

Tabernacle

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a seven-week series

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Exodus 40:34–38 (NRSV)

³⁴ Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁵ Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁶ Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; ³⁷ but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. ³⁸ For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.

Mark 15:33–41 (NRSV)

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ³⁵ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." ³⁶ And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." ³⁷ Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹ Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome.

⁴¹ These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

Know this: God loves us. God loves us all.

The Israelites have camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai for months. They have committed themselves to the keeping of God's Law. They have followed God's blueprints in every detail and constructed the Tabernacle, the tent where God will be present with his people in a way that he is not present elsewhere. They have furnished the Tabernacle with a table for God's bread, a lamp to provide lamp, and a curtain behind which they placed the Ark of the Covenant with the stone tablets. When they were all done, it was time for God to occupy the residence and so "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." The presence of God so filled the space that Moses could not even enter the tent. I suppose it is what Paul had in mind when he wrote of Jesus, "for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Of course.

Terence Fretheim gives a deeper look at this passing yet profound moment in the story of Israel. This is a bit "deep," but well worth pondering:

When all is ready, God comes to dwell among the people in the completed tabernacle. The sanctuary is not simply a symbol of the divine presence, it is *an actual vehicle for divine immanence*, in and through which the transcendent God dwells. The concern for consecration and an appropriate setting for the Holy One makes it clear that *the tabernacle does not collapse presence into immanence*. The God who is present is present as the transcendent one. It is *as* the Holy One that God is present. God remains transcendent in immanence and related in transcendence (see at 25:1 and Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, pp. 70–71). Israel's God now dwells, with intensity and at close range, in Israel's very midst. God actually takes up space in Israel's world. At the same time, the God who "fills" the tabernacle also "fills" the cosmos (Jer. 23:24; Isa. 6:3; Ps. 33:5; 72:19). On the one hand, this makes it clear that Israel's place of worship is not the only place in the

world where God's presence can be found. God cannot be so confined; God is both near and far. Yet there is no other *specific place* in creation that is said to be filled up with God; the focused choice of place by God provides for an intensity of presence that is not true of the creation generally. The tabernacle may thus be said to be a kind of *material "body" for God*. It is no wonder that the New Testament can pick up this language of fullness and use it for God's bodily dwelling in Jesus (Col. 1:19; 2:9; Eph. 1:23; John 1:14–16).

Moreover, Israel's God is not present just in isolated moments of Israel's life, or only to key leaders, but is present to the community as a whole on an ongoing basis. God continues to lead the people in all of their journeyings (see Num. 9:15–23; 10:11–13). The dwelling of God is not a static, immobile, unchanging presence. There is movement with this God, a movement that signals the comings and goings of Israel (on the continuing use of the verbal as well, see Num. 9:18–20). The people are now no longer subjected to a changeless system, to an increasingly dispiriting bondage. They are followers of a God who is on the move, in whose service true freedom and joy are to be found.¹

All of which Fretheim speaks emerges in the story going forward, as God is with his people in good times and bad, in their faithfulness and their unfaithfulness. God's relentless pursuit of his people expresses the abiding love of God for his flawed and weak creatures. I suppose that in a series titles, *Knowing God*, the one big-takeaway ought to be that God is love (1 John 4:8) and gave his only son out of love for us all (John 3:16).

For the rabbis of Israel, the darkest moment in the Bible was the making and worshiping of the golden calf (Exodus 32). The depth of such sin and depravity and ungratefulness is hard to comprehend. And yet, in the end, God went forward with his broken people, coming to them to fill the Tabernacle before proceeding to the Promised Land.

One can't help but bring to mind an even more profound demonstration of God's love, the faithfulness of Jesus even to death on a Roman cross.

God's love -- for all to see

Noon passed and a strange, unnatural darkness has overcome Golgotha and all of Jerusalem. The mid-day light recedes as the darkness pushes its way in. It seems as if the world's light is being slowly extinguished. And the minutes roll on. For three hours Jesus has hung on the cross, beaten and bleeding, struggling to push himself upward to take each breath.

Another hour passes. The darkness deepens. The minutes roll on. Still another hour. The passing minutes have slowed to an agonizing crawl in the suffocating gloom.

After six hours on the cross Jesus is near death, almost too weak to accomplish the difficult task of breathing. Alone in the darkness, Jesus is overwhelmed with despair. In desperation he screams out², "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" in his native Aramaic. The Jews standing within earshot recognize these words as the opening verse of Psalm 22, an expression of soul-crushing desolation. The psalmist feels that even God has abandoned him – *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Now, it is Jesus' prayer, his word of dereliction.³

Merriam-Webster defines "forsake" as "to renounce or turn way from entirely." To forsake someone in need is to abandon them, to leave them. That is how the psalmist felt. That is how Jesus felt. I'm pretty sure that we've all felt forsaken. Indeed, when we

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 315–316.

