

God Calls Us A Holy Priesthood

Exodus 28:1-29

Fall Old Testament Sermon Series on Exodus

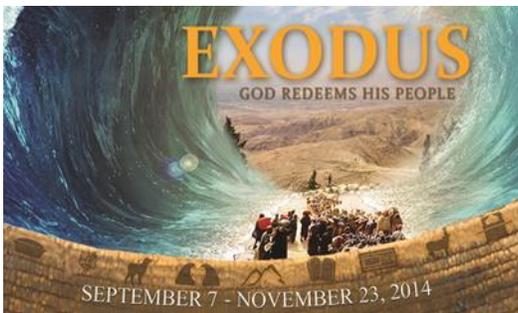
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

November 16, 2014

TEXT: Exodus 28:1-29

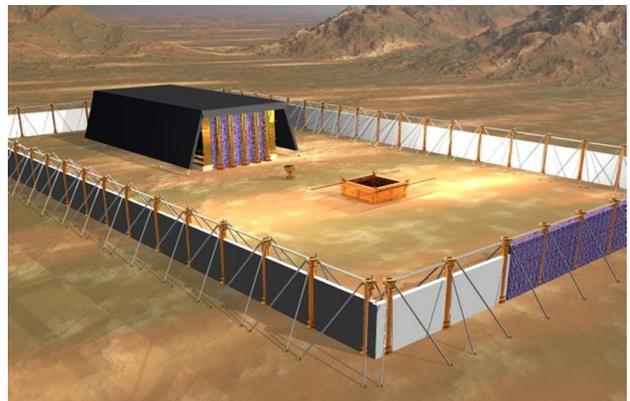
We continue this morning in our fall series on the Book of Exodus, and I want to remind you, as we look at this very sacred portion of Scripture, that the design of God's dwelling place and the



description of the high priestly garments and their ministry is given seven times more space in the Bible than the creation of the world and of humanity. This is a sacred portion of Scripture where we learn of God's dwelling place, of the glory of that dwelling place, and of our call to be a kingdom of priests, a holy people belonging to God. This morning, we look at Exodus 28

where God calls us to be a holy priesthood. Last Sunday, we learned that God had promised to dwell among us and to speak with us as we gather in His name. I hope that is your expectation this morning, that God will both be here and speak to each and every one of us.

We looked at the tabernacle as a portable Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai is that place of God's glorious dwelling: the splendor of the King on top of the mountain, and that grade of holiness where God is on the top of the mountain; the elders are in the middle; and the people are at the base of the mountain behind the altar of sacrifice. That great, glorious mountain of Mount Sinai is leaned over on its side as the architectural plan of the tabernacle in these three components. Two weeks ago, it was a great Sunday to be a lawyer; last Sunday it was a great Sunday to be an architect or an artist; and this morning, we need to draw on all those with creative gifts whom God says He will supply.



Last Sunday, we looked at the arrangement of the whole of that glorious place of God's dwelling, the tabernacle. If we look at the whole picture of this design, we are reminded that the outer court is demarcated by curtains of fine

linen. You enter this outer court through a curtain of colored wool and linen woven together. Inside the court, you meet the bronze alter, the laver for washing, and then the tabernacle proper in the center. That sacred space is divided into two parts, the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, like a square. When we look at the place of God's dwelling as it is described in Exodus 25, 26, and 27, there is one thing that is missing. Just like in the garden of Eden, the missing element in the description so far is humanity, and so now we find humanity. Just as at the pinnacle of creation, God makes mankind in His image and likeness, so the climax of the tabernacle description is of a man. It is a man clothed as no other man is clothed, and this morning, as we look at the garments of the High Priest in his ministry, we want to first look at a general description of his garments. I want us to then consider briefly the overall impression created by these clothes, and then we'll focus on one piece of his attire that points us directly to the Person and work of Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest. Charles Spurgeon, an English preacher, said:

"From every town, village, and little hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London... and so from every text in Scripture there is a road to the metropolis of the Scriptures, that is Christ."

We will take that road at the end of the message this morning.

Let's look first of all at a general description of the High Priest's holy garments. In Exodus 28:2, we read:

"And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty."

This ESV translation is a very literal translation, and is a good one here. The image is that these garments are to reflect glory. We think of the glory of God on the mountain like fire, resplendent in beauty. When the elders came approaching the throne of God, there was something like precious stones underneath His feet. There is resplendence and glory in the presence of God. The NIV translation obscures this and renders this:

"Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him dignity and honor."

