

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Exodus 25:1-9, 17-22, “God With Us”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/12/2023**

God is not just God out there.

God has always been and will always be *God with us*.

Ancient Israel knew the presence of *God with us*  
through building the tabernacle.

To be honest, I never really understood the concept of the tabernacle,  
so I’m going to try to help us out with an illustration.

Look at this stone.

What do you see? If you found this stone, what would it mean to you?

It’s a mild curiosity at best.

But to me this stone is a portable, physical connection to my ancestors.

This stone is my ancestors with me.

I grew up knowing few details about my father’s family.

I knew that my grandfather, Fred Johnson, was in the Forest Service,  
that he was an avid fly fisherman,

and that he had picked up watercolor painting in his retirement.

My grandmother Marie Johnson was a kind, quiet, unassuming woman

I didn’t know much about.

They died when I was 9 and 11 years old,

so there wasn’t an opportunity for me to

connect with them beyond childhood encounters.

But in 2018, I discovered a place they had lived.

Getting to know that place changed everything for me.

It was in 2018 that I went to a seminary in Delaware, Ohio

(just north of Columbus, Ohio) to explore how family systems  
impact congregational life.

I thought I might be making a bad decision.

Why would I ever want to go to a random place like Delaware, Ohio?

But God had other things in store for me.

As I began to do some ancestry research on my family,

I discovered that both Fred and Marie were born in Ohio.

Not only that, but they both attended *the* Ohio State University in Columbus.

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Digging through old family photos,

I learned they met in a botany class that was exploring Old Man Cave and going on hikes in the area.

Not only that, but I discovered that Marie and her brother Leslie (who I knew better than Marie because he lived longer)

was born in Powell County

– the same county where my seminary was located.

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Mulzer's Mill, Olentangy River

In fact, my grandmother Marie and my great uncle Leslie grew up on a sawmill on the Olentangy River which is only 8 miles from the seminary.

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This is my great great grandfather Hermann on the left,  
my great grandfather George next to him,  
and my great Uncle Leslie on the log in 1901.

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Here is my grandmother Marie playing in mill race at 10 years old in 1910.

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*AND* I discovered a regional park in the same place  
with signs pointing out the ruins of the old mill which includes photos  
of the old mill and my family.

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Just one more: Here's my great grandfather George out hunting with his dog  
along the Olentangy.

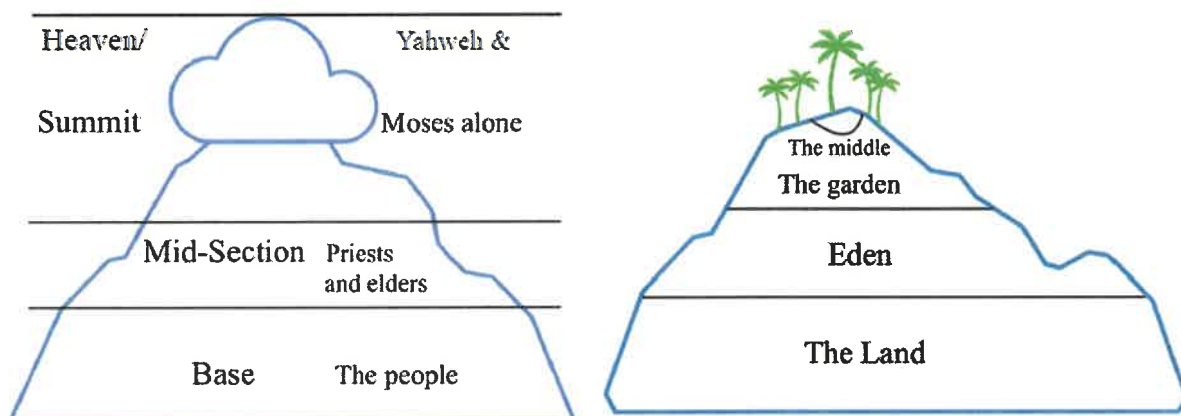
I went there for the first time in July 2018. My father died in January of 2018.  
 So when I went to that place, I waded out into the shallow Olentangy waters,  
 I was retracing steps my ancestors had walked in working the mill  
 and fishing in the river.

And I retrieved this piece of stone tile from among the ruins of the mill.  
 This is not just a piece of rock.  
 It is a physical link to a place that opens up an emotional and spiritual  
 connection between me and family members who are  
 long since passed or whom I have never even met.  
 They are present with me when I hold this tile.  
 Through this stone tile, I have a portable, physical connection to my ancestors.  
 It helps me remember where I have come from across the generations,  
 and enables them to be present with me wherever I go.

*Here's the connection to the tabernacle:*  
 God is creating a portable, physical connection with Israel in Exodus 25  
 that will help them remember who they are across many generations,  
 and enable God to be present with them wherever they go.

Like this stone tile connects me to people and places I had never known before,  
 the tabernacle also established a physical a connection to Israel's history:  
 the history of God's original pattern of creation in Eden,  
 and the pattern of God's meeting with Moses on Mt. Sinai.

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Here's an image from Tim Mackie that shows the parallels between how Eden is described and how Mt. Sinai is described:

Now, in Eden, God could be present among Adam and Eve and walk with them in the cool of the morning.

