

# God pitched a tent

All-age Christmas Worship

John 1:1-5

John 1:9-14, 16-18

Psalm 84

Sermon

I've got a big question for you this morning -

## **Where does God live?**

... everywhere

... in heaven

... in the holy place

... in our heart

... in Jesus

All these answers are true, but what is most true for you this Christmas time?

I find this question very relevant to me this week as I have really struggled with the sheer volume of tasks to be done, things to organise, emails and phonecalls, goodies to make, decorations to hang, school wind-up events, Christmas parties. Really and truly.

Where does God dwell in the midst of all this? Everywhere or nowhere? In rare moments of stillness or in the midst of the rush and bustle?

How lovely is your dwelling place

John's intricately constructed 'logos' introduction rises to a climax in this verse

## **And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.**

This is the utterly radical, earth shattering revelation of the gospel, held in the pincer between these opposing opposites of 'word' and 'flesh', that resolves through the dwelling of God, this living-with.

This is the meaning of Christmas, as contained within the old theological word 'incarnation', which means exactly that, 'in flesh-ment' of God, embodiment, the 'dwelling-with-ness' of God through the birth of Jesus Christ.

I'd like this morning to do something of a word study on this word 'dwelt'.

I have discovered that there are many layers of meaning to this word, in the Greek, and in the Hebrew words that are connected with it. The really interesting thing I discovered is that the word John chose for God coming to

live 'among us' in Jesus Christ – the word 'dwell' translates literally means to 'pitch a tent'.

Pitch a tent.

Or, in the ancient Hebrew it's the same as the word for 'tabernacle', changed into a verb.

Isn't that interesting? I think it is anyway.

Because of course God already had pitched a tent with his people, back 2000 years earlier than John's writing, back in the time of Moses, when God gave instructions for an actual tent to be built, according to strict instructions, in which the glory of God would be close to the people – a sacred box in a sacred tent which could be carried as the people travelled through the wilderness and into the promised land.

**And the Word became Flesh, and pitched a tent among us,**  
tabernacled among us.

And then 1000 years after that Solomon built the temple and God dwelt there, and we heard the words this morning of Psalm 84 which celebrates God's presence, the joy of living-in with God in this sacred place.

So John in just one word expresses a symphony of meaning and transforms it, sets the symphony to a different key, to follow a fresh tune.

Let me just draw some contrasts here

In the Old covenant The Lord dwelt in the holy of holies, originally in the tabernacle, then in the temple, but the tent and the temple existed as much to hide God's glory as to reveal it ... to protect the people from the awful awesomeness of the brilliance of God's majesty

In Jesus God's glory is revealed, glory as of the father's only son, glory of grace and truth, light for all the world to see.

the tent and the temple were physical expressions of the presence of God with his people ... but always set apart, unapproachable.

In Jesus God came close, set up his tent AMONG his people

in the temple God settled down, enshrined in a permanent home, the site of pilgrimage – the people going 'to' God's house ... but in Jesus God is a travelling companion. In pitching a tent among us God is able to move out, to go with explorers and missionaries who are charged not with bringing people physically into God's temple, but with an invitation for God's house to be multiplied and multiplied over and over, taking up residence in countless cultures and languages, countless buildings and fields and homes.

## **And the Word became Flesh, and pitched a tent among us**

Do you like tenting? We own various tents in our family, from the nice medium sized new one we got for half price from Khatmandu this year which our boys love putting up in the back yard ... there's old one from my youth which I can't quite bring myself to through out even though the zips' broken because it carries so many happy memories ... there are the army tents which aren't actually tents at all but just a bit of fabric for sleeping under when you're really roughing it ... there's my grandfather's tent, now that's a real tent, old brown heavy canvas with the big wooden poles that have to fit together just so ... there's the one we used when we were newly married, that has a large patch where a key ripped a hole in it! ... Chris & I up Arthur's Pass & the kea

There's something awesome about sleeping out in a tent. Not that I do it much any more, now that I'm officially middle aged and all ... but it's the thinness of a tent which makes you a little bit protected but also still vulnerable to wind and rain and sun... and which doesn't block out any sounds so a possum screeching or the river flowing or the bird chorus before dawn all are so intense and vivid.

Tents enable you to go places without having to get back home to sleep. It's their portability which is their biggest asset.

And tents create very intimate spaces. That's why kids love them, because it creates a whole new place where arguments are left behind, where they snuggle down and talk and laugh.

You know, I think that the incarnation is pretty much like that too. In being born as a baby God chose a thin layer between himself and the world; a huge vulnerability. He pitched a tent in the stable, in the village, by the lake, in the temple, in the court, and felt and heard this crazy world of ours in the first person, as one of us.

And he came in order to be on the move. He rejected the temple with it's great walls and gold and chose a manger – he chose a donkey rather than a chariot – he chose to walk everywhere. Because he chooses to walk with us.

And he chose intimacy, connection, being with people and enabling a whole new way of being with each other, a living in community, a love for one another to be the defining characteristic of his people.

## **And the Word became Flesh, and pitched a tent among us**

In this one sentence John sums up the two radical, fundamental claims of the Christian faith.

One, that in Jesus, the God of the universe, the God of the Jews, was fully and completely present. And John goes on to tell the story of what happened in the few short years of this man's ministry. And he claims over and over, that in Jesus people met with God the father, because they were 'one'. Here in his introduction he describes the glory that those who got to meet Jesus experienced. I wonder, what kind of glory was this?

I mean, Jesus was just an ordinary man. He didn't glow in the dark (well only occasionally), he ate and toileted and spoke and walked just like any old body. This little baby in the manger was just a baby, like any old baby. Much to the disappointment of everyone he didn't command a mighty army, or even carry his own sword, or wealth, or power (not that kind of power anyway)

Glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. Ah, that kind of glory, grace and truth.

But John is not primarily writing history. This story about Jesus isn't a historical curiosity. This is theology-in-action. It is living reality.

And this is the second radical claim of the Christian faith, that this very same Jesus is alive and present. 'He pitched his tent among us' means not only that he had a few spectacular controversial years in a back corner of the Roman empire 2000 years ago, but that he is still pitching his tent among us, wherever we meet in his name, wherever lives are lived in this very same glory. This little baby is born not just in this manger, but in any old heart, in any old dingy corner of the world. Through his Spirit alive and at work in our hearts, in our families, in our churches, in our world, Christ is born, Christ is with us, Christ is here.

So this is the answer to the question – where does God live

Christmas means that God was born once upon a time, and lived completely alive and touched and spoke and gave grace and truth to all he met.

And Christmas also means that God is alive with us, in us, among us, now at Christmas and on any old day of the year.