to displace something is to remove it from its usual or proper place, and this can apply to both tangible things like individuals and intangible things like emotions. Displacement can be temporary or permanent, but often the same underlying feelings apply to this sense of disorientation and confusion. So if you are with us this morning and identify with any of those feelings, or are going through an experience of displacement in your life, we invite you to enter into this time of meditation with an openness to God's presence and the peace that is waiting for you in this place.

In June and July, we focused on examples of involuntary and voluntary displacement—and now we turn to passages that will give us insight into what it looks like to find home together in the midst of those displacements. So as we enter this final stage of our journey, we'll be attuned to these experiences of home and what it can feel like to build that sense of community wherever we are. Let's pray together before we begin.

God of the wilderness, on our many journeys we enter into inhospitable places and environments that test our ability to keep going. We encounter rough terrain and landscapes of emptiness, and we struggle to find a way forward. Still, you call us to remember your promises to us. Still, you invite us into holy spaces. Still, you dwell with us. As we gather in this place, may your presence and your peace rest upon us. As we enter into a time of meditation, may your eternal love flow through us, as it has flowed through every generation of your faithful people. Amen.

Today's passage takes us back to our Old Testament of our Bible, to a time and place far removed from the world of the first century church that we looked at last week. This story comes from the beginning of our history as a people of faith—the beginning of our common worship of God and the identity of God's people. The Book of Exodus is the second book in our Bible, and it is perhaps best known for the story of Moses—the leader who was filled with God's spirit and was able to liberate the Israelites from their slavery in the land of Egypt. But there's a lot more that happens—especially once the Israelites are left to their own devices on the way to the Promised Land.

It is commonly said that due to the Israelites' lack of faith, they were unable to reach the Promised Land for forty years—they spent four decades wandering around in the wilderness for a journey that GoogleMaps estimates would take about seven days of solid walking. Of course, our roads are much better now, and there's signs telling you which way to go, but our spiritual ancestors spent generations in a geographic area that they could have navigated within a few weeks or a month at most if the caravans of livestock were slowing them down.

In biblical times, forty years is often a metaphor—not a strict unit of time. The same applies to stories that mention a period of forty days—it's a reference point for an inexact measurement meant to symbolize hardship and suffering. So in the case of our Israelites wandering in the desert—their journey of forty years is supposed to convey to us that these people spent a long, LONG time away from any sort of permanent home. They no longer belonged in Egypt as slaves, but they hadn't reached their new home yet—so they were in this kind of physical and emotional limbo that must have permeated their daily routines and experiences. It must have been very difficult to wake up day after day, year after year, in the same tents, with the same manna to eat, with the same people who probably were driving you crazy since you crossed the Red Sea. So while they are in the wilderness, God gives them some instructions for how to carry a little piece of home with them—a place where God himself will come

to be with them as they travel in the right direction. This temporary home will be their comfort until they've reached their final destination.

Our text for this morning, from Exodus chapter 26, comes after the Israelites have visited Mount Sinai and received the Ten Commandments—their new governing rules for living as liberated people. These tablets are their new holy items—the things that remind them who they are and who they serve—so they need a special place to be stored. And so this passage from verses 30-37 introduces a place called the Tabernacle—and gives God's vision for how it is to be constructed and decorated. First, God describes the main fabric for the Tabernacle—a tent of cloth. He says, "Make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim woven into it by a skilled worker. 32 Hang it with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases."

You can already tell that God is big on the details—down to the colors and metals of the tent.

Next, he gives some instructions for dividing the space—he tells the Israelites, "Hang the curtain from the clasps and place the ark of the covenant law behind the curtain. The curtain will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Put the atonement cover on the ark of the covenant law in the Most Holy Place. Place the table outside the curtain on the north side of the tabernacle and put the lampstand opposite it on the south side."

And finally God describes the entrance to the Tabernacle, he specifies, "For the entrance to the tent make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen—the work of an embroiderer. Make gold hooks for this curtain and five posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold. And cast five bronze bases for them."

Now, I'm not a camping girly, so tents aren't normally my thing—but this sounds like God's idea of camping is similar to glamping—or "glam camping," which I can totally get behind. Even for a temporary home—God wants the best

for this space—colorful fabrics, special embroidery from skilled craftspersons, and fine wood that might be difficult to source in a desert. It's still a tent, but it must have been absolutely luxurious to people who were living without running water. Stepping inside of the Tabernacle must have felt like entering another world, like leaving the harsh realities of the ongoing journey and entering into a space dedicated to beauty and connection with the divine.

This Tabernacle was a place of hope for the Israelites while they existed in limbo—it was their home while they were experiencing displacement. And every time they moved, every time they packed up and traveled further down the road, the Tabernacle would be carefully taken down and then rebuilt once they reached a new place. God's earthly home went with them, just like the pillars of cloud and fire that guided them. And even when they reached their destination in the Promised Land, the Tabernacle remained their central place of worship for generations—until temples and altars could be built in this new home.

And I think this concept of the Tabernacle has something important to teach us, even thousands of years later.