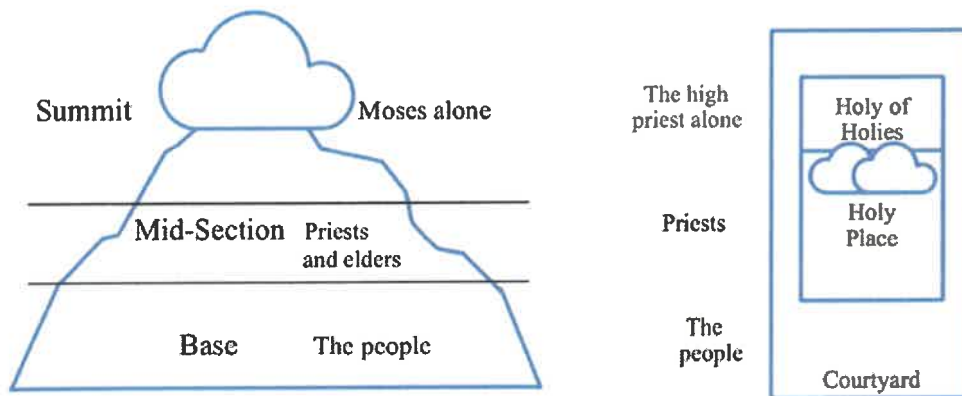
But on Mt. Sinai the people feared coming near God because of the thunder, lightning, and consuming fire. They know that they are not able to stand in God's presence.

So how can God go with the people on their journey to the promised land, not just spiritually, but physically?

God tells Moses to make an ornate tent called a tabernacle that mirrors the organizational structure of the Garden of Eden. This will be a portable, physical representation in the pattern of Eden and Mt. Sinai where God will dwell in the midst of the people: This is how Israel can know *God with us*.

In this passage, God has invites Israel to be partners in a place called the tabernacle. ... it was a little Eden.

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Here's an image to show how the tabernacle itself is based on the same pattern:

Okay, let's talk about this word tabernacle.

It's a stupid sounding word.

It is an English word translating the Hebrew word mishkan / משכן  
which means "dwelling-place."

This is related to the Hebrew verb, shakhan / שכן  
which means, "dwell."

"mishkan" / "dwelling-place" describes a tent that is made for residential dwelling.

The term focuses on the presence of the inhabitants.

This noun is used 58x in Exodus alone.

The verb "dwell" is used 5x to describe Yahweh's presence moving  
down from the mountain and come to take up residence in the sacred tent.

The purpose of this all is so that the people of Israel can know that Yahweh  
is not just a distant idea and is not some idol made of bronze or stone  
but that the Living God of all creation,  
the One who delivered them from Egypt,  
continues to dwell among them in the tabernacle.

*God with Israel* unleashed the revolutionary deliverance from Egypt,  
a covenant relationship that named Israel as Yahweh's treasured possession,  
and Moses' 10 commandments that called their society to follow the  
contours of God's own heart.

The presence of God would reside in the Holy of Holies,  
between the wings of the gold covered cherubim  
and above the ark of the covenant which contained  
the two tablets of the 10 Commandments.

When the priest offered a sacrifice of atonement,  
the blood would be sprinkled on the top of the ark of the covenant  
to atone for the sins of Israel who could never uphold those  
commandments.

And so lid of the ark of the covenant  
was called *the mercy seat*.

The tabernacle, then is a tent of meeting,  
a place of connection between Israel and Yahweh their God.

It is a portable Eden that offers restoration, renewal,  
atonement for sin, and a way for the human  
to commune with the divine.

Now the tabernacle sounds *amazing*, right?

I mean, if you knew that there was a curtain at the back of the sanctuary  
and inside that curtain the presence of God was manifested  
in a direct and physical way ...  
would that change the way you worship?

Well listen to this:

John the gospel writer saw yet another connection to be made  
when it comes to God's presence among humanity.

In John 1 he wrote, **"In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
He was with God in the beginning.  
Through him all things were made;  
without him nothing was made that has been made.  
In him was life,  
and that life was the light of all people."**

And then in v. 14 comes the kicker:

**"The Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us."**  
Jesus was God's dwelling tent among humanity,  
God's meeting place,  
God's way of coming among the people.

In Jesus the world encountered a portable Eden  
where connection with God was unhindered and free.

The Garden of Eden, Mt. Sinai, and the tabernacle were all patterns  
of *God with us* that set the stage for God's arrival *in the flesh*.

Jesus of Nazareth was *Emmanuel*, God with us, a tangible point of contact  
between creature and Creator in one human person.

*Emmanuel* unleashed a revolution of deliverance from sin,  
a demonstration of God's astonishing love,  
and the fulfillment of God's commandments  
that far surpassed that of the Scribes and Pharisees.

And when Jesus willingly went to the cross to atone for our sin,  
do you know what word the Apostle Paul used to describe it?

He said in Romans 3:25 that

**“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement**

[literally as a *mercy seat*]

**through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.”**

Christ the Living Word tabernacled among us and

became for us the mercy seat of atonement that we might  
receive forgiveness of our sin through faith.

Do you know God still tabernacles among us?

Did you know that *God with us* is not just a banner during Advent?

God continues to make a tabernacle, a dwelling-tent with humanity  
in a place called the human heart.

Through Christ the Living God will take up residence within you.

This stone tile represents my ancestors with me.

It is a physical connection to my family’s past.

But what God has done for us is much better than that.

God is with us in the tabernacle of you, and me, and us.

This community of faith in Christ is our connection to our  
spiritual ancestors.

Together we carry the presence of God, the hope of God, the love of God,  
and the forgiveness of God in Christ into our homes, our families,  
our schools, our workplaces, our neighborhoods.

When we come to God in faith, our hearts become a little Eden,  
a new creation, a connection place between heaven and earth.

So if you desire a connection to the great Love of the universe  
you don’t need to get God’s attention, you don’t need to put on a show,  
you don’t need to be someone special.

Be quiet. Be still. Listen. *God with us* is always here.