

## Sermon for Christmas 1 Year C

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

John 1:14 “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

When much of the world might think of this time as a great chance to get sales and deals or to catch up on sleep after relatives have left and to gear up for the New Year, this is a very different time for the Church. For the Church, this is the beginning of a short and nonetheless highly important season, the season of Christmas. This season gives us a sense of the expanse of time between Jesus’ birth and some of the other important events that happened around it. More importantly, this season also gets us in touch with the fact that the incarnation was not something that occurred just in the moment of conception or in the moments of delivery. Rather, the incarnation was something that unfolded over a great amount of time, since the beginning. It is this connection to the beginning that John, whose “account” of the incarnation we read today, was referring to. So let us return to John’s words. With God’s help, we will find ourselves more deeply immersed in the great mystery of Jesus Christ and his presence on Earth.

Most people who have grown up in the Episcopal or many other Christian churches will have heard the phrase: “and the Word became flesh and lived among us,” quite a few times. Compared to the pageant-worthy accounts in Matthew and Luke this seems quite unexciting. It is certainly lacking great imagery on the surface. Nonetheless, it becomes more interesting with a closer review of what these words mean and how significant they are. Another way to translate the phrase that gives us a closer experience to that of the original listeners is to say, “The Word became flesh and pitched a tent amidst us.” Taking into account how these words would have resonated with the present and past of the Jewish-Christian communities that gathered around these Gospel accounts will help us get a sense of how Jesus’ coming in turned ideas about what is sacred and what is mundane completely upside down.

So where does the ‘tent’ connection really come from? Linguistically and conceptually a ‘dwelling’ for the Jewish people was a tent. To dwell with was to pitch a tent. Long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem and long before the Jews built their Temple, they were a moving people who lived in tents. As they moved they carried the Ark of the Covenant, which held the Ten Commandments, with them and they believed God was present with the Ark. Some distance from where they pitched their own tents, they erected a super-tent, called the Tabernacle, for God. This tent had rooms, walls, incense, furniture, a garden and a clear barrier around the outside. When God’s cloud was on the tent no one was allowed in there. Otherwise, only certain men, the descendants of Aaron, were allowed in there at all. Even they could only enter after they offered a sacrifice for their own sins and took a special bath, or they could die. You see, by making God’s tent so different, so far away, and so exclusive they were making it pretty clear that their lives, their ordinary selves, where they lived and what they did were mundane, even profane. Only the exclusive people, places, and things were Holy and worthy of God.

With this in mind, we can see just how Christ turned this all upside down in his coming. While the Tabernacle was a super-tent with rooms and furniture, Christ “pitched his tent” in a stable or barn. The Tabernacle was apart from where others stayed, whereas Christ stayed in an overcrowded inn in the middle of town. One could easily argue that Christ incarnated a highly undesirable and unclean space, in the opposite space from the select area the tabernacle would have been. While only certain men, ritually cleaned, could enter God’s other tent, dirty shepherds and even animals got to share Jesus’ first intimate moments. The mundane and profane people and circumstances that were excluded from the Tabernacle were the exact people and circumstances included and recognized as Holy in the presence of Christ.

As we, as the Body of Christ, seek to follow in his example in this way it is important that we realize that it isn’t about making the Holy less Holy or less valued. Rather, it’s about recognizing the holiness in the everyday and drawing that forth. We are in a world where the lines between the ordinary and the special, the profane and the sacred are heavily drawn. If we as the church are to truly be people of the incarnation, we must at the very least challenge these distinctions and at best remove them altogether. We must do so out of our deep faith and understanding that all creation is suitable, inhabitable and thus somehow inhabited by God. How do we do this?

We can approach this work in a number of ways. The places we worship and other sacred spaces offer great opportunities for this. Through prayer we make these spaces Holy and bring forth their inherent spiritual beauty. By inviting and encouraging other kinds of meetings, fellowship gatherings, mutual support functions, and even parties with dancing, we can begin to unlock and reveal just how wonderful and sacred it is to be able to share these moments with others. By doing so in our places of worship we then change the way we regard these activities wherever they may occur.

We can also accomplish this through changing the ways that we approach and consider the routine things in our lives. From the time we spend brushing our teeth to our daily carpool and other regular appointments, we can bring forth the divine aspects of time by bringing more intentionality and paying attention to the ways that God’s presence manifests. So much of this comes down to being more intentional and practicing gratitude in all that we do. In doing so, we’ll find that in a sense of holiness will pervade our lives more deeply. We’ll find ourselves more able to recognize the ways that God is incarnating within our lives.

That leads to the most central part of this work, prayer. For it is in prayer and reflection that we enable ourselves to notice God birthing around us. And so let us all take the time, through this Christmas Season and beyond if possible, to consider all that we do notice as we remind ourselves of God’s Holy Presence everywhere. In doing so, we’ll help these Holy moments last well beyond the day or even the liturgical season of Christmas. In doing so, we’ll make them part of our entire lives and beyond. Amen.

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