

**“In the Shadow”**

Exodus 35:30-36:7

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

*Series: Exodus – ReOpening God’s Way*

The Woodside Church

July 19, 2020

Poor Bezalel. Always off in a corner, ignored by the rest of the kids. Unwanted, unappreciated, misunderstood. That’s what he thinks at least. Perhaps you’d think so if you knew his story. But you see, that’s the trouble. Nobody remembers Bezalel – probably because his name is Bezalel. It sounds like something dishonest stock traders do. “The judge sentenced him to fifty years in prison after he em-bezaleled four hundred million dollars.” Why didn’t his father Uri call him something easier to pronounce – Jacob, Joseph, Jehoshaphat? His name means, “In the shadow” and that’s where you’ll find him – in the shadow of more talented, brighter, better students. Bezalel is one of those kids who never fits in.

It’s a few years since Moses led the Israelites out of slavery and into the desert. Now they are free from the grueling, back breaking labor of building Pharaoh’s cities. No more of the harsh taskmaster’s rod or the systematic destruction of every male child. But freedom places them in the hands of a new harsher taskmaster: the desert. In Egypt there is water, meat, bread and vegetables. The desert is not so generous. Yet the Lord provides. He sends manna with the morning dew and flocks of quail with the setting sun. Moreover, the Lord shows Moses where to find fresh springs among the arid rocks.

Bezalel’s grandfather, Hur, is one of Moses’ right hand men. Hur and Aaron pray alongside Moses whenever Israel faces a battle (Exodus 17:10-13). He is a member of the elite inner circle, a personal advisor to Moses. Hur’s son, Uri, hopes his son Bezalel might one day follow in his grandfather’s footsteps. It is a heavy burden to lay on the boy. Bezalel often feels in the shadow of his grandfather. It seems unlikely he will ever step into the light and shine on his own. Uri cannot see any promising talents or abilities in the boy, either. He is useless with a bow and arrow. The teachers gave him detention when he accidentally pinned one of them to a wall. The kids laugh at him when he falls off the bucking goat after five seconds. And he is always tangled in knots whenever he throws his lasso in the big quail roundup. About the only skill he seems to possess is making tents. Even in this he is not very useful. Bezalel takes too long to finish a job. He keeps dreaming up these grand canopies covered in jewels. They are mobile palaces fit for a Pharaoh, not a dirt poor desert nomad.

Late one afternoon his father Uri comes home in a sour mood. “What’s for dinner?” he roars. “Manna,” replies his wife. “Manna, again?” he growls. “What did you do to it this time? Manna burgers? Manburger helper? Barbecued Baby-back Manna?” “No,” she replies, “I’m trying an Italian recipe: Manna-cotti.” Uri is about to complain about his heartburn when he spies the note from Bezalel’s teacher. It reads,

Dear Uri son of Hur, I regret to inform you that your son Bezalel is not cut out for the military life. We are therefore notifying you of his dismissal from the camp

training school. We are sure, however, that his special abilities will be used by God in some other way. May the Lord bless and keep your family.

Signed, Ezra ben Yosef, Headmaster of the Sinai Military Academy.

“Special abilities?” Uri shouts, “What special abilities? Who needs a satin and silk tent covered with jewels in the middle of a desert battle?” Then turning to the frightened boy he says, “Why couldn’t you be good at roping quail, harvesting manna or milking a water buffalo? So help me God, I’m going to teach you a useful craft if it’s the last thing I do. Then you will finally make your grandpa Hur proud.”

But Bezalel does not stay to find out what his father has in mind. He bolts from the tent and keeps running. Leaving his clan and his tribe behind, Bezalel is about to cross the boundary for the whole Israelite camp and head into the unforgiving wilderness when he trips over a stone. “Did you hurt yourself child?” asks a warm and familiar voice. Bezalel looks up, but he can’t make out the face because the sun is directly behind his head. The man’s shadow offers a cool respite from the heat. “Where are you going in such a hurry?” the man inquires. Then Bezalel recognizes the voice. “Grandfather?” “Yes, child. Here, let me help you up.” The two of them find a shady spot to sit. “Now,” begins his grandfather, “why are you running away?” “I disgraced you and our entire family. Father says I am useless.” “Nonsense,” replies Hur. “Your father is a man of the eyes but he is not a man of prayer as I am.” “What do you mean?” asks Bezalel. “Those who look only with their eyes, judge a person by what they can make and do. But those who live by prayer are able to look into a person and see what the Lord places in the heart. You have strong talents and abilities, Bezalel. More importantly, the Spirit of God burns in you. One day, your skills will shine.” “I should go back to Egypt,” Bezalel sulks, “they would appreciate my abilities there.” “We must never tell the Almighty how to make his plans,” says Hur. “He placed you here for a reason.” “But what do I have to offer?” Bezalel asks doubtfully. “That’s the wrong question,” replies Hur. “You should ask, ‘When will they discover how much they need what God gave you?’ Each one of us has a special role to play in God’s story. When we do, we become the way God’s glory shines in the shadows. The world will be a much poorer place if you do not play your part. And one more thing – and this is the most important – whatever you do, whether it be insignificant or monumental, do it all for the Lord.” Hur prays a blessing over Bezalel, walks him back to the family tent and has a few words with Uri to smooth things over.

