

“Storyline: Tabernacle”

Exodus 20 and 25

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First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

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It happened 44 years ago, in a place called the Ia Drang valley. A battle was fought there and after it was over General William Westmoreland ordered a “mop up” of the area.

A 22 year old soldier was part of the operation. His name was Marshall. And he and four others soldiers were sent out on a forward reconnaissance patrol. It would change all of their lives forever. You might have seen the movie that was based on Marshall’s story. It was called “Casualties of War.”

The movie showed five soldiers coming to an isolated hut in a small village. Four of them made a decision to commit a crime that day. One of them, Marshall made a different choice. Eventually, after a struggle with himself, Marshall chose to report the crime. A trial ensued the four soldiers were eventually brought to trial and convicted. That was the end of the movie.

What the movie didn’t show though, was the fact that Marshall has been haunted ever since. In an interview 20 years afterwards Marshall said he’ll live with the memory of what happened that day for the rest of his life. But then he said something else. “I think,” he said, “I think that God forgives. But I think maybe God is more forgiving than I am.”

It’s an interesting comment. One a lot of us might make. But is it true? A theologian I admire once wrote, “The great problem we have with understanding God is learning how to distinguish mercy from tolerance. We live in an age of tolerance where the Bible’s story about a God of mercy is gradually being replaced by the strange idea that out of His love for us, God has simply decided to tolerate our sins.”

So we say what Marshall said. “I think God forgives. But I think maybe God is more forgiving than I am.” But when we say that, I wonder if we really understand what we’ve said. For what we’ve said is that our estimate of our own guilt is greater than God’s. And in fact, the truth is just the

reverse.

In Exodus 32, a passage many of us read this week in the Daily Walk Bible, God says to Moses, “Now go, lead the people to the place I told you about ... But when I come to call the people to account, I will certainly hold them responsible for their sins.”

In other words, God doesn't tolerate our sins. He holds us responsible for them. That's what Exodus teaches us. But Exodus also teaches us something else. “Make the ark's cover – the place of atonement - of pure gold ... then put the atonement cover on top of the ark.”

Those words are the first directions that God gives Moses about the furnishings for a place called the tabernacle. The tabernacle was God's tent. In the middle of all the tents of the people of Israel who came out of Egypt and through the Red Sea, God now tells Moses to put up His tent.

But there's more. Because in the middle of the tabernacle is a unique piece of furniture: the Ark. It's a container; almost four feet long and just over two feet wide. It's made of wood; but not just any wood, acacia wood which is famous in the Middle East still because of one quality – its durability. You see, this is a container that's meant to last. What it contains is meant to stay there.

So what does it contain? Verse 16 tells us. “Put in the ark,” God says, “the stone tablets.” In the original Hebrew, the tablets are called “aduth”; “a witness or a testimony.” A testimony ... of course! But what testimony are we talking about?

At the end of God's directions for the tabernacle we find out. “And when the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai,” Exodus says, “God gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, inscribed by the finger of God.”

The two tablets contained the commandments. They were to be kept with the people, permanently, in a container called the Ark. And they were kept there to give testimony. They literally defined sin, the behavior that separates us from community with God.

Of course Israel will discover the truth of the testimony. For over the next 40 years they will break God's commandments. So perhaps now you can understand. There are more than just two stone tablets inside the Ark. There is a witness willing and able to testify against us. There is a witness in the center of Tabernacle to our sinfulness.

You see, God never minimizes human sinfulness, ever. When we sin, God doesn't simply say, "Well, let's just forget about it. I love you. So I'll tolerate your behavior." No! Just the opposite! God keeps His laws and their testimony against us in His tabernacle, in a permanent container, in a box made of acacia wood.

But on top of that container is a cover. The cover, says Exodus, is not like the box. The cover is to be made "of pure gold." "Make it two and half cubits long, and a cubit and half wide." It is made to match the dimensions of the box exactly. It is made to cover the box perfectly and completely. And because it is pure gold, it will be the most expensive feature of the Ark. It will have to be made at great cost.

So I wonder, can you see the correspondence? A cover of pure gold, a costly cover that completely hides the testimony inside the box ... A cover that stands between the witness to human sinfulness and the presence of God ... A cover that points beyond the Old to the New Covenant and a person named Jesus.

For like the cover of pure gold, Jesus too is pure, the New Testament says, without sin of any sort. Like the costly sacrifice needed to make the cover for the Ark, Jesus offers a costly sacrifice to cover the sins of the world. And just as the cover was carefully measured so that it completely covered the box and the witness to our sinfulness, so the sacrifice of Christ, says the Book of Hebrews, was carefully made to completely cover our sins.

"For Christ has entered," Hebrews says, "not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the real one, but into heaven itself, to appear in the presence of God on our behalf."

Do you see? God's mercy isn't tolerance of our sinfulness. It never has been. It never will be. God's mercy doesn't minimize our sins. It doesn't simply ignore them, or

pretend they don't matter. No! God's mercy offers to atone for our sins, to put them inside a box and cover them once and for all.

The cover is ready, the New Testament says. The costly sacrifice has been made to provide it. The death of Christ on the cross is ready to cover the box that contains the witness to your sins and to mine. But there is one more step that must be taken. And only you and I can take it.

The cover must be closed. We must accept what Jesus has done for us and close the cover. We must stop holding on to our sins. We must let the mercy of God bear witness to our sins, then cover them forever.

That's what a young woman named Phan Thi Kim did. Maybe you don't remember her name, but I'm sure many of you remember her picture. She was nine years old the day a napalm bomb from a South Vietnamese aircraft came down on her village. Two of her cousins were killed. But she ran down a road, screaming with her arms outstretched, right into the lens of a camera. And her picture, according to *Life* magazine is one of the most famous photographs of the last fifty years.

Phan Thi Kim suffered third-degree burns over 50 per cent of her body that day. But she lived. She endured fourteen months of treatment. After her treatment ended, she emigrated to Canada. Some Christians who lived near her invited her to church. She became a Christian. And in 1996, she accepted an invitation to speak to a group of Veterans at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC.

"I have suffered a lot; both physical and emotional pain," she said. "But God's mercy saved my life!"

What is your greatest anger? What's your greatest pain? What's the greatest sin you've ever committed, or the greatest sin that someone's committed against you? Whatever it is - God's mercy, God's incredible costly, sacrificial mercy can release you from it. It doesn't need to hold you captive. God's mercy can save your life this morning just like it saved the life of Phan Ti Kim.

So if you want to apply this sermon to your life this morning, before we pray and walk away from this moment, take the sin you've buried deep inside, the one you've never forgotten, the one you've never forgiven. Take it now, and place it with an act of your imagination in a box.

The box is big enough for it. It was designed by God to hold what you are now putting in it. Then in your minds' eye, reach up. Take hold of that pure gold cover. Take hold of the costly sacrifice that was made by Jesus Christ. Pause a minute. Say thanks. Then close the cover and let the mercy of God cover the box, now and forever.

Let's pray