

## **“Camping with God”**

June 26, 2016

*Starting Over, Digging Deeper series*

I’m not a fan of tent camping. I know some of you are seasoned tent campers. Some of you even winter camp, which is beyond my imagination. So I know some people love to tent camp – more power to you - but I’m not a big fan. You’d think that growing up on a farm would make me a little more used to or at least more willing to deal with dirt and dust and other stuff, but I’m just not there.

Tent camping is a lot of work: the preparation of packing food, cooking utensils, clothes, tools, water toys, and other stuff; the set up of tents that are just enough to shelter you, but not really enough to protect you from cold nights; unpredictability of weather; mosquitoes, repellent, and bites that itch and swell and creepy crawling things; dirt and dirty feet; the constant slathering of sunscreen on my fair skin so I don’t look like a lobster the next day; the packing up and laundry. I could go on, but suffice it to say, camping is messy.

So I’ve had to deal with the fact that God - Creator of the universe, God who spoke and it was - this God of all makes the decision to go camping. God makes a commitment to all of creation - to seek a relationship with you and me - and let’s face it, it’s messy. We’re messy - not a mess - but messy.

Yes, we are created in God’s image, and we need to start there and remember that we’re God’s good creation first. But then God commits to being a part of our goodness and our messiness. Literally, when God comes “in the flesh” in Jesus, God “sets up camp” with us. God chooses to come and be with us in the beauty and the struggle of our humanity.

It’s important to see the timeline of how we’ve understood God’s presence. It’s not that God has ever been absent. In the beginning, God called Abram and walked with Moses. As the Israelites journeyed, God’s presence was carried in the Ark of the Covenant. From there, God offered specific instructions for building a Temple where God was pleased to dwell and where people came to worship and make offerings.

We hear from King Solomon under whose reign the Temple was first constructed. At the dedication of the Temple, he lifts his hands and prays, “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in all of heaven above or on the earth below. You keep your covenant and show unfailing love to all who walk before you in wholehearted devotion.”

The Temple was THE place to meet God - to be in God’s presence. It was the center of life and faith for those who followed God. Jefferson Bethke says that the Temple “was the place where heaven and earth met,” so we can only imagine the grief

when the Temple was destroyed. Faith was tied to place - to that specific place. Where was God without the Temple?

The Temple was eventually rebuilt and stood in Jerusalem. It was the place where people came to meet God in worship and offer sacrifices. Still today, some of us may have a similar view of the church and the sanctuary. Maybe it's not THE place where God dwells, but it's a sacred space where we gather to worship, praise, pray, sing, cry, rejoice, and encounter God.

And yet we know that the Israelites struggled to remain faithful to God. They turned to other gods. They are sent into exile, and the Temple is no longer the center of life or of God's presence. And so they waited and wondered. Where is God? How is God present?

When we read those mysterious and confusing words in the Gospel of John, he's saying that God chose to be with us in a new way. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth." This is the mystery of the Incarnation. This is God's grace to us. This is where heaven and earth come together. Put another way that may connect with you and me: "Jesus is God's selfie." (SHOW PIC)

Incarnation means that God dwells with us. God comes close to us, and God stays close. Certainly our faith in Jesus is personal. We nurture a personal relationship with God through Christ, but it doesn't stop there. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Transformation is the work that God does in us and through us. God seeks to make this world - right now - more and more like what God wants it to be. And we're a part of God's work. We have a role to play in transformation because we're a part of God's good creation.

I told you that I don't like tent camping. What if God, Creator of the universe, had my attitude? What if God said, "It's just too much work. I'm not really into it. I don't like to get messy. I don't like to deal with the work, the unpredictability, the dirt and mess of it all." What if God just didn't want to do it? Where would we be? How would we be? How would the world be without Jesus?

Now some say that's where we are. There's so much less Jesus in the world, but I disagree. God's promise and commitment to us doesn't ever end. We may struggle on our end, but God is with us. That's the promise and amazing message of the Incarnation. There's no place where God isn't. There's no time where God hasn't been. There's no person whom God doesn't love. And there's no truth to those who would assume that they know God's judgment or how it all shakes out in the end.

Friends, we're not here to make determinations about whom God loves. What we know is that in Jesus of Nazareth, God is with us. And when Jesus offers a new commandment that we read later in John's Gospel in chapter 13, he does not say, "Judge one another." He says, "Love one another." He makes it clear that LOVE is the

way we're called to go, LOVE is the truth we're called to share, and LOVE gives life to others. How are we giving life to others?

Bethke offers a key observation, too: "love isn't possible without vulnerability." God is vulnerable, and that's hard for us to swallow. Sometimes we just want God to be powerful - to take care of everything. We just want God to be all-knowing - to know us and our needs without having to ask. But I'm so thankful that God is willing to set up a tent - to be present - to be with me and with you in the joy and goodness and the mess.

And if God is vulnerable and loves us enough to come in Jesus, then we have a call to vulnerability, too. If we seek to share the love of God, then we must be vulnerable - willing to get messy and be there with others. We can't control God, box God in, contain God, or make God in our image (remember that we're made in God's image - not the other way around!). God calls us to be vulnerable.

Remember how we celebrated the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? How it came in a surprising and unexpected way - so much so that people thought those who received it were intoxicated? Drunk? The Spirit is in you and me. God's presence is in you and me. We are God's image-bearers. We are those born of the Spirit who live by the Spirit. God brings heaven and earth together in Jesus, but we're also a part of bringing heaven now. The Kingdom of God isn't far off; it's what we build piece by piece through our words and our actions.

So I'll offer a camping story. There was a boy on his first overnight camp. He'd never been away from home at night before. He did pretty well for a few days, but he was getting homesick. He told one of the adults he was homesick and asked to call his mom. As he waited for the call to go through, the boy kept saying, "please pick up...please pick up." Mom answered and reassured the boy that it would be OK.

So the man who was helping took the boy back to the tent with the hope he'd go to sleep. When he walked in, even though the other boys were in the tent, they were all sleeping. The boy said stood in the middle and said, "I feel so lonely."

So the man said, "Tell you what. I'll stay outside your corner of the tent for a few minutes until you fall asleep." So the boy lay down, and the man went outside to sit and wait. The side of the tent lifted a few times as the boy looked out to make sure the man was there - once, twice, three times. Finally, there was no more looking - no more checking. Rest came for the boy, but not before he knew that he was not alone.

Friends, we are not alone. God is with us. God's presence is unwavering, steady, dependable, and steadfast. We can trust it. We can rest in it. We can live in it and show it to others so that everyone would know that God is with us.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.