

Sunday, December 25, 2022 – Day of the Nativity of our Lord (Christmas Day)

Exodus 40:17-21, 34-38 (ESV) – “God’s Presence Remains With His People”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹⁷ In the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month, the tabernacle was erected. ¹⁸

Moses erected the tabernacle. He laid its bases, and set up its frames, and put in its poles, and raised up

its pillars. ¹⁹ And he spread the tent over the tabernacle and put the covering of the tent over it, as the

LORD had commanded Moses. ²⁰ He took the testimony and put it into the ark and put the poles on the

ark and set the mercy seat above on the ark. ²¹ And he brought the ark into the tabernacle and set up

the veil of the screen, and screened the ark of the testimony, as the LORD had commanded Moses...³⁴

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁵ And

Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the

LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁶ Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over

the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. ³⁷ But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not

set out till the day that it was taken up. ³⁸ For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and

fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.

One of the things that we like to do when we are touring the country, and taking vacations, is visit museums. One of my favorite type of museums is those that contain classic automobiles, especially trucks. Recently, we visited the I-80 Truck Museum in Davenport, at the world’s largest truck stop. We also went to the Hollywood Classic Car Museum in Branson a little over a year ago. One of the things that I remember is that we weren’t allowed to touch, or even more so, get into the cars and sit in them.

They were very fragile and old, and even the oils from our skin could damage the paint jobs from decades ago. We could look, but we weren't allowed to touch! This was quite frustrating to me, as I have a love for these autos, and would like to explore them more fully than you can from a few feet away. However, this is the way that it has to be, and we respected this request.

In our text, Moses had to stay away from the tabernacle when the cloud of the LORD was upon it. This was the holy of holies, the place where only Moses could go, and even he had restrictions from time to time. The Israelites carried this tabernacle around the countryside during their forty years in the wilderness. They would proceed when the pillar of fire by night, or the pillar of cloud by day, would move further onto the horizon. You can imagine, more than a million people, walking through the desert, carrying everything they owned either on their backs or on their livestock's backs. This was a cumbersome, slow-moving procession. Yet, God took care of them, and guided even their movements from place to place. He provided them with food out in the desert, manna and quail, and water when they needed it. He proved His provision in their lives over and over again.

Yet, there was still this separation between the people and God. This would only be rectified when Jesus came as a baby in a manger, grew up and lived out His earthly ministry, living a sinless life. When He was crucified, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. This curtain indicated where the rank-and-file Israelites could go within the temple, and what parts were reserved for the high priest only, and that only once per year. Once the curtain was torn, the separation between God and man due to sin was repaired. No longer would sin separate us from God. He paid the price for our sins, by taking them upon Himself on the tree of the cross. That's a bit in the future from what we focus on today, but it's definitely in the back of our minds as we celebrate the nativity, or the coming in human flesh, of our Savior this day. Christ the Savior is born! Let us rejoice and be glad in Him!

What exactly was this tabernacle that Moses describes? What was in it? Why was it so important? The tabernacle contained the ark of the covenant, the box, if you will, that had all of the

things that God had told Moses to keep from His interactions with the people of Israel. Inside the ark were the Ten Commandment, on stone tablets; a jar containing a sample of manna that the Israelites were given in the desert; the staff of Aaron that had buds on it when all the other staffs didn't have buds on them, to mark him as the preeminent priest (the one who would offer sacrifices on behalf of the people). This was the most important possession that the Israelites carried around with them – not only because God told them to prize this ark, but because it was a reminder to them of God interacting with them directly, showing them His presence, and His tender care, and His forgiveness by not abandoning them to the grave because of their sins, but rescuing them and restoring them to full communion with Himself. This ark was so important that it was placed well within the tabernacle, or tent, so that it wouldn't be damaged, and so that the rank-and-file people wouldn't have access to it. Otherwise, you can imagine that maybe a piece of manna would come up missing, taken by someone who wanted it nearer to them than just in the center of the tabernacle.

