

Sermon for 1st Sunday after Christmas (All Cycles) – December 31, 2023
Preached at St. Aidan Episcopal Church, Portland, Oregon
Isaiah 61:10—62:3; Psalm 147; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

In one of the large parishes in Washington, D.C., there was a famous annual Christmas Pageant. There was a young boy in that congregation named Philip who had always wanted to be one of the central characters in the pageant, but because he was not particularly good at remembering either words or directions, he was never given a speaking part. Philip did possess, however, one very important trait: he had an unusually warm and loving heart; and so, finally, one year the director of the pageant took pity on him and decided to make him the Innkeeper in the drama.

Well, Philip studied and practiced and memorized; he worked at his part harder than all of the other children combined, and when the pageant came around, he was ready! As the time for his important scene approached, his excitement and nervousness grew with each passing moment. Suddenly, Mary and Joseph were walking down the long central aisle of the church and it was Philip's turn to go on stage.

There he stood, in the middle of the church, listening with great sadness as Joseph related their plight: they had come a long way; it was late at night; his pregnant wife was about to give birth. He asked the innkeeper if perhaps they could use the stable. Well, it was just altogether too much for young Philip. Suddenly his heart opened up inside him and his eyes filled with tears. Carried away by the moment he completely forgot his lines and blurted out, "Don't worry, Joseph! Mary can have *my* room."

In our reading this morning from the beginning of John's Gospel, the author proclaims: "The Word became flesh and lived among us." This one simple sentence expresses the whole history of redemption, the whole spectrum of what God has done to save and redeem the peoples of the earth. From the creation of the world to the calling of Israel to be God's people; from their deliverance from bondage in Egypt to the sending of the prophets; from the child born in a manger to the man crucified on a cross: *this* is the ultimate love story. God loves us so much that God has chosen to come among us and dwell with us: "The Word became flesh and lived among us."

It is as if God said to us, "Don't worry!" Acting on our behalf, God opened up the divine heart, a heart filled with longing and sorrow, a heart overflowing with tears. Acting on our behalf, God took our flesh and sent the Holy Child to us, so that Mary could have **our** room for the birth of her child. The splendid, sublime hymn at the beginning of the Gospel of John reaches its climax in the 14th verse in these words of warmth and generosity: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, . . . full of grace and truth."

This is good news. This is *the* good news! God not only took our humanity into the very heart of the divine life, but God also chose to "dwell" among us, revealing that the divine life is at the very heart of our humanity. In the original Greek, this verb that we translate as "lived" or "dwelt" literally means "to pitch a tent." So we might say that God's Word took on flesh and *set up camp* among us. You must admit, it's a curious choice of words, a strange image that reminds us that Jesus was not only the enfleshment of God, but also the one who "pitched his tent among us" – full of grace and truth.

This image of “pitching a tent” brings a multiplicity of images to mind. Certainly for everyone from scouts, to backpackers, or families on summer vacation, tents are a symbol of adventure. They give us mobility, the freedom to pick up and move on to new experiences. That’s why tents in some form or other have been the shelters of nomads in all parts of the world from time immemorial.

The image of the Son of God “pitching a tent” among us suggests that Jesus was nomadic—someone who was always on the move. Just as a tent is a temporary shelter, unlike a castle or even the simplest hut of mud and sticks, so Jesus lived a brief, nomadic existence among us in the vast span of the ages of life on our planet. His was not to be a permanent existence in one place for all time; his presence in human history was also something transitory.

But tents can also symbolize degrading circumstances, such as the Red Cross tents for people who have become refugees or who have lost their homes in natural disasters. And tents (or their equivalent, cardboard shacks) are a symbol of the homeless, an ever-present concern for all of us. In recent years we have witnessed the growth of tents and other temporary shelters here in the Portland metro area, despite increased efforts to provide housing for the homeless. The sight of a bunch of tents set up in the very shadow of our modern bridges and highways is an unmistakable sign of poverty in the midst of affluence.

What are we to make of a deity who “tents” among us? When John speaks of the Son of God “pitching his tent among us,” we are reminded of his homelessness. Whether as an infant refugee in Egypt, or as a wanderer in the Judean hills, or as one hanging deserted on a cross, Jesus knew homelessness first hand. In Luke’s Gospel story, Jesus even reminds his followers of his situation: “Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” (Luke 9:58)

The Son of God tenting among us can symbolize both the homelessness of Jesus of Nazareth and the inevitably transitory existence of the One whose birth we celebrate this Christmas season. And all of this—perhaps even more than the image of the temporary shelter offered by the stable in the crowded city of Bethlehem—all of this business about God pitching a tent among us might be the image that gives us a better sense of the reality of Jesus’ self-sacrifice, humbly emptying himself by taking on our human flesh.

But if tenting among us is a symbol of Jesus’ humility, it is also an explicit reminder of the profound reality of God’s covenant. God does not abandon the people whom God calls, even if they wander on a sometimes seemingly obscure pilgrimage through life’s wilderness. This Greek verb which means “to live among us,” or “to dwell among us,” can also be translated as “to tabernacle” among us, as strange as that phrase may sound.

In Israel's history the tabernacle was the physical symbol of God's presence with God's people. So just as God "tabernacles" among the people of Israel through the Arc of the Covenant during their exodus through the wilderness of Sinai, so now God's Son tabernacles among us in the person of Jesus. Where we go, there Jesus is. What we endure, Jesus endures. As we move toward that day when we all shall be at home in the promised land, Jesus is with us on the journey.

Jesus "tabernacles" among us at the baptismal font. Jesus "tabernacles" among us as the Word of God is read from Holy Scripture and preached from this pulpit. Jesus "tabernacles" among us when we share in the Eucharistic meal at this altar. And Jesus himself has said that he "tabernacles" among the poor, the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, the outcast and rejected.

"The Word became flesh and lived among us," – "dwelt among us," – "pitches his tent among us," – "tabernacles" among us. But no matter how we translate that strange verb, Jesus' presence is always, *always*, "full of grace and truth." Think of it! Are you ready to welcome that grace and truth into your life? That can only happen when you are willing to open our heart and say, "Don't worry! Jesus can have my room. The Lord of life is welcome to set up his tent here—in me."