

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from the Word of God in the flesh, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

How many of you would call yourselves “campers”? I know some of you disappear on various weekends throughout the summer to spend time camping. You might not call it camping. I usually hear things like we’re going to the lake, or we’re going to the cabin up north. For me, personally, I don’t care too much for camping. For me, camping is poor room service at the Holiday Inn... If you consider yourself a “camper,” let me ask you this, how many of you actually pitch a tent when you camp? Aha, now the numbers dwindle! What if I ask it this way...How many of you have ever pitched a tent before? Maybe in Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, or maybe with your parents when you were young. Okay, so most of us understand the basics of “pitching a tent,” but what if you had to live in a tent on a more permanent basis... When I was on deployment in Egypt back in 1989, we were all told that no matter what our career field was, until we have enough tents for everyone to live in, we were all tent makers. So, we pitched tent after tent until we had several hundred. One of the biggest tents I’ve ever seen is the dining hall tent. It’s this giant “H” shaped tent that can feed over 1200 people at a time. Now the civil engineers had already laid the electric lines and installed the generators that provided the power. Unfortunately there was only one way to connect the tent to the power and of course we built the tent 180 degrees backwards. Our

Commander got us all together shoulder to shoulder, all 250 of us and we lifted the giant, fully constructed tent and turned it around so that the electrical connections could be made. The really funny part of this story is that even after that experience we did the exact same mistake on the second dining hall we built and had to turn it around as well. By the time we got to the third one, we knew which direction it had to go...

In our Gospel text from John, we heard the words “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us...” That’s what it says in our translation of vs. 14 in our gospel. “The word became flesh and dwelt among us...” The word translated “dwelt” comes from the Greek verb “skenoo.” “Skenoo comes from the root word the word “skene,” which means tent. “Skenoo” literally means making a dwelling, pitching a tent, or making a tabernacle. The sense of this word is not just that word of God comes to earth, but that the Word of God pitches his tent with us. Jesus sets up camp with the people of earth, in spite of the fact that he’s got a much better arrangement already available.

Most religions have stories of some form of divine being visiting humanity. In Christianity, the divine does more than just stop in for a visit. God sets up camp with us, pitches His tent among the people, and becomes a real flesh and blood human being. This is not just an appearance, but God in human form, who came from heaven to live life as a human being.

Think with me for a moment the significance of this image of God pitching a tent rather than say, inhabiting a building. Tents are temporary; they wear out; they only give partial shelter from the elements. The same things can be said about humanity. Human life is temporary. Human bodies wear out. The human condition gives only partial shelter from suffering. But Jesus came to be a real human being, experiencing mortality, pain, frailty, suffering, and humiliation. All experiences that God chose to embrace when He became human.

Another definition of this verb, *skenoo*, is to tabernacle. Though not a word we'd use in regular conversation, the tabernacle was basically a traveling temple for the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years. It was seen as the house of God, but it was movable, so it could go from place to place with them as they wandered before settling in the Promised Land. The glory of God was understood to be housed in that special tent, called a tabernacle. So, when we hear that God tabernacled among us, we also should think about the way God's power is now experienced, not through some vague "presence" in a tent, but through a real human being, made of flesh and blood, who lived and loved among us.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once sought to describe the incarnation of God in Christ. I'll paraphrase his story... A certain king was very rich. His power was known throughout the world, but he was most unhappy,

because he desired a wife. Without a queen, the vast palace was empty. One day, while riding through the streets of a small village, he saw a beautiful peasant girl. She was so lovely the heart of the king was won over and no other would due. He wanted her more than anything he had ever desired. Every day he would ride by her house on the mere chance of seeing her for a moment in passing. He wondered how he might win her love. First, he thought, I will draw up a royal decree and require her to be brought before me to become the queen of my land. But, as he considered this option, he realized she was a subject and would be forced to obey. He could never be certain that he had won her love. Then, he said to himself, “I shall call on her in person. I will dress in my finest royal garb, wear my diamond rings, my silver sword, and my shiny black boots. I will overwhelm her and sweep her off her feet to become my bride.” But, as he pondered the idea, he knew he would always wonder whether she had married him for the riches and power he could give her.

Then, he decided to dress as a peasant, drive to the town, and have his carriage let him off. In disguise, he would approach her house. But, somehow he knew this would be discovered and she would think he was a fake and a liar. Finally, he knew what he must do. He would shed his royal robes. He would go to the village and become one of the peasants. He would work and suffer with them. He would actually become a peasant. That is exactly what he did and he won over

the love of his life. God likewise considered how He might win over the love of his life, humankind. God in Christ became one of us. He took upon Himself the form of human flesh to dwell among us. Jesus, God Incarnate, the Word, became flesh and lived among us; Jesus pitched his tent and lived as one of us. The very God who created the universe humbled himself by willingly being born a tiny baby in a manger and living as one of us, with all of our limitations. He did it out of sheer love for us all.

I think Kierkegaard was on to something with this story, but I'm not sure that God pitching a tent and living as one of us tells the whole story. Just because God decided to give up the riches of heaven to become a babe in a manger doesn't really explain how that benefits humankind. There must be more to the story. And there is! In the very first chapter of John's Gospel, we're given this great prolog and near the end of our text for today we hear that through this Word become flesh we receive grace upon grace. John reminds us that through Moses we received the Law. But through the Word become flesh, we receive this thing called Grace. I teach my confirmation students that Grace stands for God's Riches At Christ's Expense. We receive forgiveness of sins, salvation, and everlasting life all because God chose to pitch His tent and become a human being. Why would God do that for the likes of me and you? It goes back to the beginning. In the beginning was the Word. This Word or Logos in the Greek means much more than just the spoken

or written words. It also refers to the word still in the mind—things like reason, logic, and ideas. The Greek concept of “Logos” also refers to the power and energy that undergirds and holds the universe and everything in it together. Imagine giving up all that power to become a helpless baby. To experience hunger and thirst. To feel pain and suffering. To die in the most humiliating manner ever invented by the mind of mankind, crucifixion. That’s the full picture of the price God paid for you and for me and for our salvation. Yes, God pitched His tent in the body of Jesus Christ, but that’s not the end of the story. Jesus taught us to love, not just our friends and family, but even our neighbors. Jesus gave a whole new meaning to forgiveness. It’s not just a one- or two-time thing, but forgive infinitely, just as our Father in Heaven forgives infinitely. Jesus came so that we could see the face of our Father Creator and to know that we are loved by that Father. This Word of God also promised us that trusting in Him would bind us to him not just in a death like his, but also in a resurrection like His. Now that’s really good news for all of us who know our own mortality. The sting of death has been removed. Thanks be to God!

May the reality of God’s Word become real for you this Christmas Season. May God’s peace come to you because you can trust God’s Word in the flesh, Jesus Christ. May we all now go and tell this great news to our world so the peace we have found in Jesus can spread to all people. Amen.