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**Exodus 25:1–9, ESV.**

*25 The LORD said to Moses, <sup>2</sup>“Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me. <sup>3</sup>And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, <sup>4</sup>blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats’ hair, <sup>5</sup>tanned rams’ skins, goatskins, acacia wood, <sup>6</sup>oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, <sup>7</sup>onyx stones, and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. <sup>8</sup>And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. <sup>9</sup>Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.*

**Ezekiel 11:14–16, ESV.**

*<sup>14</sup>And the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>15</sup>“Son of man, your brothers, even your brothers, your kinsmen, the whole house of Israel, all of them, are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, ‘Go far from the LORD; to us this land is given for a possession.’ <sup>16</sup>Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone.*

### **A Sanctuary.**

The notion of a Sanctuary is very old, predating Christianity, predating Judaism, predating monotheism. Ancient multi-god, or pagan believers built sanctuaries to help people solicit aid from a deity. These places tend to share two qualities: an aura of holiness, which is often accompanied by purification ceremonies, and a hierarchy of levels of holiness within the sections of a given sanctuary. Sanctuaries

have taken many forms, including particularly beautiful landscape artifacts, like hills and trees, or portable tents, such as the home of the tabernacle in the Old Testament, or the two ancient Temples in Jerusalem. Our first quote today contains one of the most commonly referenced references to a sanctuary. In Exodus, Chapter 25, God calls Moses up the mountain. God gives him stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. God himself has engraved them. These laws dictate the way God wants his people to live, and they illustrate God's hands-on approach to caring for his people. Moses leaves the camp in the hands of a couple of men. Moses goes up the mountain, accompanied by Joshua. Apparently, Joshua does not enter the holy cloud with Moses. From below, to the people waiting on Moses and Joshua, the top of the mountain looks like it is on fire. As is common, cloud and fire mark God's presence. Moses waits six days before God speaks to him. This waiting period allows Moses to prepare himself. The number six is often used in the Bible to refer to the limitations of humans: God created people on the sixth day. Perhaps Moses must wait six days in order to learn some humility and to purge himself of pride. Here is what God says to Moses from within that cloud:

*"Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me. <sup>3</sup>And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, <sup>4</sup>blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats' hair, <sup>5</sup>tanned rams' skins, goatskins, acacia wood, <sup>6</sup>oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the*

*fragrant incense, <sup>7</sup>onyx stones, and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. <sup>8</sup>And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. <sup>9</sup>Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.”*

God taxes the Chosen People, who since they are living in the desert, have very little to begin with. They are to give up their gold, silver, bronze, fine cloth, animal skins, ornate wood, lamp oil, spices, and precious stones. They are going to put these stones on an ephod and a breastplate. An ephod is a vest-like garment worn by priests, and it lies under the breastplate. These are to be worn by the high priests. The people are then to make a sanctuary, so that God may “dwell in their midst”. God gives Moses precise instructions on making and furnishing the sanctuary. The sanctuary is a tent, a sacred tent. It must be mobile because the people are mobile and are going to take it into the Promised Land. Inside the tent will be the tabernacle, the home to the ten commandments. This is a massive tent. It contains a courtyard and the tabernacle. The courtyard is 150 feet by 75 feet, and it is 7 ½ feet tall. The tabernacle is about 45 feet long and fifteen feet wide, and 15 feet high. The tabernacle has two rooms, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. The two rooms are separated by a curtain. The ceiling of the tabernacle is made of four materials: linen, goat’s hair, ram’s skin, and badger skin. The walls are made of white linen, and the walls also contain acacia boards with silver set

into them. They are overlaid with gold. The door to the sanctuary is on the east side so that unlike the pagan nations around them, the Israelites will always worship God facing west. There are six items in the sanctuary: the altar of sacrifice, the laver or solid bronze washing basin, the table of acacia wood, the menorah, the altar of incense, the veil, and most importantly, the Ark of the Covenant, which is a box made of acacia wood and covered with gold. It contains the Ten Commandments.

Here's what's not so obvious about the sanctuary: It is God's idea and God's design. It is his custom home, built out of the finest materials, donated by all of his people, and constructed by a large number of them. The Ark of the Covenant, the Ark containing the covenant with God, will later be carried around by the Israelites, and it will serve them for an extremely long time. They bring it with them when Kings Saul and David fight the Philistines. After it is captured by the Philistines, they get it back and return it to Israel. The Ark, and the surrounding sanctuary, is a deeply holy place where the Israelites go in order to connect with God. They literally think of it as the home of God. The word tabernacle in Hebrew, *mishkān*, means "residence". Our English word, tabernacle is actually derived from the Latin word *tabernāculum*, meaning tent. It is only superseded 440 years later, when Solomon builds the first Temple in Jerusalem.

