

“He pitched his tent among us”
St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church, Hamilton
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Christmas Day, 25 December 2011
John 1:1-5, 9-14, 16-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... It all sounds more than a little abstract, doesn’t it? John begins his gospel this way because he’s setting Jesus’ origins firmly in the Godhead, in God’s eternal power and deity. John knows no doctrine of the Virgin Birth – he has this powerful vision of the Word instead. But his writing becomes more concrete with every sentence.

“All things came into being through the Word, and without him not one thing came into being.” Notice that the Word is personified – without *him* nothing come into being, not without *it* nothing came into being.

If you didn’t like generic use of the masculine pronoun you might, I suppose, say “him or her,” since we don’t have a non-gender-specific singular personal pronoun in English, but saying “it” would definitely not do here. He/she is a *person*, not a thing, or a concept, or an idea, but a *person* who embodies God’s creative will.

A *divine* person, not a human person at this point, so not a gender-specific person as human persons always are, but a *person* notwithstanding – really, in fact, the *original* person, the origin of all personhood, male or female – and therefore with a real personal consciousness, identity, mind, heart, will.

Nor can you say “without *them* nothing came into being,” because while “them” isn’t gender-specific, it *is* plural, and “Word” is definitely singular. There is *one* Word, *not* a plurality of words – one will, one intention, one mind, one heart – because the divine person of God is not double-minded or two-faced or anything like that.

What has actually come into being in this divine person is *life*, the *original* life, life which is the light of all people. And he gives those who accept him the power to become children of God, to be born *of God*, the God whose Word he is.

I can hear you thinking, “Well, OK, that may flesh out the Word a little, but it’s still pretty abstract... and not a little complicated, too!” But then comes Christmas Day – or rather, verse 14. “The Word *became flesh* and *lived* among us...”, and abstraction vanishes! The Word became flesh. Human flesh.

It doesn’t get a lot more concrete than that. Don’t believe me? Pinch yourself. Dig a fingernail into your arm and feel pain. Dig too hard and you’ll bleed. Oh, it’s concrete, alright – skin, muscle, bone, nerves, synapses, blood, sweat and tears.

The divine person who is the Word became a human person, and lived among us, as human persons do – walked on the same ground, breathed the same air, knew the same joys and sorrows.

The Greek word John uses that is translated “came to dwell” is “*skenoun*,” which actually means, “to pitch a tent.” He took on our flesh and pitched his tent among us. He came into our encampment and sat around our campfire, ate our food and sang our songs.

To become human the Word must become not merely a person but a gendered person, and to do this within the culture of ancient Israel meant becoming a man, a male person, as women were considered to be second-class persons of no consequence. Had the Word become a woman’s flesh, no one – really and truly no one – would have listened, would have received her or believed in her name, and so none would have received power to become children of God, etc.

But the way this man regarded and treated women, especially in John’s gospel – think of the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4, or his first resurrection appearance in chapter 20 being to Mary Magdalene – shows that a woman’s flesh is just as capable of bearing the Word as a man’s. For he sent both of them – *instead* of men in both cases – forth with his Word to tell others, implicitly but seriously pushing the limits not only of Jewish culture then but of all culture worldwide even to the present day.

It’s funny how so much stuff in the New Testament, especially in John, it sometimes seems to me, really comes out of the Old Testament. The *skene*, or tent, as the symbol of God’s presence shows up in two ways in the Old Testament.

In the books of Moses, from Israel’s nomadic days, it is the tent of meeting, literally a tent, which houses the tabernacle, the Ark containing the tablets of the law. When God descended in the form of a cloud upon that special tent, neither Moses nor anyone else could enter it, because God’s own presence was in there, and no one could look upon God’s unveiled presence and live. So this was the Tent of God’s Presence in the Israelite encampment.

The prophets tend to use “tent” figuratively, as a verb, so that God says that he will dwell in the midst of his people. The story in 2 Samuel 7 of David taking it into his head to build God a house sort of brings the Mosaic use and the prophetic use of “tent” together.

David has gotten to feeling uneasy and a bit guilty about the fact that he lives in a palace built of cedar, while the Lord God is still slumming it in a tent – the Tent of the Presence. God definitely needs a new house, so David decides to build God a house of cedar at least as good as his own. Laudable, in a way, that is, from a human point of view, but God turns thumbs down on this plan.

I paraphrase: “Did I ask for this?” God says to David. “I have always moved about in a tent and a tabernacle, with my people.

“But here’s a better idea. Believe it or not, *you’re* the one who needs a new house, not me. So I’ll build *you* a house, a house of flesh, the house of David. Your house shall be the place of Israel’s safety. I will establish your house forever, and through your descendent I shall rule over my people Israel.”

That is to say, the house of David will be as the tent of God’s presence, and David’s descendent the representative of God’s own rule over the people of Israel. David is simply stunned.

“Who am I, O Lord, and what is my house, that you should do this? I am speechless. It is because of your promise, and because of your own heart, that you have revealed this to me. How great you are, O Lord, and my house will show it. Because of this, I find the courage to praise you.”

The Word became flesh, and pitched his tent among us. The interesting thing about a tent as the symbol of God’s presence is that *it can be moved*, and moved easily. It can be moved as easily as you or I could break camp during a camping vacation, pack up the car and move on to the next place. It can be moved as easily as you or I could walk out of this church at the end of this Christmas Day worship service and be a channel of God’s gracious love to another human being, another human person.

A tent implies an encampment, a nomadic community in which God chooses to be present. Surely we here at St. Paul’s are called, then, to be such a community of Jesus’ presence for the people he loves – for each other, and for all whom we meet.

He calls us to be a community in which the Word becomes concrete flesh and blood, to live the life that is in the Word, the original life, the life which is the light of the world. The Word which became flesh at the first Christmas still becomes flesh – not Jesus’ flesh now, but *our* flesh – and pitches his tent among us.

We often hear about “living the spirit of Christmas all year long” – and it usually sounds more than a bit trite. But anchored in Jesus Christ where it belongs, it’s not trite at all. For the Word becoming flesh, pitching his tent among us, is the divine and cosmic reality behind it.

If we will receive him and believe in him -- the Word as he truly speaks, not as we would rather hear him – he will give us the power, the spiritual means, to become as he is, namely, sons and daughters of God, whose life comes from God, goes to God, and is lived in God, for those whom God loves.

Merry Christmas, my friends. INJ, Amen.