

January 3, 2021 Second Sunday following Christmas
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
John 1:1-14
"A Pup Tent onf the Front Lawn?"
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When I was growing up I was a Boy Scout which meant I did more than my share of camping. We would camp all twelve months of the year. It did not matter the weather, the heat of summer, the cold of winter, the rain of spring, the winds of fall, we would load up our backpacks and hike out into the woods. This meant that I learned a fair amount about tents.

Tents are tricky bit of business. Carelessness will demonstrate how fragile they are as a shelter. Falling asleep without leaving a screen window partially open in the winter time will cause frozen condensation to form and it can literally snow inside of your tent in the morning. Not covering tent spikes with rocks in the muddy earth of spring can allow your entire tent to collapse as the spikes loosen. I have many vivid memories, both good and bad of my life in tents growing up. There is an unmatched exhilaration to being deep in the woods with only a tent as shelter. But, I do not tent anymore. Although I still love being in the woods, I also have a fondness for hot showers and cold martinis which keeps my excursions in nature to daytrips.

The reason I have been reminiscing about tents with you this morning is that when I did a little research on our text this morning from the Gospel of John I was struck by an interesting translation variation. In verse fourteen

we are given what has been called a summary of the incarnation in three phrases; "the Word became flesh, and lived among us, and we have seen his glory..." I found the second phrase, "and lived among us" translated in two other ways which captured my imagination. The first was, "and tented among us." "The Word became flesh, and tented among us, and we have seen his glory." It paints a more evocative image of the incarnation, "tented among us" than "lived among us" does. It paints a picture of the divine's incarnation that is more fragile, more ephemeral, more potentially on the move, more in need of mindful and intentional care. It presents an image of an existence that is more challenged by its surroundings, an image of trying to make do in an environment in which one does not normally reside.

This alternative translation led me to blow the dust off of my Greek reference books to get some sense of the meaning of the phrase in the original language. I discovered that "tent" is certainly a sense of the word in general terms but in the specifics of how it is used in this case the more appropriate translation would be "tabernacled." This provides yet another interesting image to consider. A tabernacle could be considered a tent as well but a tent on steroids as it were.

In the book of Exodus, Moses is instructed by God to build a portable shrine which would serve as a meeting place for humanity and the divine. Due to the semi-nomadic nature of the tribes of Israel they needed to be able to pick up and move this structure for the three hundred years of its existence. The description of the tabernacle is quite detailed and elaborate. They used poles and hanging

linen curtains to build the walls which allowed for the creation of an enclosed courtyard and an inner sanctuary which was divided into an outer room called the Holy Place and an inner room called the Holy of Holies where it was believed that God chose to dwell. Once a year, one person, the High Priest, was allowed to enter. The detailed use of metal and wood and varieties of colored linens is extensive. We are not talking of any simple pup tent when we discuss the tabernacle.

Perhaps it is just me but I prefer the image of Jesus "tented" among us. A simple tent pops up one day on the front lawn of Ladue Chapel or perhaps on the Saint Louis Country Club. There is Jesus making camp right in our midst. He does not choose a sturdy brick building in which to dwell among us. There he is as we head for work each morning and upon our return home each evening. There he is in his flimsy tent making a home for himself with us. His tent is carefully pitched to withstand the elements.

Unfortunately Greek scholars will not let me get away with this tent interpretation. They argue that "tabernacle" is the more appropriate translation. They state that the main point of the word is not the temporary and transitory element of Christ's existence in our midst but that it is about the bringing together of God and mortality "the presence of the Eternal in time."

I am not really sure what to do with an idea as big as "the Eternal in time." All of our experience is defined by the transitory. All that we do is parsed out by the seconds on the clock. We move from activity to activity

with one eye ever on the schedule. Even here in worship we are aware of the clock. Have you ever noticed there is a clock on the back wall of the balcony of the sanctuary? Better not take too much time during the sermon, everyone is waiting on brunch.

It is hard for us to fathom the eternal, to imagine that which is beyond the only reality we have ever known, tightly tucked within time. And yet that is what we are presented in this Christmas season, "the Eternal in time" an image just as out of place as that of Jesus in a pup tent out at the Saint Louis Country Club.

And if we turn to the preceding phrase from John we find the same problem, "the Word became flesh." "The Word became flesh?" The God of majesty and might within the body of a baby, is a challenge to our well established categories.

Preacher Fred Craddock writes this,

"And the Word became *flesh* is a Christological affirmation of a radical nature with far-reaching implications for our thinking about God, life in the world, and what it means to be Christian. Analogies about changing clothes, as in the stories of a [ruler] who wears peasant clothing in order to move among his subjects freely, are not adequate for clarifying John 1:14. The church has always had members who wanted to protect their Christ from John 1:14 with phrases such as 'seemed to be,' 'appeared,' and 'in many ways was like' flesh. Whatever else John 1:14 means, it does state without question the depth, intensity, and the pursuit of God's love for the world." (Craddock, et al, pp. 71-72)

Again I say, you might as well put Jesus in a pup tent out on the front lawn. It makes just about as much sense.

The writer Madeleine L'Engle expresses it this way, "Cribb'd, cabined, confined within the contours of a human infant. The infinite defined by the finite? The Creator of all life thirsty and abandoned? Why would [God] do such a thing? Aren't there easier ways for God to redeem...fallen creatures? (L'Engle p. 18)

I do not know if there was any easier way or any other way to redeem all of us. What I do know is that there is not a more startling way. When John wrote this gospel many viewed creation with a sense of dualism. Significant philosophical schools and religious traditions divided creation into a spiritual realm of perfection where God resided and a material world that was sinful. This even played out in how people viewed themselves. It was believed we were made up of a soul which sought out divine perfection and a body of flesh which was inherently sinful.

The Word made flesh was blasphemy to all of this. It was Jesus in a pup tent on the golf course. And then John goes on to suggest that in this weak, vulnerable, mortal baby in a manger we have seen God's glory.

But what does any of this mean for our lives? What difference does it make if the Word is made flesh, if God lives among us, if we have seen God's glory? What does it mean if we have Jesus in a pup tent out on the front lawn?

It means that God travels right to where we live. It means that even at our most vulnerable God understands all of our human frailty. It means that God will go to absurd lengths to bring reconciliation, and healing, and wholeness into our lives. It means that God demonstrates divine power and might and glory not by lording it over us but by choosing to live with us. Jesus in a pup tent on the front lawn may not make much sense but what a grand gift it is. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Craddock, et al, Preaching Through the Christian Year: A, Trinity Press International, Philadelphia, 1992.
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L'Engle, Madeleine, The Irrational Season, Crosswicks, U.S.A., 1977.