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The Transfiguration of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“God’s Tent of Glory”

Text: Matthew 17:1-9; Exodus 24:12, 15-18; 2 Peter 1:16-19

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

***“And Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ ”***

Tents, Peter?

Have you ever lived in a tent? Or slept in a tent? It’s not very nice, really. Even with all the modern day improvements in materials and craftsmanship, a tent is still a tent. You’ve not much protection from the weather, and no matter how hard you try, it always seems as if the rain manages to get in. Bugs are hard to keep out, and it gets dirty in there, and musty. Which is why it always feels so good to get back home, and into your nice, warm, clean, comfortable bed!

So tents, Peter?

Actually, Peter was not that far off! His suggestion here actually shows some good theological knowledge. For yes, God did dwell in a tent. In the Old Testament, with the people of Israel, wandering around the wilderness for 40 years. They called it a Tabernacle – which is to say that it was a fancy tent! And sometimes they called it a tent, too: the tent of meeting. For that tent/tabernacle was where God dwelled, and it was the place Moses went to meet with God and speak with Him.

And the Old Testament reading that we heard today is about Moses going up onto Mt. Sinai to get instructions for how to build this tent/tabernacle. Now normally, when we hear of Moses and Mt. Sinai, we think of what? The Ten Commandments! But our reading was from Exodus chapter 24 – the Ten Commandments had been given by God already in chapter 20, along with other laws in chapters 21 through 23, and at the beginning of chapter 24, Moses tells the people all the words of the Law and the people willingly enter into this covenant with God. This is how we will live. God will be our God and we will be His people. And then a sacrifice is offered, and half the blood of the

sacrifice is sprinkled on the altar, representing God, and half the blood is sprinkled on the people. All that has already happened.

But that is not enough for God. It is His desire not to be a law-giving God, a God far off; but a God who dwells with His people. Who lives with them. Who is here for them. An intimate and close God. And so when Moses goes up onto the mountain now, He receives not only the Law written on tablets of stone, but what is even greater than that – He receives instructions for God’s tent/tabernacle and the Divine Service that will happen there. This is how God will dwell with His people. This is how God will bless them and forgive them. This is how God will be our God. Pretty good stuff!

And so when Peter suggests tents here, it’s not as silly a suggestion as it first may have sounded. For He has just seen Jesus in His glory. Jesus didn’t change in the transfiguration, but who He really is, His divinity as the Son of God, was allowed to shine forth for a little while. Here is God dwelling with His people again, and so a tent of meeting is in order. A tent/tabernacle. But not just one, as in the Old Testament – but three! Even better! One for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. God, the Law, and the prophets. The kingdom restored to Israel, right there on that mountain. Actually, not bad thinking, Peter!

But again, that’s not good enough for God. For His is a kingdom not of this world. He wants to dwell with His people not in one place but in all places. He wants to bless and forgive them for all time. And so a new kind of tent would be required. A tent not made by human hands and held up by tent poles and stakes. No, the tent God would dwell in now, to be with His people, to bless and forgive them, and to be their God, He was actually already in – a tent of flesh and blood. This is what the Apostle John (who was also on the mountain that day) spoke of in describing the birth of Jesus when he wrote **“and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”** (Jn 1:14) Most of you know that the word translated as “dwelt” there is really the word for “tent.” In Jesus, God was again tenting among His people. Perhaps it is the transfiguration that John was thinking of when he wrote those words! For the transfiguration unmistakably shows us that reality. That this man Jesus is more than just a man, more than just a prophet, more than just a miracle worker – He is God with us. God with His people, to save.

And that reality was true even when the cloud and the glory and the light and the voice and Moses and Elijah went away. When the three frightened disciples lifted up their eyes and **“saw no one but Jesus only.”** Even though they could only see the human tent, it was still the tabernacle of God. And therefore it was still glorious.