² The Greek word that Mark uses here suggests something akin to a scream.

³ This fourth of Jesus' "last words" is often called the Word of Dereliction, for "dereliction" means "the state of having been abandoned."

come to this word of dereliction, we are tempted to hurry to the resurrection, but we need to stand at the foot of the cross for awhile yet.

Forsaken by God?

There are many ways in which we suffer. Some are physical; some are emotional. But I don't know that any are worse than believing that you are absolutely alone – cut-off, abandoned, forsaken by all, forsaken even by God. But what could it mean to say that Jesus is cut-off from God when, in the next moment, we confess him to be the Second Person of the Trinity. Is there any sense to made of this? What can we learn of Jesus, of God, in this cry of dereliction?

Such love and devotion for us, for humanity, to undertake such a vocation, to suffer in body and spirit . . . for our sake. Honestly, it is a love that we can imaging only in a small part. God loves me this much? I shake my head in wonderment and fall on my knees in gratefulness.

Was Jesus truly cut off from God for our sake, drowning in a dark ocean of sin? Was this what Paul meant when he wrote that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21)? Did God really turn his back on Jesus? But what then does this do to our confession that Jesus was fully and completely God? Doesn't it rip apart Jesus' two natures? Notice that Jesus is not even speaking of the Father as he often does, but of “God.”

I won't pretend to know the answers. But I do know this, Jesus suffered on that cross. He suffered terrible physical pain. He suffered emotionally. He felt abandoned and cut-off, even from God. He suffered and, in this, he revealed the deepest and most important truth about the nature of God. Such is the nature of true love, God-love. And is we are going to come to know God, we must confront this suffering.

But, we ask, if God truly loves us why is there so much suffering in the world? Where is God we ask? What sort of God would allow such a thing? We are like Gideon. When the angel of the LORD shows up and tells Gideon to stay strong because “The LORD is with you,” Gideon replies, “But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us.” We would ask the same question of that angel. And, while we cannot fully answer all these questions, the Bible gives us room to say something.

First, suffering is a function of human limitations. We break easily. We get lonely and fearful. We are tempted into bad choices. These limitations are not the result of sin but are simply part of how God made us. In the Garden of Eden, could Adam have climbed a tree, fallen out, and broken his leg. Sure. The laws of physics operated in the Garden. Indeed, we can bet that “subduing” creation (Genesis 1:28) wasn't any easier back then than it is now. Does our sin increase the suffering? Sure. Adam might have been pushed out of the tree. (I won't say by whom, but the candidates were limited).

Second, suffering results from the freedom we are given. From the beginning, God pulled humanity into the work of creation. We are to multiply. There is no magic God-wand for making babies; a man and woman must become one flesh. We are to subdue an untamed and often dangerous planet. It is human gardeners who help beautiful flowers to flourish in ways they never could in the wild. How many varieties of roses have human created? In this wild world, we have been given remarkable freedom to grow and to be challenged. God created a universe into which randomness is woven at every turn. Indeed, at the deepest structures of reality exists a strange, counterintuitive world that seems to be governed by dice as much as by anything. And yet we manage. We still land men on the moon. We still eliminate smallpox. And God is with us in all this.

Finally, suffering also stems from the fact that the Lord God Almighty has chosen to accomplish his purposes through us weak, finite humans. This is the cosmos that God, in his infinite wisdom, *chose* to create. I suppose that God could wave a magic wand and fix all our problems, take away everything that might harm us, but then we would

no longer be thinking, loving, free creatures. What is love without the possibility of not loving? Consider those who have suffered the pain of unrequited love . . . for example, God.

Yes, there is mystery in suffering but it isn't all mystery. *And always, we have to bear in mind and heart that God enters into our suffering with us.* This is the cross. It is Jesus who lies at the bottom of the pile of murdered bodies. It is Jesus who is tormented with a body broken by disease and injury. It is Jesus who bears the brunt of human evil. And this Jesus is God, the One to whom every knee will bow. As the child's song goes, "Jesus loves me this I know . . ."

The end

And so, we are at the end of Exodus. We'll close with a few words from Walter Brueggemann:

We are at the finish of Exodus. The workmen finished (39:32). Then Moses finished (40:33). And now God has finished (40:34–38). The seer of Revelation also anticipates a "finish" (Rev 21:3). In our candid self-knowledge, we pray hungrily that God should "finish" for our good. Our prayer for this presence, however, is not a desperate prayer. It is urgent, but it is also confident and bold. Such confidence is grounded in, and informed by, the sacramental enactment by Moses in this text before our very eyes. We dare also say, "It is finished." That lyrical affirmation is part celebration and part anticipation, all grateful, joyous, and confident.⁴

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of Matthew's Gospel

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Genesis

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Current series: *Seven Books that Rocked the Church*. This week: Darwin's *Origin of the Species*

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1994–2004, 1, 981.