

“Tabernacle Times”
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Myers Park Presbyterian Church
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Have you seen the latest sign up at Myers Park Baptist Church? It reads, “You can take the person out of the church, but you can’t take the church out of the person.” I love that. It’s a powerful expression that church is not so much a place as a people, for church is something within us all, not just a place we go to. This wilderness season in the life of the church has shown us this truth.

Worship has been our central activity as a congregation in this wilderness time, a striking reality given that we haven’t been able to gather in our worship spaces for six months now. According to that vast majority of almost 700 respondents to our recent survey, worship has been the most meaningful experience during this pandemic. Worship is central to life in the wilderness. You can take the people out of the church, but you can’t take the church out of the people. Amen to that.

That’s been true in our wilderness time, and it was true in Israel’s as well. Our reading today comes from the Tabernacle section of Exodus, found in chapters 25-31, and in chapters 35-40. The Tabernacle was the tent God called Israel to make to worship in the wilderness. It’s a part of the story we often ignore, filled with details about supplies, and building instructions; passages like, “make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet stuff... The length of each curtain shall be twenty-eight cubits, and the breadth of each curtain, four cubits... Five curtains shall be coupled to one another; ... make loops of blue on the edge of the outermost curtain... Fifty loops you shall make on the one.” You get the idea. Not exactly a page turner. No wonder the Common Lectionary ignores this part of Exodus.

Yet, the Tabernacle section makes up thirteen chapters of Exodus, almost one-third of the whole book. So, the tabernacle was important to those who put the book of Exodus together. It’s important to remember they were in their own wilderness time, likely in exile in Babylon some 700 years later when these stories were remembered, collected and assembled. In the midst of their own wilderness, they remember stories of Israel’s grumbling and God’s providing, of Israel’s questioning and God’s answering. And they remember Israel worshipping, not in a Temple made of stone, but in a tent that travelled with them wherever they went. Wherever they went, God was with them in that tent. Many scholars have argued that Israel was more faithful during wilderness times, Tabernacle times, when they were not landed, than during Temple times when they had kings who lived in palaces and life was fixed. The tabernacle narrative in Exodus certainly testifies to that faithfulness. It’s one of the few times in Exodus when the people do exactly what God tells them to do.

In the midst of our Tabernacle times, as we worship in our respective tents these days, God’s presence has been on the move with us. As one member said to me, “I used to think of the sanctuary as the place I went to experience the sacred, but now the sacred is in my house during worship.” Wherever they went, God was with them in the tent. So too, God is with us.

A couple of weeks ago, Millie shared with our Senior Leadership Team an article by church consultant, Susan Beaumont, who I believe has worked with our church in the past. It was entitled, “Five

Assumptions That are Failing us Now.”¹ Four of them apply directly to worship. The assumptions are grounded in a temple kind of mindset, rather than in a tabernacle mindset required for the wilderness.

The first assumption of temple times is that “geography dictates belonging.” This no longer applies in Tabernacle Times. Churches used to draw a five-mile circle around the Temple, the building, to represent the pool from which we draw our members. As a large congregation, Myers Park has always had a larger circle than that, but during the Pandemic, our circle has extended to Texas and Michigan and beyond. I had a conversation this week with a faithful member who has moved to Florida during the pandemic, but he’s still attending worship and Sunday school with us every week. In Tabernacle times, geography no longer defines belonging.

A second assumption of Temple Times is that discipleship begins with membership. During these wilderness days, people connect with us much more through our ministries than by coming to church on Sunday and joining a new member class. One of our new members from last week has been teaching in our weekday school for years. Through that process she found us to be a warm and welcoming place, so now she and her husband joined the church. Ministry preceded membership. One of our newer members in the Disciple Bible Study is already providing lunch one day a week for 45 kids at the Grier Heights Community Center. In the wilderness, during tabernacle times, discipleship begins with service, not membership.