These are not garments for Aaron. They are garments designed to display the glory and beauty and perfection of God. The NLT renders this well:

"Make sacred garments for Aaron that are glorious and beautiful."

These garments are to display the glory and likeness of Almighty God. Aaron is, in one sense, the image of the invisible God, as we will see.

Let's look together at these garments as a whole. There are eight elements of this amazing attire that God instructs Aaron, and then his sons, to wear. We are going to move from the inside out, arranging them in a sequence that I hope helps us to see the whole. All of the priests

in Israel wear these four linen garments. Just as the outer curtain is demarcated by linen, all of the priests, including Aaron, have four linen elements to their clothing. These are in common. The first is that they have linen underwear. God makes a big deal about this, that they are to be clothed underneath with underwear, because there can be no mention of anything immoral or improper in the sanctuary. There is a mark for modesty in the priesthood in Scripture. In Ezekiel, it says that this linen undergarment is there to absorb the sweat, like ancient wicking garments, lest the smell come up of people working too hard, an image of sacred space at rest in the sanctuary of God. Another linen item that all priests wear is a large tunic underneath, and this is the white garment that you see just of the bottom edge and at the sleeves. All priests have a linen tunic. They also have linen headpieces, and they have a sash of some kind. The common priests have a woven sash, which is made of material just like the outer veil, almost like a mark that allows them to go past this outer level.

All of the priests wear these items, but the high priest, who is our main concern this morning, wears four distinctive outer garments, and they are made of the costliest materials, the same materials that the sanctuary is made of. The first of these outer garments is a **robe**. In Exodus 28:31, we read:

“Make the robe of the ephod entirely of blue cloth.”

It is made entirely of *tekellet*, a bluish-hued, dyed wool and linen mixture. This is the blue garment that you see hanging on the outside above the linen tunic underneath. This robe is made of very expensive materials. It takes 10,000 murex snails to dye just one garment. Sewn in at the hem of this robe made of costly fabric are pomegranates alternating with golden bells, and as a high priest walks and ministers in the sanctuary, the sound of these bells tinkling can be heard. Just a couple of years ago, archaeologists found in a sewage drain one of the high priest’s golden bells from the time of Jesus. It might have fallen off the robe of Caiaphas. The significance of the golden bells is that as the high priest walks with his stately royal gait, the tinkling sound of the bells announces his presence. As no one comes into the presence of a king unannounced, the high priest wears these garments entering into God's holy presence.

Above the robe, the high priest is clothed with a unique garment called the **ephod**, as we read in Exodus 28:6-8:



“Make the ephod of gold, and of blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and of finely twisted linen--the work of a skilled craftsman. It is to have two shoulder pieces attached to two of its corners, so it can be fastened. Its skillfully woven waistband is to be like it--of one piece with the ephod and made with gold, and with blue, purple and scarlet yarn.”

Again, the ephod is made of the same materials that the tabernacle is constructed of. It is gold and purple; it is scarlet yarn together with finely twisted linen. It is also made of gold. Some scholars wonder if perhaps the gold is woven as an appliqué on top of the ephod; other scholars think that gold was hammered into thread, and that the gold thread is woven in each strand. The ephod has a shape almost like chain mail, but it is woven of gold. Can you imagine the image of a garment of such splendor? The Hebrew tradition calls Aaron's garments just garments of gold because the dominant impression created by these garments is the shining reflection of gold. The ephod is fashioned above the blue robe, and it rests on the outside of his person. On his shoulders, there are two onyx stones, and they have on them the names of the sons of Israel, tribal names arranged in the order of their birth. Just as military officers today wear the insignia of their office on their shoulders, so the high priest carries the names of the tribes on his shoulders. This is the background for the famous passage in Isaiah 9:6 which says of Christ, the Messiah:

“For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders.”

The high priest represents the entire community. The ephod is attached to his person on these shoulder pieces.

The third distinctive element of the high priest's attire is the **front piece upon his headpiece**. It is made of pure gold, and in Exodus 28:36 we read that this is engraved upon it, like a signet seal:

“HOLY TO THE LORD.”

He belongs to God; he is God's man representing the community, bearing their names on his shoulders, and the name of God upon his forehead.

