

The People Work
Exodus 38:1-23
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
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Moses was up on Mt. Sinai for a really, really long time, and the people felt they had waited long enough. They became impatient, and the impatience became anxiety. *Where is he, already? What happened to Moses?*

And their anxiety turned to fear. *Maybe Moses is dead. Maybe we are out here in this wilderness without a leader. Maybe we shouldn't trust this Yahweh, after all, he is pretty scary.*

And the fear turned into doubt. And the doubt led to betrayal.

Then the people assembled against Aaron, Moses' brother, and said, "Rise up, make us gods that will go before us, for this man Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him." Aaron instructed them to take off their jewelry so that he might mold it into a Golden Calf. And once it was done, the people worshipped it with sacrifices and orgiastic dancing.

Meanwhile, up on the mountain, God told Moses what was happening, and Moses rushed down the mountain, holding onto the tablets of the law which had been inscribed with God's own hand, and when Moses saw the calf and what the people were doing, in anger he threw down the tablets of the law, shattering them upon the rock. He destroyed the idol and punished the people. Many died.

The construction of the Tabernacle begins after the episode of the Golden Calf, though God had already given Moses the design plans for it before the people sinned.

Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim, who was one of Jim Harmon's professors, by the way, writes that through the Tabernacle God was doing something radically new and different. God was responding to the needs of the people to be present with them in a new way. God would come to dwell with them in a tabernacle and the furnishings and the rituals of worship. True, God was with them everywhere, just as God is with us everywhere, but God was also going to provide a special place where they could come to encounter God. Fretheim writes that God had chosen to enter time and space "to meet their need for the specific, the tangible, the personal, . . . [the] concrete and focused."

One third of the Book of Exodus is taken up with the description of the design and building of the tabernacle. This is one of those sections where people get bogged down when they are trying to read the Bible. Like the long lists of who begat whom in Genesis, and the details about the law codes and the rituals of sacrifice in Leviticus. There are parts of the Bible that are pretty boring. Exodus is full of so many exciting stories, then suddenly we get to these detailed descriptions about how to hang the curtains.

Fretheim writes that in some ways the Tabernacle becomes God's physical body. A place for God to be immanent within the creation. In other words, an incarnation. But what's

most revealing about these passages in Exodus is that they are not a celebration of the completed object, the finished Tabernacle. They are, in fact, a celebration of the process of designing and building. The creative and imaginative process. A celebration of art and craft. Of the work of the people.

So, what begins to dawn upon us, is that God dwells not simply in the completed product, but in the work itself. God dwells within the people as they are designing, crafting, imagining, and creating. The stories about the construction of the Tabernacle are really about discovering the divine image within ourselves. In other words, the people didn't need to create the Golden Calf, an idol, what they needed to do was awaken to the realization that God was already within them. Creating the Tabernacle was an act of transformation, awakening the people to this spiritual truth. And telling the stories again, point us in that direction—finding the divine image within ourselves.

In verse 8, we read:

He made the basin of bronze with its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.

What are these mirrors?

I had never noticed this verse, probably skimming over it. But the Jewish scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg makes this verse key to her interpretation of the entire Book of Exodus in her commentary *The Particulars of Rapture*. [I love stuff like this. A little obscure verse opens up new possibilities for interpretation.]

The piece of furniture being built here is the basin for water which would stand in the outer court of the tabernacle near the altar. It was used by the priests to wash their hands and thus to purify themselves. Its function is described in Exodus 30 this way:

When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to make an offering by fire to the Lord, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die.

You can imagine the sign in the employees' bathroom: "Employees must wash hands before returning to work OR THEY WILL DIE!"

So, this basin, important to the worship rituals of the people, is made of the mirrors of the women. Now, these are not modern, glass mirrors. These are highly polished bronze.

Philo of Alexandria, who was a Jewish scholar living about the same time as Jesus, wrote that the purpose of these mirrors was so that the priest, while washing himself, could examine himself. Could see himself in the reflection. Since the washing symbolized purification, there is an implication that the priest also had to examine himself, to "look into his own mind" and see if he was pure.

Philo also writes that the mirrors are connected with desire and prompt reflection on the question, "What do you desire?" According to Philo the priest should not desire "the pursuit of present pleasure" but "only that beauty which is genuine and unadulterated," which Philo goes on to describe as the beauty of a virtuous life which brings "fresh vigour and

renewed youth.”

Fascinating ideas, that should also prompt us to reflect and examine ourselves. What do we desire? Are we our best selves?

But, there’s even more to say about these mirrors. The Bible tells us that these are the mirrors of the women, but what purpose had they originally served?

Well, what do you use mirrors for? To see how you look. Most importantly to see if you look good, right? Because you want people to be drawn to you, attracted to you, to desire you? Well, that hasn’t changed. The ancient Israelites wanted the same thing. To see their image in order to look their best and to be desired.

Way back in Exodus chapter 1, we read, “the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.” You see, God blessed the Israelites with great fertility, with the power of new and abundant life, in face of Pharaoh’s policies of death and destruction. The fertility of the Hebrew slaves was rapid and alarmed the Egyptians. Remember, they tried to kill all the firstborn boys in order to slow down the growth rate, but that backfired. Every scheme Pharaoh tried back-fired. Whenever the Egyptians tried to impose death, God’s blessing of life would grow even stronger.

There is a longstanding Jewish *midrash*—you know, the stories that Jews tell to fill in the gaps of the Biblical story—which says that it was the mirrors of the women which accounted for the high birth rate. With the mirrors the women made themselves desirable, the men slept with them, and they kept having babies.

The mirrors, then, are connected with God’s blessing of fertility and life. According to the rabbi Rashi, these mirrors were more precious to God than any other gift given to create the Tabernacle, because it was these mirrors which created the nation of Israel.

What a beautiful image is created here! These instruments of sexual desire now become the means for purification. These instruments for new life, become central to the people’s worship.

According to Avivah Zornberg, the mirrors awaken desire and open us to unexpected possibilities. They even help us to imagine ourselves in different ways. Thus, they are instruments of transformation, inviting us into the creative process by which we become our best selves.

The person who took these mirrors and fashioned them into the wash basin, was Bezalel. According to the Bible, Bezalel was called and inspired by God to become the master craftsman and to teach the people the skills they would need. His gifts of imagination, creativity, and artistic skill would help to prepare the way for God’s presence.

Bezalel is one of the few people in the Old Testament who is described as being filled with the spirit. Normally this is reserved for prophets and judges. Here God’s spirit comes upon a craftsman, a laborer, an artist in order to guide his skills for the work of the Lord.

Bezalel’s name means “in the shadow of God.” It’s also connected to the same Hebrew word which is used in Genesis 1 when we are told that humanity is created in the image of God. There is the sense, then, that Bezalel himself represents the image of God. Bezalel’s craftsmanship is part of God’s revelation of God’s self to the people. God is revealed in Bezalel’s talents, in his work, in his art. When we use our imaginations and our creativity, we embody the presence of God.

So, today, let these stories of the Tabernacle remind us that our work is really about preparing ourselves, awakening the divine image within us. Let these stories invite us to reflect and examine ourselves. “What do we desire? Are we our best selves?” And let these stories invite us to imagine new possibilities. And call us to new levels of creativity.

In this way we will be transformed, as we awaken to the realization that God is already within us. Our personal work of transformation is how God works in this world.