Only Moses and Aaron had access to this inner sanctum, this holy of holies – and when the cloud settled on the tent, and God's full presence was there, even they were not permitted to go in. The tabernacle (or tent) would eventually become the temple, once the Israelites were settled once again in their own land, in Jerusalem, and David had won the battles over all their enemies, and his son Solomon had the permanent temple built. The dimensions might have been different, the building materials different still, but the purpose of the tabernacle and the temple were the same – they were God's house, His dwelling place.

Many of the parts of the church today are taken from that which was in the temple. The altar, for example, was a place of sacrifice, where Aaron and the priests would slaughter animals, sprinkle the blood over the people, and offer these unblemished animals as a pointing-ahead to the perfect sacrifice of Christ that was coming into the world. That's one of the reasons that the Lord's Supper is distributed

from the Altar – the supreme sacrifice of Christ, the one that exceeds all other sacrifices, is celebrated on this table.

The separation between the chancel and the nave of the church, the communion rail, also is a reminder that some places in the church are more sacred than others. It's not just a handy place to kneel and receive the Lord's Supper! The Word of God, and the Sacrament of the Altar, are distributed from places that are within the communion rail. Therefore, those are holier places than just the generic pews, which are in turn closer to the Word of God than places outside, like the parking lot. Now, things have changed, and God hasn't told us that we cannot approach Him, even inside the rail, no matter what. However, it's good practice for us to realize that the places where God is truly present are more sacred, more set apart, than other places within the church proper.

What does all this have to do with Christmas? I think you might be asking yourselves, "has Pastor gone down one of his famous rabbit holes once again?" I mean, we're supposed to be talking about a cute and cuddly baby, lying in the straw, in the manger, where the animals usually took their nourishment, right? The reason that the Nativity of our Lord is so important is that this was the beginning of His time here on earth, His earthly ministry. He came to us when we could not come to Him – in order for that to work, He had to be born in a way that was different from the natural way – otherwise, He would be infected with the original sin that plagues each and every one of us, the sinful nature. He was born of a virgin mother – His Father was God Himself – and the Holy Spirit worked to cause this to be. We don't know just how He came to be in the womb of Mary, but it happened according to God's perfect will. He was born completely and totally without sin – that alone was a miracle that only God Himself could cause to take place. One of the reasons that Joseph was chosen to be His earthly father was to protect Him from the marauders that would come and try to destroy Him. Evil men such as Herod were jealous of Him and would stop at nothing to get rid of a potential rival to

the throne. This, too, was divinely inspired – Joseph was open to, and obeyed what he heard, in dreams given him by God.

He came, ultimately, to die. I know that's not what you're used to hearing on this day, and it's a bit of a downer, to be honest! Skipping ahead a little bit to Epiphany, however, the Scripture alludes to His purpose being to die with the three gifts from the Wise Men. Gold – okay, bringing a king wealth makes sense, as He's in charge of heaven and earth. Frankincense – not Frankenstein or Frankenmuth! – was a nice-smelling perfume, which, let's be honest, in the pre-modern world, in a cattle barn, would have been pretty nice to have! It's the third gift – myrrh – that's the most puzzling. It was a burial spice, to wrap around the body of one that recently died, that would stop some of the smell, to be sure. However, it was also to preserve the body so that it wouldn't begin to deteriorate before burial rites could be performed. It was strange, indeed, to bring this as a gift to the family on the birth of a new baby! Kind of like giving a newborn child a nice, shiny, new coffin – after all, he's going to need it someday, right? So, let's give it to him right now!

Jesus' entire birth and earthly ministry were focused on His dying and rising again. The only way to fix the sin problem of mankind, to redeem us from the wages of sin, which is death, is for a death to occur. Because Jesus was and is fully God, He was able to die for all men, not just for Himself. And He could rise again, which was also on the docket. Because Jesus was and is fully man, He was capable of dying on the cross. Otherwise, God is eternal – He cannot die. But, in the person and work of Jesus, the God-man, this prohibition is eradicated.