The central most distinguishing element of the high priestly garments, the most costly of all, is the **breastpiece**, and it rests above his heart. It is in the shape of a square, just like the Holy of Holies. The high priest's garments allow him access once a year to this innermost place where God's presence dwells. The breastpiece is also made of the same combination as the ephod, of these costly materials woven with gold, and yet the breastpiece is distinguished by 12 precious stones arranged in four rows of three. In this way, the names of the twelve tribes are borne upon his chest. Aaron's garments, these high priestly garments, mark him as clothed in glory and splendor. No one in Israel is dressed as he is. The impression of these garments is

overwhelming in reflecting the glory of God. Aaron, in a sense, is in himself the image of the invisible God behind the veil. Just as humanity in the Garden reflects the image and likeness of God, so Aaron, in the midst of the sanctuary, is like a re-created man. He is clothed in splendor, the glory of God. The impression of these garments was one that created awe and wonder, beauty like none other. We have an eyewitness account from about 200 years before the time of Christ of what the high priest looked like when he ministered in this attire. *The Letter of Aristeas*, ca. 150-100 B.C. records this reaction. He says:

“It was an occasion of great amazement to us when we saw Eleazar (the high priest) engaged on his ministry, and all the glorious vestments, including the wearing of the ‘garment’ with precious stones upon it in which he is vested; golden bells surround the hem at his feet and make a very special sound. Alongside each of them are ‘tassels’ adorned with ‘flowers,’ and of marvelous colors. He was clad in an outstandingly magnificent ‘girdle,’ woven in the most beautiful colors.

“On his breast he wears what is called the ‘oracle,’ to which are attached ‘twelve stones’ of different kinds, set in gold, giving the names of the patriarchs in what was the original order, each stone flashing its own natural distinctive color-- quite indescribable. Upon his head he has what is called the ‘tiara,’ and upon this the inimitable ‘mitre,’ the hallowed diadem having in relief on the front in the middle in holy letters on a golden leaf the name of

God, ineffable in glory. The wearer is considered worthy of such vestments at the services.

“Their appearance makes one awe-struck: A man would think he had come out of this world into another one. I emphatically assert that every man who comes near the spectacle of what I have described will experience astonishment and amazement beyond words, his very being transformed by the hallowed arrangement on every single detail.”

That was the impression created by these garments, and they are chosen with great care. God does not tell the people: “Make something that seems good to you.” He designs these with tremendous care because they are to reflect the glory of God.

I want to focus on the central piece of these garments. These garments are big part of the



Palmer family because my wife spent our entire married lives researching these garments, and it's a big subject around our house. At one level it pains me to speak of them in such brief



terms. There is so much that we will have to revisit at another time, but I want to focus on the central piece, the breastplate. The breastplate upon his chest corresponds to the Holy of Holies. There are only three squares in the Bible: the Holy of Holies, the breastplate, and the New Jerusalem. The breastplate signifies the dwelling place of God, and what is so exciting and thrilling is that God instructs the people to place these stones in four rows upon the heart of the high priest. On each of these precious stones is engraved the name of one of the tribes like a signet seal. Seals and signets embody the person. They stand for the tribes. The high priest literally carries them

into the sphere of God's presence. It is as if all of Israel is present before the Lord like a signet seal, each one with a name: the stone of Asher, Naphtali, or Simeon carved and inscribed by name, set like a signet seal. Signet seals were used to sign legal documents; signet seals were used to mark identity. It is Judah's signet seal that he leaves with Tamar in Genesis. With these seals, the people of God are safely carried into God's presence. Signet seals in antiquity were often worn on garments with a pin, just above the heart.

We hear of this in the Song of Songs, the Song of Solomon 8:4-6 when a woman who is just so in love with a man says:

"Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires. Who is this coming up from the desert leaning on her lover? Under the apple tree I roused you; there your mother conceived you, there she who was in labor gave you birth. Place me like a [signet] seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame."

Place me like a signet seal right above your heart. You see, the center piece of this holy attire is that you and I are placed like signet seals over the heart of the priests, and we are carried representatively upon his person into God's holy presence. The high priest embodies in himself the Covenant relationship. He has us, by name, upon his chest, upon his shoulders. He has God's name upon his forehead, and he carries us to God's presence, and he carries God to us. When the high priest returns from his ministry, he blesses the people: after carrying us into God's presence, he then bestows God's name back upon us. The priestly blessing is seen in Numbers 6:22-27:

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

‘The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the LORD turn His face toward you and give you peace.’”

