

GOD PITCHES HIS TENT

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Dec. 4, 2016

based on Exodus 29:42-46; 40:16-34, John 1:14

The sermon this morning is the conclusion of a sermon series entitled, “Navigating the Storm—How to Journey in Faith through Troubling Times.” During the series we have considered how people have been able to navigate through some very difficult circumstances, whether literal storms at sea or stormy times in general. Our reflections find their appropriate conclusion as we take hold this morning of the message of Advent. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

We have noted in this series that when people face great trial in life and see no way through it they can easily begin to feel that God is absent. So, for example, a few weeks ago we were considering the story of the Israelites trying to navigate their way through the wilderness, and as they were wandering in the desert unable to find water, they became increasingly distraught and finally cried out, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

If you consider this question simply on an intellectual level, it seems quite easy to answer. If you were taking a theology exam and saw the question, “Is God with us?” you would answer, “yes,” and go on to the next question. Of course God is with us.

But this is quite a different question on an existential level, when we are dealing with our actual experience in life. If we hit serious trouble, and see no apparent way out, we can begin to really wonder, “Where is God?” It is in such times that our Scriptures this morning speak in a profound way.

Our Old Testament readings came from the time when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness. Moses, under God’s inspiration, instructed the people to build a tent—a very big tent. Called the tabernacle, or the tent of meeting, this was a moveable sanctuary. You can find detailed descriptions of every element of its construction in the book of Exodus. It was made out of sections of canvas and poles, so that it could be moved from place to place as the people journeyed through the wilderness. There was an outer canvas wall, and in the center was a large tent where the ark of the covenant was kept—the gold-covered box which contained the ten commandments. Sometimes the term “tabernacle” is used to denote that central tent, while the “tent of meeting” is the term for the outer gathering area of the people; but often the terms “tabernacle” or “tent of meeting” just signify the whole sanctuary. Daily sacrifices were offered in the tabernacle, and people joined within its boundaries for worship.

So here is the picture of what things looked like as the people journeyed through the wilderness: wherever they encamped, there were all the tents in which the people lived, and in the midst of them was God’s tent. The tabernacle was a visible symbol of the

fact that God was present among the people. But the tabernacle was not only a symbol; it was the place where the people experienced God's presence. Our passage said that when the construction of the tabernacle was completed, "The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." [Ex. 40:34] You get a sense that there was a visible sign of God's presence, as the pillar of cloud that guided the people through the wilderness settled upon the tent of meeting. But the key verse is, "The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." No one is sure what exactly the "glory of the Lord" was. Was it a radiance? Was it something that the people felt spiritually? Certainly the phrase, "glory of the Lord," signifies God's presence; but what it was exactly is a mystery, as God's presence is always a mystery. What is significant is that God's presence was to be encountered in all its wonder and fullness in the sanctuary. This brings us some key truths about how we can encounter God more fully today.

It says that God's presence is encountered in worship. The people drew near to God's glory as they came to the tabernacle and turned their hearts to God in worship.

It says that God's presence is encountered in community. Many people today prefer just a private religion, but you get the very opposite picture in the Bible. It was as people connected with others in the faith community that the glory of God was in their midst.

Finally, the fact that the tabernacle could move—and the glory of the Lord would move with it—tells us that God's presence is always available, no matter where our journey may take us. As the Psalmist would later say, "Whither shall I go from Your Spirit, O God? If I take the wings of the morning and dwell at the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me, Your right hand will hold me." (Psalm 139:7,9) Or as the apostle Paul said, "God is not far from any of us." (Acts 17:27)

So for people who are struggling in life, and who are wondering in their heart where God is, the story of the tabernacle brings a powerful word. In instructing Moses to build the tabernacle, God declared, "I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God." (Exodus 29:45) The core message is that God is with us, and even if we cannot see or understand where exactly our journey is taking us, we can find strength, encouragement, and hope in this sure truth that God is among us. Moreover, we can come to know that God is with us not only on an intellectual but even more on a spiritual level; we can come to personally know God's presence. This entire message is brought to its ultimate fulfillment through the birth of Jesus Christ.

In the gospel passage we heard, John says, "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us." The Greek word translated as "dwelled"—ἐσκήνωσεν --actually is a form of the word, "tent"—σκηνή—it really means "to pitch one's tent." Literally, John's passage says, "The Word [namely, Christ] became flesh and pitched his tent among us." This is a direct allusion to the tabernacle. The gospel is saying that just as God once pitched his tent among the people of Israel in the wilderness, so now in a far greater way in the birth of

Jesus God is dwelling in the midst of us all. The allusion to the tabernacle becomes yet more pronounced as the verse continues: “and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) The glory of God that once radiated from the tabernacle now shines forth in all its fullness from Jesus Christ. In Christ God is truly with us.

How then can we personally experience the presence of God come to us in Christ? The allusion to the tabernacle is helpful, because the principles that we saw in connection with the tabernacle are now true all the more in connection with Christ. We saw that people encountered God’s presence in the tabernacle as they came to worship. So today we come to Christ in faith and in praise, and as we lift our hearts to Christ in worship we enter into real fellowship with Him.

We saw further that people encountered God’s presence in community. So it is little surprise that Jesus later said, “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of you.” (Matthew 18:20) We experience the fullness of Christ as we connect with others in the community of faith.

Finally, the moveable tabernacle signified that God’s presence would always be available no matter where the people’s journey took them. Likewise, as Jesus later sent forth his disciples to journey all over the place—to go to the ends of the earth to proclaim the gospel—he said, “Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

All these elements come to particular focus for us in the sacrament of Communion. We noted that the tabernacle was not only a symbol of God’s presence, but it was also the place where people experienced God’s presence. Likewise the elements of Communion are the sign that God is in our midst, and they are the place where we can personally experience the presence of the Lord with us. We do so as we come, within the community of faith in worship, to partake of fellowship with Christ, and as we go forth, we know that no matter what twists and turns our journey make take, the Lord will always be near.

It is all summed up in the title that Jesus was given at his birth—Immanuel, God with us. As we share in Communion, we can know that God is with us, and we can, as John says, “behold his glory . . . full of grace and truth.”