If you want to boil down the choice of this text from Exodus as our Old Testament reading for the Day of the Nativity of our Lord, it's all about the presence of God among His people. For Moses and the Israelites, the presence of God was found in the tabernacle, in the tent, but more specifically in the Ark of the Covenant, in the holy of holies. If you asked a young child in Moses' day where God was, he or she would probably respond by pointing to the tabernacle – it was big enough to be seen throughout

the camp, it was prominently placed in the middle of the camp and was known by all to be where God dwelled among His people, when and where He wished to be. The presence of God was so strong in that holy of holies, that no one was to approach Him there, especially when He was embodied in the cloud that covered it. The people knew that He was holy, and that they were not – and this difference would render them dead right away if they were to meet with Him face-to-face.

For the folks in Jesus' time, the presence of God was found wherever Jesus was – either in the temple, teaching the crowds; or in Bethlehem, being worshipped by shepherds and angels; or on the cross, when He changed everything from us being doomed to destruction to being saved and rescued from sin.

For us today, He's present in His Word and Sacraments – that's where He has told us that we can look for Him and find Him. Why would we look to our own intellect, or our own emotions, or our own experiences, for God, when He has told us where He will be? He's in His Word, which is more powerful than anything else in the entire universe. When God says something, and promises something, we can be SURE that He means it, and He won't change His mind. The Word of God converts the heart – it's that powerful! He's in His Sacraments – in Holy Baptism, where He washes away our sin, and gives us the gift of faith. He's in the Lord's Supper, where we behold Him in a veiled way, but still have the privilege of receiving the fruits of His sacrifice, the Body and Blood, into our mouths as a tangible gift from Him. Our sins are forgiven; because we eat of His flesh and drink His blood, we have life within us.

We went to another museum this past summer, out in Pocatello, Idaho. It was called the Museum of Clean. I think that at least a couple of you have been there; it's quite comprehensive. Apparently the guy that started it, Don Aslett, was a minor celebrity on infomercials on television; he would give tips on how to clean your house, and folks would watch Don demonstrate vacuums and brooms and other cleaning tools. He's still alive today; he still has an office at the museum. The point of bringing up this museum is that it's totally different from the classic car museums that we went to – at

the Museum of Clean, there were entire sections where kids and adults were encouraged to “Please Touch!” These weren’t breakable antiques; these were exhibits where the entire goal was to experience, handle, interact with things. A totally different concept for a museum, isn’t it?

In the same way, thanks be to God that He has improved things so much in our lives, that we can interact with Him more fully than Moses could in his day. Instead of being afraid to come near to Him lest we be destroyed, we are fully aware that He has destroyed this separation forever, by becoming the supreme sacrifice for our sins. We are invited by Him to come and taste, come and see, come and touch, come and receive, the very body and blood of Christ. Come and be washed in the font of Holy Baptism, come and have your sins washed away, and be cleansed. Come and hear the Word of God through this humble instrument and know that when I speak the forgiveness of Christ to you, it’s the same, even in heaven, as if our dear Lord Jesus Christ were dealing with you Himself. When I speak the Word of God, it’s the same as if the original writers were reading it to you, except I’m being used by the Holy Spirit to bring it to you thousands of years later. Not to say that I’m anything special; I’m merely being used by the Holy Spirit, within the Office of the Holy Ministry.

So, Merry Christmas! Thanks be to God that He has come to us and dwelled here for a time, so that His purposes could be fulfilled. He came to die and rise again, so that our sins would no longer be held against us, but would be forgiven and forgotten by God, forever. That’s why Christmas is so important – it’s a continuation of God’s presence with us His people, but also to bring about a change in how He interacts with us. No longer do we fear His presence but celebrate that He has deigned to come to us. He has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.