A third assumption born of Temple Times is that worship attendance is the best indicator of member engagement. We gauged our success by how many people came to our building on a Sunday morning. Now, only 15-20% of the people worshipping virtually do so live at 8:45. The vast majority of our worshippers tune in after the fact—maybe later Sunday morning, maybe Sunday afternoon or Monday evening. In fact, we don’t finalize our counts until Tuesday. No longer can we measure engagement by who is present with us in the Temple when we worship. In these tabernacle times, whenever you turn your attention to worship, wherever your tent goes, there God is present.

A fourth assumption of Temple Times is that in-person engagement is more authentic than online engagement. That’s not true in Tabernacle Times. We had a virtual new member class last week that welcomed eighteen new people into our community of faith. Some of them have never been in our building, but felt called to join our faith family. Two of our new members who I don’t believe have ever set foot in our church signed up for Disciple Bible Study and were with us for the kick off Wednesday night. How about that? A 32-week commitment to study the whole Bible. I’d say that’s pretty serious engagement, and it’s all happened online. Our 21 Day Race Equity Challenge back in May connected with over 1,000 people from dozens of states, and that doesn’t count the number of congregations across the country who were inspired by our program and did it for themselves. When we eventually return to worship together in this physical space, we would be well served to remember those who connect with us online. They can be just as engaged as those here in person. That’s a mindset for Tabernacle Times.

A final mark of Tabernacle times experienced in the wilderness is incredible generosity. That’s not in Beaumont’s article, but it’s in the Bible. Reading on in the Tabernacle narrative we see in chapter 36, that after calling for the offering, those with willing hearts and stirred spirits respond in an amazing way. In Exodus 36:3 we hear of Moses delivering the offering to the workers making the tabernacle. It reads:

¹ See: September 8, 2020 by Susan Beaumont

“and they received from Moses all the freewill-offerings that the Israelites had brought for doing the work on the tabernacle. They still kept bringing him freewill-offerings every morning, ⁴so that all the artisans who were doing every sort of task on the tabernacle came, ..., ⁵and said to Moses, ‘The people are bringing much more than enough for doing the work the LORD has commanded us to do.’ ⁶So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp: ‘No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the tabernacle.’ So the people were restrained from bringing; ⁷for what they had already brought was more than enough to do all the work.”

Can you imagine? Can you imagine generosity overflowing in such a way that Moses has to tell the people to stop bringing offerings? Can you imagine in the midst of that wilderness world, with so much uncertainty defining their future, the Israelites have the faith to share what they have for the work to be done? It's not like they could run down to Home Depot and replenish what they offered. Their generosity is so overwhelming that Moses tells them they've got “more than enough to do all the work.” Can you imagine such faithful giving while living in the wilderness?

I can. In fact, I've witnessed it among you. Through these wilderness days, you've been remarkably faithful in your giving. Our operating ministry is ahead of budget from a revenue standpoint. We do not find ourselves in a deficit. Why? Because you've continued your generosity in this wilderness time. On top of your regular giving, you've contributed over \$350,000 to the COVID 19 fund. That's helping our local ministry partners like Crossroads, Roof Above, Loaves and Fishes, and many more. We're not to the point where Moses got, there is still plenty of work to be done, but you have been incredibly generous in accomplishing this work during these Tabernacle Times.

In the coming days, we'll be developing some new worship opportunities. You'll be hearing much more about that. We've got a Worship Council Meeting today to hammer out those details, finalize the measurements on the curtains and figure out the colors, blue, purple or scarlet, and how many loops we'll need! You'll also be receiving in the mail in the coming days an invitation to support this ministry in 2021 through your financial commitments. We know these are uncertain times, unparalleled in my lifetime. But God has always provided for this ministry, and we trust that through your generosity and faithfulness, God will continue to do so. Together, beloved, may we have willing hearts and stirred spirits to meet the challenges of this present wilderness with the faithfulness of Tabernacle Times.