So they will put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.’”

Today, Jesus Christ our High Priest carries us into God's presence and carries God back to us. For many of us, as Americans, or as Protestants, we find this concept of a representative priesthood somewhat alarming, but let me assure you this morning, that all of us need a High Priest. None of us can come into God's presence on our own. Aaron's sons who come and offer strange fire are consumed by the holiness of Almighty God, and God, just as He placed a high priest at the middle of the sanctuary, this high priestly ministry holds in trust the ministry of Jesus Christ, our High Priest, because Jesus Christ is the one who has the government upon His shoulders. He is the one who has our names upon Him, and He carries us safely into God's presence that we might be remembered. Aaron comes right before the presence of God, and God's attention is fixed upon the names of the people. He carries us; so too, Jesus Christ. If you have a High Priest, that means that God does dwell among you, and it means that God's dwelling among us makes us a holy people, a kingdom of priests. God is really among the people. It is not just an idea; it is not just a thought. God is really there.

I remember, as a new Christian, coming to church and being overwhelmed by the presence of God. I heard people singing to God like He was alive and hearing them. I heard people speaking about what God was telling them. I thought: “God is not just an idea, He is a person; God is alive!” In the Old Testament, the High Priest would carry the names of the people into God's presence, bearing their sins, mediating God's presence back to them, God dwelling among them. So it is the case this morning: we have a High Priest, Jesus Christ, fulfilling this office, ever living to intercede for us, carrying us safely into His presence. Do not come into God's presence on your own; you will not be received. If you try to come into God's holy presence on your own, unmediated, God's presence is a holy consuming fire; but if you come this morning through faith in Jesus Christ, He will carry you safely there, and you will be received. You will be treated like a son or daughter, and God's presence will abide among us in holiness, and that holiness will radiate out. It will be a holiness that will spill out into our lives so that we will reflect His holiness in the way that we live and act and think. We will be that people in the world seeking to maximize the display of God's glory in our lives.

If you don't know Jesus Christ this morning, I want to encourage you to place your trust in Him. Paul's favorite way of describing a Christian is someone who is *in Christ*, or we might say this morning someone who is *on Christ*. Place your trust in Him so that your name is on Him, and be

received as a son or daughter. If you do know Christ this morning, then savor the sweetness of His High Priestly mediation, of the presence of God, and let it wash over you, cleansing you, cleansing me, and then empowering us to reflect the glory. We are sort of like the moon. It was exciting this week to land a robotic 'something or other' on a comet. The surface of the comet sort of looks like the moon, and the moon has no light of her own. The moon is beautiful, and it is guiding and orienting, but the moon has only borrowed glory, the borrowed, reflected glory of the sun. We are not the sun, praise God! We function in some ways, however imperfectly, like the moon, signaling and pointing and orienting life and time toward the sun. You see, the road in this text to Christ is the road toward Jesus Christ our Great High Priest. He bears your name on His shoulders and over His heart. These truths are sublime and beautiful and poetic, and I found this week that this is a time for poetry. The praise song, *Before the Throne of God Above*, expresses this truth so wonderfully. The words of this song were written by a young Irish girl, 22 years old: Charitie de Cheney Lees Smith Bancroft. Her dad was a pastor, and in 1863, she wrote these words because she saw the glory of Jesus Christ, our High Priest:

“Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea.
A great high Priest whose Name is Love
Who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on His hands,
My name is written on His heart.
I know that while in Heaven He stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart.”

If you have trusted in Christ morning, then you have this High Priest of glory and splendor, and the presence of the living God is a sanctifying one for all of us. Let us pray.

Lord God, we worship You this morning. Lord, we pause at the beauty of Your holiness. We thank You, Lord, that You have carried our names into Your presence that we might be received. Lord, we praise You this morning that You have not only carried us to You, but that You have taken the name of Almighty God and placed upon us. You have marked us as a people, holy, and belonging to You. I pray, Father, this morning, that Your name would be upon us, that Your name would be reflected in how we live; that Your name would be the subject of our conversation, the person we are eager to talk about. Father, I pray for anyone here this morning who is wondering if they would be received. I pray that Jesus Christ would seem ineffably attractive to this heart, and that you would place your trust in Him. He is unique. Father, I pray for all of us who already know You, that we would be freshly reminded of Your high priestly ministry on our behalf, and that we might take our identity as a holy people in You and live like that this week.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.