Let's look at our second quote for today. It is from Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet and the book is written in the first person, with Ezekiel telling the story of his three-decade long ministry. The book was written around 570 or so B.C. As a young married man, Ezekiel is living in Jerusalem. The life of Ezekiel coincides with the height of Babylonian power over a vast area. The Babylonians have recently wrested control over Mesopotamia from the Assyrians. The Babylonians are sending their armies out to expand their power base south and west to include much of the land that surrounds the Israelites, which at this time consists of two areas known as Israel and Judah. This very aggressive expansion leads the Babylonians to wars against Egypt and Phoenicia - with the region including the holy city of Jerusalem, in Judah, caught in the middle. The mighty Babylonian army of Nebuchadnezzar besieges and captures Jerusalem. But at one point, Israel comes close to beating back the Babylonians. In retaliation, the Babylonian army sacks Jerusalem, destroys the temple, and robs the temple of its treasures. And to weaken the upstart Israelites further, many of the educated and skilled, along with the rulers of Israel and Judah, and leaders of the army, are forcibly moved about 700 miles away to the heart of the Babylonian empire. Ezekiel finds himself living on a barren plain, deep in Babylonian territory, near the Kebar River. Ezekiel fights to wrest control from a secular ruling class of Israelites that

had emerged back in Jerusalem. Although he is exiled from the land, he proposes that the Israelites in exile should live strictly by God's laws. Parts of the Book of Ezekiel contain bizarre, wild visions of his. In our quote, God is reassuring Ezekiel that there is hope for the exiled Israelites:

*<sup>14</sup> And the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>15</sup> "Son of man, your brothers, even your brothers, your kinsmen, the whole house of Israel, all of them, are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, 'Go far from the LORD; to us this land is given for a possession.' <sup>16</sup> Therefore say, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone.*

This says that no matter where we are, God considers himself a personal sanctuary for us. Now consider something from the New Testament, from the third chapter of Paul's letter to the believers in Ephesus, the ancient city that is in what is now Turkey: *<sup>14</sup> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, <sup>16</sup> that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.*

This says that Jesus lives within us in the form of our faith. We personalize God in Christianity. We think of God being present in us as we move through the day. We might go to a church, or perhaps to a forest in the mountains, to be reminded of God's presence, to be inspired, but we know that God is everywhere. Paul tells

us that we are a sanctuary. We hold God within a sacred place within us. We don't need to go looking for God, that he doesn't live in some building somewhere, certainly not in a tent. But is there some value in real, physical sanctuaries?

The problem with a church sanctuary is that we must travel to it. Most Christians go to a physical sanctuary no more than once a week. I have a very heavy Celtic cross formed from bronze on the wall above the main computer I use at home. It's about a foot and a half tall, and highly polished. Celtic crosses have that circle that wraps around all four pieces of the cross. There is folklore that says that St. Patrick introduced the Celtic cross to Ireland when he was converting its kings from paganism to Christianity. Perhaps there is some truth in that. Some say that the circle was simply a structural consideration in ancient times, that it strengthened the design. Others say that the Celtic cross is in truth a hybrid pagan and Christian symbol, that the circle is a sun symbol sacred to the ancient, pre-Christian Celts. Personally, I just think it's beautiful. I have another smaller one on the wall in front of the rower and stationary bike I exercise on every morning. When I work, when I work out, I look up many times and I see the cross. It turns my private space at home into a physical sanctuary – much like the

sanctuary that God had the Israelites build for God. I feel a calmness come over me when I think about God's presence in that sanctuary in my home.

I once found one on the wall of a hospital patient, someone who was very sick, but not terminally ill. His family had put it up, with the nurses' permission, using two-sided tape, so that when they took it down, there wouldn't be any damage. He was one of those patients who was not very talkative, who really seemed to want to be left alone. I tried a couple of times to strike up a conversation. When he responded with a polite, but curt "Thanks for coming by," I was about to back out of his room when I noticed the cross. I told him that I had two Celtic crosses on my walls at home, that they turned my home into a Sanctuary. That caused him to break out in a smile and look up at me. He said that he thought of it in a similar way, that whenever he traveled on business, he took a smaller Celtic cross with him and temporarily put it up on a wall in whatever place he was staying in. It turned the loneliness of a hotel into a place that reminded him of God. He said that he had not brought the cross to the hospital himself, that his teenaged kids had done it. He had woken up on his first morning in the hospital, while getting ready for surgery, and saw the cross. At first, he thought it belonged to the hospital, but it's a public hospital, and Boulder is not exactly a highly Christian city. Then he realized it was the one from his

home office. He said it brought an incredible joy to him, that his children would think of putting that big, heavy cross up for him. Then he said that the cross reminded of God, not of a church. He asked me what I meant when I said that my Celtic cross turns my home office into a sanctuary? I found that passage from Exodus for him, about Moses being given the instructions for building a sanctuary where the People of God could go and visit God. I made a point of saying that just like the cross he traveled with, Moses' sanctuary was highly mobile.

I'd like to suggest that you find a physical, visual way of reminding yourself of God's presence every day. Now, I have other crosses in our house. Wendy and I have a brightly colored Mexican cross in our bedroom; our Spanish-speaking daughter Isabelle gave it to us. I also have about fifty different Bibles and many hundreds, perhaps thousands of Christian books. Often, though, we become so used to the Christian symbols we put up in our houses that they lose that special meaning. They stop jumping out at us visually. They become just part of the scenery. That's why I bought two heavy, shiny, Celtic crosses. I knew that they would remain special for me, that I would stop and think about God's sanctuary in my home every time I looked at them. You might try to think of something special for you, some way of turning a little part of your home into a Sanctuary. Wendy and I, when we were looking for a condo to buy for our daughters to live

in some years ago, opened a bedroom closet door in a condo for sale, and found an altar that someone had built. There was a Bible on it, along with a statue of Jesus, as well as a very old looking cross made out a palm branch that I suspect was left over from some ancient Palm Sunday. Give it a try. Be creative. Build yourself a Sanctuary. Please pray with me.

*God, we know that you are everywhere, including within us. We know that we do not have to build a special place in order for you to enter our realm. But help us find a way to remind ourselves of your blessed presence every day. Let us think about our personal space, where we live or work or play, as being a sacred place where you come to be with us. Amen.*