

Pastor Chris Matthis  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
The Transfiguration of Our Lord, Series B  
Saturday, February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Sunday, February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018

**Sermon: Tents**

**Text: Mark 9:2-9**

Focus: God's glory tents in Jesus' body.

Function: That they would look forward to the return of Christ in glory.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God..., and also true man..., is my Lord..." (SC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Do you like to go camping? I don't mean a nice, big, fifth wheel trailer with all the amenities of home, including satellite TV, a king-sized bed, and even the kitchen sink. I don't even mean a pop up trailer that you crank by hand. I mean *real* camping: *tent* camping like you did when you were a kid. Lisa and I enjoy camping. And we do it right. We *tent* camp. We cook our food over a campfire. We see the stars at night.

Last summer I took Benjamin on our first father-son camping trip. We went to Eleven Mile State Park near Lake George. The forecast called for rain, but we'd already paid our reservation, so we drove down anyway. We tried to wait out the rainstorm in the car for a while, but when it showed no signs of letting up, I finally setup the tent (with little help from my then four-year-old). I even succeeded in getting a campfire going in the rain. And let me tell you: that was a great experience. I felt especially manly after my triumph over the elements. And as Benjamin and I bedded down for the night in the tent, we created powerful memories together: telling jokes and stories to each other. The smell of smoke and drizzle comingled, and a little on towards midnight, the skies finally cleared and the stars came out. I sat in a chair by the fading embers of the fire.

The next day was perfect and sunny! We ate a pancake breakfast hot off the griddle and rented a kayak to go fishing on the lake. When the weekend finally rolled around, I was reluctant to return to Castle Rock for the regular routine of worship services. I enjoyed getting away with my boy—even in that cramped little tent full of camp gear and smelly socks. It was a special time, and I didn't want it to end when the reality of everyday life hit home. (By the way, I was never able to get my own father, a retired Army chaplain, to go camping with me. "Son," he said, "I was a professional camper in the Army for 28 years. The closest I come to camping anymore is a Holiday Inn!").

Peter wanted to go camping in our Gospel lesson—at least after a fashion. "Teacher, it is wonderful for us to be here, and let us make three tents: one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah" (Mark 9:5, CSM).<sup>1</sup> That's what Peter said when faced with the miracle of Jesus' Transfiguration. Moses and Elijah appeared to him on the mountain, talking with Jesus, whose appearance was changed so radically that his clothing gleamed white hot like burning metal. The picture of Jesus here reminds me of John's vision of the glorified Christ in Revelation 1, which was so terrifying to behold that he fell at Jesus' feet like a dead man.

Peter, James, and John were terrified at the Transfiguration also. Mark tells us that Peter didn't know what to say because he was terrified (Mark 9:6). When you read through the Gospel narratives, it quickly becomes clear that Peter rarely seemed to know what he was saying, such as the time he rebuked Jesus for preaching about his betrayal, death, and resurrection, or the time that he told Jesus to beckon him out of the boat and onto the water, or the time that he insisted that he would never betray Jesus though everyone else should fall away. Peter suffered from a terrible malady that many men have: foot-in-mouth disease (as in: open mouth, insert foot!).

---

<sup>1</sup> All Scriptures marked CSM are the author's own, personal translation.

Peter didn't know what he was saying, but his way of dealing with things was to say something. Thus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah" (Mark 9:5, ESV).<sup>2</sup> Peter couldn't comprehend exactly what was happening on the Mount of Transfiguration, but he knew it was a big deal. The appearance of Moses and Elijah confirmed that *Jesus* was a big deal. This was a big moment, a powerful event, a moving experience that Peter didn't want to end. So he proposed to setup camp.

But Peter didn't realize what he was saying. He got a lot of things mixed up in that simple proposal. First of all, he called Jesus "Rabbi," or Teacher. Yet, as the thundering voice from the cloud soon made clear, Jesus was no mere teacher. He was God's beloved Son, the very Son of God (9:7)! The idea of building three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah might have seemed like a good idea, but it betrayed Peter's mistake of somehow *equating* Jesus with the Old Testament prophets instead of recognizing him as their Lord and the one to whom all the Scriptures pointed. If there was going to be any sort of tent at all, there should've been only *one*: for Jesus.

But Jesus didn't need a tent anyway. He *was* the tent. Or, rather, he *is* the tent. You see, the Greek word for tent used by Peter (*skēnē*) is also the word used by the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) to talk about the Tabernacle, which was the traveling tent for worship while the children of Israel camped around Mt. Sinai and wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. The Tabernacle was the tent where Moses spoke to God face-to-face. The Tabernacle housed the Ark of the Covenant and the altars of sacrifice and incense. The Tabernacle was the place where Yahweh's glory cloud dwelt, signifying his abiding presence with his people.

---

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

But later on the Tabernacle was replaced by Solomon's Temple. The glory cloud filled the Temple for hundreds of years until the temple was destroyed by Babylon as punishment for Israel's idolatry. The Temple was rebuilt after the exiles returned and "improved" by Herod the Great. But the glory cloud never returned. And so, it seemed, that God no longer dwelt with his people in the same way that he had before.

Yet all of that changed when God took on human flesh and came down to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, the son of Mary and the babe of Bethlehem. In his beautiful poetry, St. John—who was there on the Mount of Transfiguration—describes the Incarnation this way:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...” (John 1:1, 14).

And the Word became a human being and made his dwelling among us (v. 14). There's another way to say that—a more literal way. “And the Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us.” You might even say: “The Word became flesh and *tented* among us or *setup camp* among us.” Yes, the same Greek word that undergirds the Tabernacle in the Septuagint is related to the verb (*skēnoō*) that John chooses to describe the Incarnation. Jesus didn't merely come down to live among people. He came down and pitched his tent among us. He setup camp. He came to stay with us. And by the Incarnation, his own body became the tent, the tabernacle—the place of God's glory. So, as I said before, it was foolish for Peter to try to build three tents. Jesus didn't need one. Jesus *was* the tent. And he still is.

Peter wanted to go camping with Jesus on the mountain so that he could hold onto the moment and not go back to the workaday reality of suffering and dying and the cross. But Jesus didn't need a tent. He *is* the Tent. And the only way for him to save Peter, James, and John, the world—and all of us—was for them to decamp and go to a different mountain instead. The one

called Golgotha. The place of the skull. Mount Calvary. Jesus' tent pole was a wooden beam in the shape of a cross. And we nailed the tent to the pole, hammering nails into his flesh. There he died so that we could live with him—so that we could one day *tent* with him forever.

Jesus is the very picture of God's glory because he embodied God's saving plan to love and forgive and save his people by dying on the cross and rising again to new life. He is the beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased. (And that is why we and Peter are better off listening to Jesus than running off at the mouth. His words are so much better than any word we could ever speak because he *is* the Word.) Now, when Jesus comes again on the Last Day, we will rejoice because then, at last, the dwelling place of God will be with man. Or again—more literally—“God's tent will be with people, and he will pitch his tent with them, and God himself will be with them” (Rev. 21:3, CSM).

So I hope you like camping. Because in heaven we're going to go camping with Jesus forever. We won't even need to pack a tent because Jesus *is* the Tent. To him be the glory forever! Amen.