The next day Bezalel goes out among the rocks near his camp. He loves to collect gems and quartz. But as he bends to pick up a rock at the top of the hill, someone throws a stone past his head. “Get out of here, this is my spot,” yells a boy about his age. “I don’t see your name on it,” shouts Bezalel and throws a stone at him. “Don’t make fun of my name,” yells the boy and throws more stones. “I didn’t make fun of your name,” shouts Bezalel, returning the volley. “Besides your name can’t be as bad as mine.” “Oh, yeah! I bet my name is worse than yours,” a hail of pebbles fly. “No way! My name is Bezalel.” “Oh yeah? Well my name is Oholiab.” Bezalel stops. “O-ho what? You win. Your name is worse.” “Cut it out,” says Oholiab as he charges up the hill. “Truce!” Bezalel says between gasps of laughter. “I know how you feel. I’ve been teased a lot myself.”

The two sit down. “So why do you want this rocky ground?” asks Bezalel. “Same reason as you – the gems. Everyone down there worries about manna and quail. They don’t know what treasures lie all around them.” “Yeah,” agrees Bezalel. “But you can’t eat this stuff, so it’s useless to them. It’s only valuable to guys like you and me.” And suddenly, Bezalel realizes he’d found a friend – someone who has a talent like his.

Each day Bezalel and Oholiab meet on the hill, after their chores, to collect and trade stones. As the years go by, they discover how to cut and set the stones into jewelry. They go into partnership making and fixing jewelry. They learn how to weave, embroider and dye fabrics. The colors they create are magnificent: purple, scarlet and azure. In addition to their jewelry store they open a chain of tent improvement shops called Tent Depot. And all along, Bezalel remembers the advice of his grandfather, “Whatever you do, do it all for the Lord.” He tries to serve each customer as though he is serving God.

Sadly, Oholiab and Bezalel decide to close their shops. The poor Israelites have no money to spend on jewelry and fine fabrics. Bezalel was right all along: he has nothing to offer these people. They decide to announce the closings at the next worship service.

As usual, the whole nation gathers to offer sacrifices. But this day is different. For Moses has returned from a long visit with the Lord. His face still reflects the blinding radiance of God’s glory. “This is what the Lord has commanded you to do,” he declares. “Bring Bezalel son of Uri and Oholiab son of Ahisamach to me.” The two friends are stunned and scared to hear their names. The nation parts like the Red Sea before them and suddenly they are in the brilliant presence of Moses. They don’t know what this is about, but now is a good time to announce their going out of business sale since every eye is on them. “Sir, we regret to tell you we must close our shops...” “Good!” Moses declares, cutting them off. “Good?” the two ask, “Why is it good?” “Because the Lord has another calling for you. He has chosen you to direct the construction of His Tabernacle. It will be His tent in the midst of our tents. The Lord chose you and filled you with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts (and) the ability to teach others (Exodus 35:30-31, 34).” “But...!” they stammer. “You will direct all the skilled craftspeople,” Moses continues, “the weavers, the embroiders, the dyers, the gold and silversmiths, the jewelers, the carvers of wood and tanners of hide. Every tribe and clan will send their best people to learn from you.” “But where will all the materials come from?” Oholiab asks. “From them,” Moses replies sweeping his arm out to the nation. Bezalel is shocked. “But they’re poor. They don’t have enough fabrics and gems to build this.” “Never tell the Almighty how to make his plans,” says Moses. “He will build this Tabernacle through your abilities and their gifts.”

And Moses’ words came to pass. Every tribe, clan and family sends skilled workers to study under Bezalel and Oholiab. More amazing by far, though, is the flood of offerings that pour in from every corner of the camp: gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; ram skins dyed red, acacia wood, olive oil, spices, incense, onyx stones and other gems. The people bring so many offerings morning after morning that the workers ask Moses to tell the people to stop the offerings! The entire camp buzzes with activity. Bezalel and Oholiab can’t be everywhere at once. Yet since they train the workers well, it is not necessary.

Finally the day comes when, before the gaze of the entire nation, Aaron and the priests carry the Ark of the Covenant into the Tabernacle and the Pillar of Cloud, the symbol of God's presence, descends upon it. Now God's presence is not just up in the sky or high on Mount Sinai. The glory of God comes near and lives in the middle of His people thanks to the work of Bezalel and Oholiab.

So learn some lessons from these two guys with funny names. Each one of us has a special role to play in God's story. When you do, you become the way God's glory comes near, comes among us and shines in our shadows. God has given you more abilities than you think. Discover your gifts, your calling and purpose. You are valuable to God no matter what other people think. The world will be a much poorer place if you do not play your part. And whatever you do, whether insignificant or monumental, do it all for the Lord. That's the best way to say thank you for the abilities He gives you.

On the day the Tabernacle is dedicated, Uri approaches Bezalel. "Son, can you forgive me for doubting your abilities?" "Of course father. I doubted myself for a long time. But there is one question I have always wanted to ask." "What's that son?" "Why did you name me Bezalel? That name is like a curse – it made me feel I was in the shadow my whole life." "No son, you misunderstand. It's a blessing. Bezalel means 'In the Shadow of God's Protection.' And that's the best place to be."