

“GIVING IS AN ACT OF HOPE”

Romans 12:1-13; Exodus 35:4-10, 21-31; 36:2-6

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I find this story from Exodus both rather charming and kind of puzzling. I love all the details about the gifts the people brought for the making of the tabernacle – gold jewelry and different colored yarn and acacia wood and leather and bronze – and the skills the craftspeople contributed – wood carving and metalwork and spinning and embroidery. I love the way the story emphasizes the participation of a lot of people and how everyone’s gift or skill is valued. I really love what it says about their willing hearts and spirits. And what church leader would not love a stewardship campaign so successful that it became necessary to tell the congregation that they needed to stop giving so much?

But it’s also kind of puzzling, because it seems rather unlikely that formerly-enslaved people living a nomadic life in a harsh desert environment would not only have all these luxurious materials but be willing to give them up – and put in a lot of energy and effort as well – to make a very fancy tent as the focal point of the worship of their God. Where would they have gotten such things?

Well, it turns out that there are a couple of places earlier in the book of Exodus that suggest they brought valuables out of Egypt – things given to them (at their request, which God and Moses told them to make) as they were leaving, by their Egyptian neighbors. Apparently, after a series of unpleasant and eventually deadly plagues visited on them by God, on behalf of the Israelites, the Egyptians were so glad to see these folks leave that they gave them what they asked for (although only jewelry and clothing are actually mentioned). So that’s one possibility.

I still wonder, though – where the other things came from, whether they’d still have much of what they brought from Egypt, if they wouldn’t have traded with other nomadic groups for things they needed (or hoped to do so). It could be, of course, that the story involves a bit of hyperbole: maybe it’s the willing and generous spirit of the people that makes the gifts seem so precious. It’s still hard to picture people struggling for survival spending so much time embroidering enormous curtains and overlaying pillars with gold.

But this is a very, very ancient story; the book of Exodus is made up of material from various earlier written sources, which in turn had their origins in even earlier oral traditions. Exodus was probably written in something like its current form during the time of the Babylonian exile – long, long after the time in which the story is set. So we have to think about that context as well as the setting of the story. And too, there’s the whole history of the people of Israel in the intervening years, during which they were for a time an independent and fairly prosperous small nation, and even built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem which was the center of their worship of God, until the Babylonian armies destroyed it. The memory of that temple would have been very much alive in the minds of the Jewish exiles in Babylon.

So maybe the offerings of all these precious things and the fine craftwork of the women and men are more representative of how that temple in Jerusalem got built, and this outpouring of valuable gifts is merged into an older story about the tent where Moses and the people met with God during the time of the desert wanderings. Stories do get woven together like this as they're told over time. Why here? Probably because this telling spoke meaningfully to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon.

There, without the temple as the center of their worship, the written word became the defining focus of their faith, and as those writings were compiled and edited, the circumstances of the community shaped them. That the Exodus story was at the heart of those writings isn't surprising; as people living as outsiders in a foreign country, the Israelites in Babylon saw their own experiences reflected in their ancestors 40 years as wanderers in the desert.

Like them, their ancestors were without a land to call their own. They'd had to leave behind what was familiar. Life was hard. They didn't know what the future would bring. Their survival was uncertain. Their confidence in God's presence and help wavered. And they didn't have a temple, or any place they could look to as a sacred place or a place to encounter God.

You can see how the ancient story of the people making the tabernacle in the desert becomes a new story for the exiles in Babylon. It says, your ancestors struggled just as you do, in a situation that looked hopeless. They also wondered if God had abandoned them. But then this happened! A promise and a call to participate in making it real.

The promise of the tabernacle was God's presence. Not just from time to time, in a cloud or pillar of fire, or having a meeting with Moses, but continually in that tent-like sanctuary. As it's described it has the feel of a temple... but here's the thing: it's a *moveable* sanctuary. It goes with the people wherever they go, a physical symbol of the promise of God to be in their midst.

