

“God Tabernacled Among Us”

St. John 1.1-3, 14

Christmas Day 2005

The Word of God for our sermon meditation this Christmas Morning was written down for our faith and life in the Gospel of St. John, especially this 14th verse where the Evangelist writes “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Ever since the fall into sin every person has had the desire to have someone who can understand us, identify with us, and be with us. We sometimes call this person a “soul mate”, a “one and only”, our husband or wife and other such affectionate terms. Though anyone at any age has this desire it may be during the teenage years when so much is going on in one’s life physically, mentally, and socially that the yearning for someone who will truly identify with us, who can “gets” us, as the slang goes, is felt so forcefully.

It is very likely a result of the fall into sin that there is this void and gap in understanding and identification with someone else. How often have we often wondered if there is anyone who can really understand, who walks step and step with us in our struggles and troubles in life, who can truly sympathize and not patronize. Yes, this longing is in each one of us. We want someone who knows us better than ourselves and yet, at the same time, will protect and defend us at every turn.

There is one sent to us on Christmas Day who truly does get us, who truly does understand us, and who can completely identify with us no matter our age. He is none other than Jesus the Christ Child born of Mary as the Savior of us all. In Him and Him alone we find that there is indeed one who like no other knows all that we think, knows about all our struggles, and who can truly sympathize and care for us. This is the truth we learn today from the Gospel of St. John who relates to us today how God tabernacled among us.

It may seem strange to use the word “tabernacle” as a verb, as an action word, when we are so accustomed to seeing it used as a noun, as describing that tent that the Israelites built and which God dwelled in during the history of Israel before the Temple. The tabernacle, you may recall, was the visible symbol of God

presence with His people, a constant reminder that God was with them, Immanuel.

Yet, even this dwelling of God with His people had its limitations. Notice that God's dwelling with His people prevented the people, even the great prophet Moses, from approaching and standing in the tabernacle. To have been in the presence of God's unveiled glory would have meant certain death to them and to us because of our sin. Yes, it reminded the people that God was with them, mighty to save and to deliver, but it also reminded them of their sin and their inability to approach God in their iniquity.

But even the tabernacle served a purpose beyond a sign of God's presence and a signal for the children of Israel to travel or not. The tabernacle actually pointed to a future and greater dwelling of God with His people, a time when He would tabernacle with us not just as a Father, as a Mighty Warrior, but as our Savior, as our flesh and blood Brother. The tabernacle, as we learn from St. John as well as the writer to the Hebrews, was a sign revealing that God would come to His people not in His unveiled glory but with His glory veiled in the flesh.

St. John, in what we might call his Christmas story, relates that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Literally, the word "dwelt" here means tabernacled. It means that God in Jesus Christ took up His residence among men some 2,000 years ago by taking to Himself a human body and soul. Rather than being something feared because of His great glory, Jesus came to take away fear by taking away our sin so that we in the end, in eternity can stand and dwell in His glory.

For this is why Jesus came and tabernacled among us. He who the eternal God, who was with the Father and the Spirit before time, at the creation, and for all eternity left His heavenly abode in order to take us to be with Him in heaven. For in heaven we learn that there, once and forever, as St. John records, "the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will tabernacle with them, and they shall be His people." Throughout all eternity and since the beginning of time the sole purpose of Jesus' incarnation, of His birth into this world has been so that God and we might tabernacle together.

For, remember, in the Garden of Eden this blessed relationship was lost when Adam fell into sin. No longer could God walk with us and strive with us in our sin for the holy God cannot brook and tolerate iniquity. We were cast out of His presence, no longer able to stand in the presence of His glory. No, God had to shield us from His glory, protect us from His holiness and judgment on sin.

So He had His people build a tent and He manifested Himself in that tabernacle. So He had prepared for Him from eternity a body by the Father so that Jesus could live among us and remove our iniquity and our sin that we might once again stand in the presence of the holy God without fear. Jesus came and walked among us, strove with us as our Savior all those years ago, veiling His glory all for the purpose of shielding us and delivering us from the judgment on our sin.