And that reality was true even when they descended the mountain and were faced with

opposition and persecution. Even when people mocked and ridiculed Jesus. Even when they rejected Him. Even when they spit on Him and beat Him. Even when they whipped Him and crowned Him with thorns and then fastened Him to a cross, pounding spikes through His hands and feet. Even though they could only see the human tent – and it abused and killed – it was still the tabernacle of God. It was God Himself! What happened to Jesus happened to God. In Jesus – in all of this! – God was dwelling with His people, blessing and forgiving them, and being our God. Our God who was saving us. And though it could not be seen, the glory of the Mount of Transfiguration was no less when Jesus was hanging on the cross on Mount Calvary. The glory of God laying down His life for us. For on the cross is where we see most clearly God being *our* God. God being our God, in taking our sin. God being our God in taking our punishment. Taking our abandonment. Taking our guilt. Taking our shame and humiliation. Taking our suffering. Taking our death and grave. And if you think a tent's not very nice, how about all of that? **Yet this is how God will be our God.** You cannot have God apart from all this. . . . Oh, many try. Many false religions try to have a cross-less God. They think it better. More attractive. Successful people want a successful God! And this false thinking permeating our culture gets us to think this way too. When we do not want the cross, but want God to give us success and happiness, and health and wealth, *as signs of His favor and blessing. As signs of His presence with us. As signs of His approval.* God, if you really loved me . . . But no! This [pointing to the crucifix] is your God. The only God. He is a suffering and dying God. And it is glorious.

And this is the reality still for you and me today. For after His crucifixion, God was not finished with His tent. He did not dwell among us only for a while, and then on Easter, when He rose triumphant from the grave, discard His body, His tent/tabernacle, no longer needing it! No! This God is our God – Jesus, still dwelling with His people and blessing us and forgiving us *in flesh and blood*. And though the “tent,” what we see, may not look like much, it is glorious. For it is God with us. . . . That's why Peter could write what we heard in the Epistle, that even though He got to *see* the transfiguration and the glory and the light and all that – he writes, **“*we have something more sure, the prophetic word.*”** Or in other words, more sure than glory and success and visions and grandeur, is the Word of the apostles and the prophets. The Holy Scriptures. No other sign of His favor do we need.

+ For in this Word, His Word, God is dwelling with us, and coming to us, with His blessing and forgiveness. *A tent of words may not look like much, but it is glorious.*

+ And in His Word joined with water, God is dwelling with us and blessing us and forgiving us. In Holy Baptism, washing us clean from our sins and making us His own. *A tent of water may not look like much, but it is glorious.*

+ And in His Word joined with bread and wine, God is dwelling with us and blessing us and forgiving us. In Holy Communion, feeding us with His own body and blood and strengthening us and living in us. *And a tent of bread and wine may not look like much, but it is glorious.*

For here is God Himself. **For you.** Once crucified, now risen, and now here **for you.** Not in just one place, but in many places. Not at one time, but for all time. Not to establish a kingdom in this world, but to take us to His kingdom, that we “*may live under Him in His kingdom . . . in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.*” (Explanation to Second Article, Small Catechism)

And how much better we have it now, than Peter, James, and John! We heard that “**after six days,**” they went up on the mountain and saw this glory. But only once. We get to see this glory every week! For “**after six days**” we gather every seventh day here, and meet our God, our Father, our Saviour Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. We hear His Word, we confess our sin and receive His absolution, we come in weakness and are fed and strengthened. **After every six days** in the valley of the shadow of death, in the world, in the rat race, among the false gods and false philosophies, the chasing after temporary glory and vanishing riches, we get to return. *To the tent of meeting.* For here is the flesh and blood of God for you. Here are the gifts of God for you. Here is the life and salvation of God for you. **And here it is not Jesus who is transfigured, it is us.** For here we are the ones receiving the glory of God in the forgiveness of our sins.

And though we cannot see it now, what we are will one day be made known and made visible. For we are being conformed into the image of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. So while this tent [pointing to my body] may not look not very nice, pretty grimey and dirty with sin, pretty tattered and torn with the struggles of this life; while we here live under the cross and bear the crosses we have been given; while we may be rejected and persecuted and mocked and ridiculed – that’s okay. Actually no, it’s good! For to this world and its things and glory we should not cling. And just as with Jesus, while our earthly tent will one day be destroyed in death, it will be resurrected. And it will be glorious. With a glory far surpassing all the glory of this world. Far surpassing anything we could imagine.

And so as we now enter the season of Lent this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, it is with this in mind. We have seen His glory, yes, and see it still, for He is still with us. And just as after this season of Lent awaits the glory of Easter, so too after this life awaits for us the glory of Heaven. Where we will say, “**Lord, it is good that we are here.**” And truly it will be! And we will lift up our eyes, and see Jesus – only and glorious.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.