A lot of us like to think of our lives here on Earth as permanent—we continue to wake up day after day and do our normal human things and carry out our routines. But in a more cosmic sense, our lives here are actually quite finite—they begin and they end—and some of us trust that there's something more eternal for us on the other side. In certain moments, we realize how short and precious this existence is—and how unsettling it can feel to be in these liminal spaces that we find ourselves in. It can be difficult for us to reckon with these in-between moments—and so it makes sense that we go looking for places and spaces where we might find comfort and reassurance that there is more to our human lives than just what we can see. Right now, a lot of us are weary and worn out from our journeys, we've been searching for meaning and purpose, and we don't quite know what is on the horizon—so we are searching for a place where we can bring our doubts and our struggles, a place where we can be heard and loved.

While modern churches don't look anything like a tent in the wilderness—I believe that the spirit of the Tabernacle is still inside.

Church is where we don't have to be alone. It's where we don't have to navigate displacement all by ourselves. It's where we can be with others who are also experiencing the disorientation of a changing culture and the changing expectations that are placed upon us. It can be a place where we find the peace and divine presence that our souls are longing for. It can be there for us, as we move from destination to destination. It can be a space where our souls can take a break from the journey outside.

But we all know that historically, the church hasn't always been the safe place that we are hoping for—churches around the world of all shapes and sizes have been known for some pretty horrible things. Even churches where good things happen have been sources of pain, or discrimination, or even abuse—and so it's natural that many people in our community don't see these spaces as places where they can be vulnerable. Even churches where good pastors lead and good people congregate, there's a potential for division, and loneliness, and hurt feelings—because we're all human, and we all have brokenness and blindspots that affect how we treat each other.

So my question for us this morning is: how do we make church into the kind of Tabernacle that God intended? How do we fully live into that spirit of the Tabernacle that is possible when God's people gather together?

Well, I think the answer has something to do with a mindset that I'm going to call "Big Tent Mentality." You might have heard the term "Big Tent," in political discourse—referring to a party or caucus that includes a wide spectrum of beliefs—or you might have heard it when talking about a circus or carnival, but I think it has some spiritual applications as well—applications that don't include conventions or clowns.

Despite what the Book of Exodus might tell us about ancient tabernacles, “Big Tent Mentality” is not about fancy decorations or specific wood elements, or gold plated candlesticks—it’s not about colorful fabrics, or having the most luxurious carpeting, or even the physical size of the building. And contrary to some beliefs in our larger culture, Big Tent Mentality is not about how expensive the musical instruments are, or how often the bathrooms are renovated, or how dressed up the congregation is. None of those factors, alone or put together, have any bearing on whether or not a space will be a tabernacle. None of those things guarantee that a church will be a place where the lost can be found, and the weary can find relief.

Instead, I think “Big Tent Mentality” is about three things.

First, I think “Big Tent Mentality” is about the desire to make a space special—and by special I mean holy, set apart, and transcendent. It’s about trying to craft a unique place where the rest of the world falls away, it’s about a place where cynicism is replaced by awe and wonder, it’s a place where mystery and curiosity are welcome. It creates room for people of faith to ask those big questions that might not fit into our daily routines. It allows for deep pondering about what we don’t know, and in whom we trust. At its core, the big tent feels different from the businesses, schools, organizations, and workplaces that fill most of our week.

Second, I think “Big Tent Mentality” is about creating an atmosphere of connection—where people can come into contact with the divine and be transformed and renewed for the journey ahead. Connection with God, and building community with each other is one of the best ways we have to navigate life when things get tough. Trying to travel alone is a surefire way to lose hope and direction. Trying to traverse the wilderness without any kind of help is going to be a slow and lonely process. And so the big tent is a space where fellow travelers can rest together and guide each other home.

And third, I think “Big Tent Mentality” is about inclusion. Although the ancient tabernacle was more exclusive, with only certain people able to access the most holy parts, I believe that God has shown us that the doors have been

opened to all. Through the ministry of Jesus, we can see that the boundaries that used to keep people separated from each other have been intentionally torn down—the walls that were built to keep some people in and others out have crumbled to the ground. And so I think that the tabernacle is spacious enough for dreamers, and doubters, it's big enough for long-time members and new friends, it's wide enough to encompass individuals and families of different backgrounds, life experiences, and social groups. In the big tent, everyone belongs, just as they are.

My dream is that Bremerton UMC would be all about Big Tent Mentality.

My dream is that this church would be so into Big Tent Mentality that we begin to change people's minds about church—that would be so welcoming, so supportive, so encouraging, so generous, so much a source of hope and liberation, that people couldn't help but pop their head in the doors to get a taste for themselves.

My dream is that we would be so into creating a Big Tent that everyone who walks in our sanctuary or into our small groups—no matter where they are on their journey—would become our traveling companions on this path we call life.

My dream is that we'll do this work of tabernacle as a team—that each of you would be so committed to the Big Tent that you'll live out this mentality every time you're here—greeting guests with a warm welcome, reaching out and building relationships, mentoring others along the path, and leading the way towards a better future.

If you take nothing else from our time together, I want you to know this: If you're in the wilderness today, the tent is for you. If you know someone in the wilderness right now, the tent is for them. Let's build that tabernacle together.

Amen.