He did this because He understands us, He "gets" us, because He identified with us as no one else could. Jesus knows of our sins, we know of our failings toward others, whether that be to a husband, a wife, a son, a daughter, a parent, a friend, a stranger, or a fellow believer. He knows how we in our haste and rush through life will not take the time to listen, give someone somebody to talk to, and pay attention to the needs of another because we are wrapped up in our own selfishness and self-ambitions. Jesus knows how we fall short of His will for us as spouses, as parents, as children, as believers. He knows as no one else the death and damnation that this should bring us because the glory and holiness of God demands it.

But Christmas announces to us that Jesus not only knows about our sinful condition and the condemnation we ought to receive as a result, it proclaims that Jesus came to do something about it since there was nothing that we ourselves could do. He came and identified with us when He was made true Man of Mary. He came and lived in this world as an infant, a toddler, a child, a teenager, as a Man. He stepped right into our existence and was tempted and harassed by the Devil just as you and I are. He had to deal with followers who were thinking only of themselves and of others who hated Him and wanted to kill Him. He had to deal with rejection, abandonment, and desertion by those He called His friends.

The Son of God came and though He was without sin, He was made Sin for us. Jesus came and took every instance and occurrence of transgression you and I have ever committed – every time we have thought of ourselves, every occasion when we deserted another to save face, every situation where we have left others behind literally and figuratively – and He bore them in our place before the judgment seat of heaven.

As the Babe of Bethlehem was laid in a crude, wooden cradle by His mother Mary to bear the sins of us all, so He was crudely and roughly nailed to a wooden cross paying for our sins, identifying with us so much that He became our Sin-Substitute, that He stood in for us all before the holiness and glory of the eternal Majesty so that we would not get what we deserved for our sin. The Word made flesh was killed in the flesh so that we would not suffer in the flesh eternally. He suffered the abandonment, desertion, and rejection of God in our place so that we might never have to endure it eternally.

Jesus became Man and tabernacled among us so that we, through faith in Him and His saving sacrifice, may be able to have God tabernacle among us. By His birth, by His life, by His death, and by His resurrection to life the third day Jesus saved us from the judgment of heaven. By leaving heaven and returning again in glory, Jesus has prepared for us an eternity in heaven where “the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will tabernacle with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

So did Jesus tabernacle among us, identify with us, and dwell with us so that we by faith in Him, by believing on Him as the Son of God born of Mary the first Christmas, may look forward to dwelling, “tabernacling” you might say, with Him in heaven forever. For we had no greater need than One who would take away our sin so that we could stand in the presence of His glory without fear now and for eternity.

But the dwelling of Jesus with us the first Christmas and throughout His earthly life not only has guaranteed us by faith that we will dwell with Him and He with us in the new heavens and the new earth. It also assures us that He still abides with us, still

identifies with us, still “gets” us, if you will. If I have learned anything from our sing-along time before our Wednesday service by the frequency of one song’s selection, it is this truth – “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

Of all the songs we sang in that sing-along time, this was the one selected every time. How appropriate for it embodies, in many ways, the blessed truth of Jesus becoming flesh and tabernacling among us. For not only did He befriend us and save us from sin as our Savior, He still befriends us in our time of need regardless of our age or our situation. He is the only One who understands what it is like to be tempted, to be abandoned, to be forgotten, ignored, to be left out, to be the odd-man out, and more. He knows what it is like to be lonely, forsaken, mocked, and mistreated. He knows and understands us better than we do ourselves.

So He promises us forgiveness for our sins through faith in His name so that when we are weary and down trodden by them we may have rest in His name. He promises us grace to help us in our time of need so that we may never flounder and want for His support and aid. He assures us He is ever with us, even to the end of the age, even as we go through the awkward times of life, even as we face the closing moments of our lives.

He tabernacles with us by His Spirit since He knows, He cares, He loves you with an everlasting love that moved Him to enter our world the first Christmas, be laid in a wooden manger in a stone cave, be nailed to a wooden cross and laid in a stone tomb, be raised to give us life and a place in heaven where we will tabernacle with Him and He with us. All this is His gift to us by faith since He, Jesus, our Savior as God tabernacled among us. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+