The external circumstances might not have looked very promising. But when the people heard God's invitation as Moses communicated it, they claimed the hope as their own. The teller of the story takes pains to make it clear that the gifts of time and skill were not coerced. "Let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord's offering," Moses says. And later on we read, "And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing." In chapter 36, the campaign is referred to as a "freewill offering." We're left in no doubt that the people's giving was from their hearts, that they consciously chose that act of hope.

That act of hope is an expression of one side of the covenant relationship between God and this people. God doesn't drop a fancy tabernacle into the middle of their camp, but invites the people's participation in its making.

You might remember another Exodus story in which these same people brought the raw materials and their skills - but that time, it was to make an idol, a golden calf, to worship, because they'd lost faith in both God and Moses, God's appointed leader. The tabernacle

building project is kind of a do-over; it represents redemption and restoration of that covenant, and a hopeful new beginning.

In the context of the years-long wandering in the desert, this is almost a miracle story. The people brought whatever it was they had, the best of what they had, and whatever it was they knew how to do. And that turned out to be a lot, more than anybody could have imagined. More than was needed ... which is a bit reminiscent of the manna that fed the people in the wilderness. Here again, what God provides is more than enough.

In the context of the Israelites displaced in Babylon, the story becomes inspiration and challenge. Can they see that God is present with them, too, and will go with them wherever they are? Will they abandon their faith for the beliefs of the Babylonians (like their ancestors did with the golden calf) or will they invest themselves in the promises of God and the future of their people? Will they make a commitment to build whatever structures and new practices necessary for to live faithfully in a new situation? Do they believe they have resources and skills to offer? Do they believe that God will provide what they need? Will they have hearts as willing as their ancestors to respond to God? Are they as ready to claim that hope?

In the Christian community today, we don't live with the same sense of displacement as the desert nomads or the people in exile in Babylon. But we do know what it is to feel unsettled by change. We know what it's like to mourn the past. We know what it's like to worry about what's ahead. We know what it's like to absorb pessimistic messages about the future of the church. We know what it's like to wonder if there's any hope.

After all, we've heard so much about the decline in church participation, the diminished influence of the mainline church in public life, programs that can't be sustained anymore, buildings that are expensive to maintain. We know that more people mistrust religious institutions and question traditional ideas about God. Scandals and conflict and failure to speak for justice have compromised the church's witness. And lots of external pressures – from cultural changes to economic realities – haven't made things easy.

But the story of God's people is about something beyond the circumstances of the moment. It's about God's faithfulness. It's about discerning and welcoming God's presence in our midst, even if that means we experience it in ways and places that are different from our previous experiences. It's about reimagining and reforming our ways of doing things to be faithful in the here and now. It's about repenting of past sins and choosing to act differently. It's about new ministries and new ways of reaching out, to maybe include people and voices who were not attended to in the past. It's about believing that although structures and programs – and even aspects of worship – might change – God is still with us, still working.

We can see it, if we look. Here and everywhere the church is learning new things, doing outside-the-box ministries, reconsidering priorities, finding more courage to do what's just and right ... and finding holy space in the midst of unhoused neighbors, pride picnics, advocacy

work, new music, creative expression, and more. The tabernacle is moveable; God's presence is enduring, constant, faithful.

The future of the church is in God's hands... but it's also in ours, because God asks us to be willing, involved, and hopeful.

Can we like the ancient Israelites believe we have something to offer (and that it will be enough)? Do we have the willing hearts to give of ourselves, our resources, our skills to make space for the presence of God and the love of Christ to be experienced in our midst?

Giving is an act of hope. Even a little giving is an act of hope that creates more hope. The faithful, even enthusiastic ways this congregation has contributed to ministry here has declared, month after month, year after year, the hope that you have for the future of the church (and the future of *this* church. *Feeling* hopeful can be difficult sometimes, but when we enact our hope – however waver-y that hope may be – we claim it and we strengthen it. When we do it together, we build up our shared hope. As we look forward to the future, to 2025 and beyond, let's continue to claim the hope to which God calls us. Amen?

Resource:

Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus*