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Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3

Psalm 147: 13 – 21

Galatians 3:23 – 25; 4: 4 – 7

John 1: 1 – 18

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“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

That’s how we’ve always heard this particular phrase in the majestic, soaring prologue to the Gospel of John. It’s a little mystical and abstract though, or perhaps distant. What if we heard this: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” [*The Message*] Or this, which is more accurate to John’s original Greek, “The Word became flesh and pitched a tent to dwell with us.”

It’s an intriguing image that most Bible translations don’t really convey. The image of God with a tent from REI - or a big white party tent with a dance floor, or a huge, striped circus tent so as to accommodate everyone. God pitching a tent is a reminder that we are *all* here only temporarily. And the image of God pitching a tent implies a God who is spontaneous and flexible and intimate; a God who wants to get real with God’s Creation, including us.

When we think camping, or a party or a circus, everything is fine. But what if we realize that God’s tent is pitched among those in one of the tent cities that are so often in the news? The tent cities around the globe where tens of thousands of refugees dwell, some of them for decades. Or the tent cities in our own cities, including Savannah, where the homeless and the down-and-out live? *Then* we are perhaps not quite so comfortable with the image.

The growing refugee and homeless populations are frequently in the news. Sometimes, we hear about how some groups – church or otherwise – are finding ways to minister to these people and get them basic medical care, or food, or a safer place to sleep. How they are trying to find a way to help folks survive another day. How they are trying to respect the dignity of every human being. Our own diocese has a ministry to some of the homeless in Savannah with the Community of St. Joseph. At least one of the Episcopal churches there has an outreach ministry of weaving waterproof mats out of plastic grocery sacks so that people aren’t sleeping directly on the ground. Those actions make God pitching a tent among anyone and everyone more visible.

Or perhaps God pitching a tent and dwelling among us is like being at one of the Woodstock-like music festivals around the country, such as Bonnaroo or the Wild Goose Festival. One writer recalls her experience at Bonnaroo where she pitched 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 and realized with great embarrassment that all her “neighbors” had borne witness to her discontent.

So what if God – instead of our own or neighbor kids – HAS pitched a tent in our yard or right next to our tent? The possibility that God Almighty has pitched a tent among us temper-tantrum prone, malodorous, needy, and guilt-ridden human beings might be quite shocking. It’s a very earthy, human, familial image. Familial like a parent of a cranky two-year old. And this kind of image contrasts mightily with the more stately, rational metaphor that the Evangelist, John, uses at the very beginning of his prologue.

The Greek word John uses is *logos*, which we translate as “Word,” with a capital “W.” *Logos* is more ordered, more logical. *Logos* sounds like it ought to be the operating system for all of Creation,

one designed by the Master Creator. But John doesn't let us depersonalize or make more distant this central image for relating to God. Instead, John says that Jesus, the very incarnation of God, is both the operating system of the cosmos AND the one in the next tent over.

As you envision Jesus/God pitching a tent in your yard or perhaps as the next tent over – what are you thinking? Is there a hesitancy to embrace this idea? Are you thinking, OMG, I'd better go clean up the yard and the house? Why might we be reluctant to go camping with Jesus, or why might we be hesitant to think of God so close to our day-in and day-out lives?

Perhaps we might be self-conscious about being SO intimate, SO exposed to God in a way that can't be ignored? Are we afraid of God overhearing every conversation, or our snoring, or whatever? Or God seeing the shadows on the side of our tent, revealing the actual silhouette of our lumpy, unruly bodies (as if God doesn't already know us more intimately than we know ourselves)? Or God seeing close up our neediness, our wastefulness, our laziness?

Or perhaps we are uncomfortable with God pitching a tent right next to ours because tents and camping are kind of dirty. No matter how careful we are, dirt and leaves get tracked in. We are not the immaculate housekeepers that we would like our neighbors, including God, to think we are. So much for trying to fool God about who we *think* we are versus who God *knows* that we are! But that touches on our real fear, doesn't it? Our deeper fear is being known by Jesus, inside and out. Because it means we have nowhere and no way to hide. We are perhaps afraid of having an intimate relationship with God.

Intimacy is in trouble these days. A recent story in *The Atlantic* explored the steady delay and decline in intimate relationships (not just marriage) among younger people. Our age and culture upholds self-sufficiency and independence 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 or do something? Pull up a video on YouTube and try it yourself. If that fails, just call a service person. Need a ride to the airport? Don't be beholden to a friend, 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 for who we really are: flab, anxieties, quirks, imperfections, impatience and all. And more and more of us, in the United States anyway, are saying, "No, thank you. I'll take care of myself. Or I'll find a professional to help."

But here's the thing. Right after telling us that God has come and pitched a tent among us, John tells us that we 'have seen Jesus' glory' and that it is chock full of Grace and Truth. In order for most of us to even begin to entertain the idea of Jesus pitching a tent next to us or in our backyards, much less residing in our hearts, we need the assurance of Christ's grace—that God sees us through the lens, not of rose colored glasses, but of mercy and unconditional love.

That assurance of God's grace, of God's desire to be with us—no matter how much we want to avoid being exposed or how much we want to hide because of our shame or guilt or imperfections – that assurance is the greatest gift we can receive. It is the gift of the Incarnation, the gift of *God-with-us*.

Our Christmas invitation is to accept the gift. And accepting that gift isn't a matter of some formulaic recitation or a one-time transaction. Rather, it is a lifelong process of growing into divine intimacy – *and* a deeper intimacy with one another. Accepting this gift of God-with-us is counter-cultural, because it means acknowledging our dependence on someone other than ourselves: God. And each other.

The Incarnation, Christmas, is about Jesus pitching his tent in the messiness of the human condition, coming to understand our struggles, our chaos and disorder, our finitude and weaknesses,

our brokenness, our truth, and then redeeming it all by assuring us that we are worthy of being Jesus' brother or sister. We are worthy of being adopted as children of God.

Emmanuel, God-with-us, The Word, the logos, Jesus, full of grace and truth. So full, in fact, that we can't help but receive that fullness, grace upon grace, truth upon truth. God-with-us, so intimately, that in our quiet moments, when we turn down the voices of our culture, of our fear of intimacy, of our 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." +

*Inspired by Episcopal "Sermons that Work," December 30, 2018 The Rev. Joslyn Ogden Schaefer*