



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick**

**Nativity of Our Lord, December 25, 2019**

**Sermon Title: "God Pitched a Tent in Our World"**

**Gospel: John 1:1-14**

When our daughters little we got a tent for the beach to keep them out of the sun, called a Shelt-a-Hut. I know the name was pretty cheesy, but it came out of a legit yuppie parenting catalog and it seemed like a great idea until the winds kicked up ahead of a sudden storm and that flimsy tent snapped in two and started to blow away down the beach. Thankfully without our daughters inside. Such a lowly, fragile shell that could so easily be tossed was not shelter after all. What on earth were we thinking?

It's why I'm confounded by the gospel. Beautiful, lyrical words, "the Word came to dwell." Yet to the earliest followers these words did not evoke some disembodied presence hovering nearby. They heard that the Ruler of the Universe would show up in a tent. would dwell in such a place, that the Word pitched a tent among us. It heartened to long ago days of old when the people of the Exodus wandered in the wilderness, on their way home to having a temple and a land. But until then, God who knew they needed a presence and was present among their tents, in a movable tent. God promised to dwell with them as they wandered, in the "tent of meeting." Dwelling nearby so that the people would be reassured, and trust God's promises to them. But long long ago, the people had gone on and settled in that promised land. Long ago, the temple had been built, a veritable fortress and unmistakable and breathtaking presence of an all-powerful God. Who needed some flimsy tent? It was one thing to have a tent as a last resort, but now?

The present generation of those same people in the gospel who found themselves unsure and oppressed, and longing for God to come close again and save them envisioned when the Messiah came. They dreamed. But in all those dreams, God's presence would be stupendous, and a monument for all to see. More like a castle. Not showing up in, of all things, a tent. They were past tents.

Yet I wonder if that image of a tent is not only an image of something we envision as flimsy or vulnerable, but a stand-in for our own sense of insufficiency, of vulnerability? Vulnerability in all kinds of ways. After all, if you have ever been in a campground, you know. There are no secrets in a camp. At least not for long. Everything you say and do is pretty much on display and known. What you say or do in the morning, has made its way to the other side before lunch. All your best parts and worst. Even your garbage is public knowledge. "Hey they had quite the party last night, eh?" "It is this nearness (of God) which we have made into a mere detail in our Christmas observance, not at its heart. Probably because nearness is not a pretty picture." (Olov Hartman, *The Birth of God*).

Could you imagine waking up in the morning and finding God in your back yard? Do we really want God in the next tent over? Knowing our "everything" all the time? Turns out we're pretty fragile too.

The Word made flesh is God wearing our fragile skin, showing up not in majesty, and might, but in the form of a tiny infant who has to struggle to use never before tried lungs, and has to endure the efforts of a new parent. And be on the move in tents because of the power struggles of the world. The Word dwelling with us sets up camp in our very rugged and real humanity, experiencing emotions, pain, squabbles. Our messes, our garbage, our weaknesses. Why on earth would one so almighty choose to be the Word born into such a world? To be so seemingly insignificant? Because we need this Word.

This is how God wants us to know God's mind about humanity. That God is fully dwelling and fully invested. With skin in the game, if you will. And to this God, our world (not some mythical perfect world) is worth God being in. To this God, we are worth God's presence. And to this God, our vulnerabilities are not a barrier to knowing our Savior. And because our liberation and peace are bound up with the birth of a little helpless and defenseless child, then the future can lie in the hands of God alone. On the human side, all we can see here is weakness and helplessness." But this Word makes known that is not pride and strength that are proclaimed on the threshold of the kingdom, but the hope of a child. (The Disarming Child, Jurgen Moltmann). God sees us with the hope of a child.

This morning after lots of festivities, our energy is low. Maybe some of us are a little disappointed with our gifts, or our families or the state of the world, yet this morning, we wake up to the good news. To the reality that despite our vulnerabilities and concerns, and the state of our own tents, God has indeed pitched a tent in our midst. For good. God has moved in and isn't going anywhere. This God, the Word, made known to us as Jesus, has showed up at our threshold despite all our protestations, bearing the best gifts of all- the gifts that God who created us and dwells with us, lovingly knows we need-

Grace and truth- no batteries required. Grace for us in the face of our truth. So we can hear the truth in the beating heart of God who is with us and for us. And no matter how flimsy our tents, or how helplessly we flail, though there is nothing about us that can earn God's love, God cannot wait to be here with us. In celebrations and devastations. In our loneliness where we long for someone to enter in. And with all of these longings and needs at hand, who has time for building temples anyway when our very lives are what God is after? For all of this, for us the Word became flesh and moved in to save us.

So Lord, we hope that you don't mind our manger  
How we wish we would have known  
But long awaited Holy Stranger  
Make yourself at home  
Bring your peace into our violence  
Bid our hungry souls be filled  
Word now breaking Heaven's silence  
Welcome to our world  
Wrap our injured flesh around You  
Breathe our air and walk our sod  
Rob our sin and make us holy  
Perfect Son of God.

(Excerpt of "Welcome to Our World" by Michael W Smith)