



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### 1 Christmas

#### A Tent Among Us

[RCL]: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 147 or 147:13-21; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

In today's Gospel, St. John uses a fascinating image that most of our Bible translations miss. Some of us are accustomed to hearing this majestic and abstract prologue to John's mystical-leaning Gospel: "The Word became flesh and *lived among us*." But we aren't so used to hearing this: "Jesus became flesh and *pitched a tent among humanity*." The image of God dwelling among us is beautiful and a bit abstract, maybe even domesticated—but Jesus pitching a tent? Hmm...

This week, our small-town paper has been running a series of articles about the growing population of homeless people. The paper reports, "Word has gotten out beyond our kith and kin" about a local storefront ministry that serves hot breakfasts and lunches seven days a week, as well as a 90-day transitional housing program. Folk are coming here, pitching tents on vacant lots, and trying to get enough food and respect to survive another day. Predictably, town fathers and mothers, as well as non-profit donors, fear that we won't have the resources to provide care for them. Right now, the idea of anyone pitching a tent in our town—except for scouts in the backyard—is viewed suspiciously.

Recently, I heard a friend talk about pitching a tent in a very different context when she attended a Woodstock-like music festival called Bonnaroo. She recalled pitching her tent in a sea of thousands of other tents. One day, exhausted and exasperated by the constant stimulation, she went into her tent and had a miniature breakdown: she complained (loudly) that she was tired of the noise, the humidity, and the smiling strangers everywhere she looked. When her temper-tantrum ended, and she emerged from the tent, she realized with great embarrassment that all her "neighbors" had borne witness to her discontent.

The idea of God Almighty pitching a tent among us temper-tantrum prone, smelly, needy, and shame-filled human beings is quite shocking. This earthy image is such a contrast to the more central metaphor for Jesus at the beginning of John's gospel, the *logos*, translated as the *Word*. *Logos* connotes order, rationality, an "operating system" designed by a masterful creator. But St. John doesn't allow us to indulge our de-personalizing tendency when it comes to relating to God. Instead, he brings us back down to the gritty reality of the Incarnation by juxtaposing the *logos* with tent-camping among humankind.

In fact, I think many of us might recoil a bit at the idea of the Christ showing up in our backyard and asking us to pitch our tent right next to his.

Why might we be reluctant to go camping with Jesus?

First, I bet most of us wouldn't want to be exposed; every conversation can be overheard, not to mention the snoring and that annoying zip-sound in the middle of the night when a fellow camper needs to relieve him or herself. Not to mention the shadows on the side of the tents revealing the silhouette of our actual lumpy, unruly flesh.

And secondly, tents are always a bit dirty, no matter how stringent you are about keeping your shoes outside.

Dirtiness and exposure. So much for putting on our Sunday best to meet Jesus! So much for the obsessive nature of reputation-management that consciously or unconsciously drives how we present ourselves on social media.

But you know, our aversion to tent-pitching God is about something more than our desire to “look good” for God. Our deeper fear is being known by Jesus, inside and out. Of, in a phrase, personal intimacy.

Intimacy is in trouble these days. A recent cover story for *The Atlantic* explored the steady delay and decline in intimate relationships (not just marriage) among younger people. We live in an age and culture where self-sufficiency and independence are upheld as attainable goals. If you lack a cup of sugar, don't *bother* your neighbors, just run to Wal-Mart. Don't know how to fix something? Pull up a video on YouTube on your private smartphone. And if that fails, just call a serviceman. Need a ride to the airport? Don't ask a friend for a favor (who wants to be indebted?), just text Uber for quick service, requiring only your credit card and small-talk, not meaningful conversation.

Genuine intimacy means that we'll be exposed, flabby flesh, anxious ruminations, perfectionist tendencies, short-temper, and all. And more and more of us, in the United States anyway, say, “No, thank you. I'll take care of myself.” And then, even when we can't, many of us prefer to pay a professional to provide for our physical needs.

Later in the same verse, when St. John tells us that the Word, the *logos*, the Christ, Jesus, has come to pitch his tent among us, he says that we have seen Jesus' glory—and it is full of grace and truth. Grace and truth. For most of us to even begin to entertain the idea of Jesus pitching a tent in our backyards, much less his Spirit taking up residence in our hearts, as Paul puts it in Galatians, we need the assurance of Christ's grace—the assurance that God sees us through the lens of mercy and loving-kindness, unconditional love.

And that assurance of God's grace, of God's desire to be with us—no matter how much we want to avoid being exposed, being caught with metaphorical dirt under our nails, no matter how much we want to hide

because of our shame, our guilt, or just the fact that we are imperfect, never measuring up to the person we'd like to be—that assurance is the greatest gift we can receive. It is the gift of the Incarnation, the gift of Emmanuel – *God-with-us*.

The invitation for us this Christmas is to accept the gift. And I'm not talking about some sort of formula where we "accept Jesus Christ into our hearts" and are, from thenceforth, "saved." Accepting the gift of grace, of God-with-us, isn't a one-time transaction. Rather, it is a lifelong process of growing more comfortable with intimacy, with showing up in the world, showing up for life, "Just as I am," as the old hymn says. Accepting the gift of grace sometimes means letting go of the demands of the law, the cultural law, anyway, that suggests that dependence or interdependence is anathema to maturity. The law tells us we must always be engaging in some type of self-improvement project to be worthy of another's affection. The law keeps us from intimacy with ourselves, our spouses, our families, and, of course, the Christ who wants to pitch a tent and come to know and love us as we *are*, rather than as we *want*, or even *ought* to be.

The Incarnation, Christmas, is about Jesus pitching his tent in the messiness of the human condition, coming to understand our struggle, our messiness, our finitude, our sin, our truth, and then redeeming it all by assuring us that we are worthy of being Jesus' brother, or sister, of being adopted children of God. Emmanuel, God-with-us, full of grace and truth, so full, in fact, that we can't help but receive that fullness, grace upon grace. God-with-us, so intimately, that in our quiet moments, when we tune down the law, the fear of intimacy, the running from our imperfections, we can hear Jesus' spirit in our own hearts, crying out, "Abba!" And Abba saying to each of us, "This is my son, my daughter, with whom I am well-pleased."

Amen.

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