Tent Meeting!

I. The Incarnation

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1)

A. John now introduces us to the fourth characteristic of Christ.

1. First, he told us Christ was eternally coexistent with God and was God.
2. Second he told us Christ was the source of life and light
3. Third he told us Christ was the unrecognized and rejected Creator as He dwelt among the created.
4. And now, John emphasizes the incarnation – the Word became flesh.

There is great and wonderful significance to this that may not be readily apparent. It all starts hundreds of years earlier.

Remember the popular OT story of Israel being delivered out of Egyptian bondage. Having escaped the pursuing armies of Pharaoh by the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea, the children of Israel find themselves faced with the challenge of surviving in the desert. Panic set in, but God proved Himself by providing Manna on a daily basis. They grew sick of Manna and God sent them quail. God met their water needs by bringing forth water out of a rock. God provided for their safety by giving them victory over a band of Amalekites that attacked them at Rephidim. That was the story, you remember, when Aaron and Hur helped Moses hold his hands up so they could win the battle.

Soon after that, God instructed Moses to build a mobile tabernacle. Some translations use the word sanctuary. The original word is “tent” and the literal but somewhat clumsy translation of this into our language is “the tent of meeting.” This would be the worship center for Israel. They would disassemble it and take it with them when they moved, then reassemble at their new camp.

The tent of meeting was about worship. It was about sacrifice, as there was space allotted where sacrifices would be performed. It was about God’s holy presence and a physical reminder to Israel that as they journeyed through the wilderness God was with them everywhere they went.

Eventually, Israel entered the promised land and the tent of meeting was set up at Gilgal, supposing that would be its permanent place. However, it was later moved to Shiloh where Joshua’s tribe lived and remained their for three hundred years, through the time of the judges ruling over Israel.

Then came Solomon, who had the tent of meeting moved first to Nob, then to Gibeon. After Solomon completed his temple, he had the old tabernacle moved to the temple mount and the ark of the covenant taken out of the tent of meeting and placed in the temple. After that, we lost track of the old tabernacle, the old tent of meeting. It just fades from history.
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In the days Jesus walked upon this earth, the Jews did not have the tabernacle. The only thing they had was a temple. It wasn't Solomon's temple. Solomon's temple had been destroyed. The new temple was built under Zerubbabel, but time had taken its toll on the temple and King Herod made a name for himself remodeling Zerubbabel's temple, which then became known as Herod's temple. That is the temple that existed in Jesus day. That was the temple where Jesus drove out the money changers. That was the temple that Jesus prophesied would be destroyed – “not one stone left upon another.” The Jews were proud of their temple. It was the center of their religion. It was the ultimate home base of their worship. Synagogues served as remote worship locations for those who did not live near the temple. But the temple was their pride and joy.

John says “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us”. The word translated “dwelt” is best translated “tented” among us. The Jews didn’t have a portable tabernacle to take with them. The temple was planted and going nowhere. But John informs us that Jesus came and “tented” among his people. He would go with His disciples wherever God led them. This is powerful imagery for those who understood Jewish history. Jesus was the new and improved tabernacle. He was the walking, living, breathing tent of meeting. He was the earthly presence of God among His people.

But there is still another even deeper dimension to this. While the tabernacle of old served as a physical location for the presence of God to be manifest, there is infinite superiority in the fact that Jesus himself became the tabernacle and “tented” among us. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The most important point made in that statement is not the second part (and dwelt among us), but the first part (He became flesh). He not only was among us (like the tabernacle of old), but he was one of us. He was fully man and fully God. He didn’t set up a tabernacle of different substance among humanity. He made his tent of human flesh. More than among us, He became like us. He ate our food. He drank our water. He wore our clothes. He slept on our crude beds and sat our furniture. He hungered when we hungered and thirsted when we thirsted. He bled like us. He ached like us. He shivered from the cold and perspired in the relentless heat. He rejoiced with the blessed and wept with the grieving.

II. The Power of God in our Midst

Continuing with the Jewish festival theme John has invoked, we are prompted to remember the account from Exodus 40 when the tabernacle was completed and

…the glory of the Lord descended in a cloud and covered the tent of meeting, and the glory filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud was settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. (Ex 40:34-45)

And with that image in mind, John tells us,

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John was one of many witnesses who witnessed the glory of the Lord upon Christ, the living tabernacle of God.
Most Christians have heard the term “shekinah”. The word is actually not found in the Hebrew OT. It was not until later rabbinical writings that they began to use that word to describe the presence of God. We often hear people talk about the “shekinah glory” of the Lord, which is somewhat redundant. It is almost like saying the “glory glory” of the Lord. The “shekinah” is a favorite subject matter of the those many self-proclaimed Bible teachers you can tune into on Christian television. I suppose they feel scholarly by throwing around a word from another language. But most of them present the shekinah of the OT as something we covet today – the overshadowing power of God’s presence coming down in our church. They want to recreate that scene in the tabernacle with the cloud descended on the tent of meeting and the glory filled the tabernacle. But I want to point something out to you. What happened in the OT was inferior to what happened in the NT. The tabernacle was inferior. The priesthood was inferior. The sacrifice was inferior. Everything was inferior.

What John told us is what we should be in total awe of. “We have seen his glory”. The power and presence of God was fully demonstrated in Christ. What happened in the tabernacle in the OT pales in comparison to what John saw.

They saw the glory of the Lord upon Christ when He mended broken bodies, opened blind eyes and deaf ears. They saw the power of God when He walked on the water and calmed the stormy sea. They saw the glory and power of God when He spoke like no man had ever spoken before and silenced the most brilliant minds on earth with wisdom they could not answer. They saw the power of God all over Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration. They saw His power when we commanded Lazarus to rise up and walk out of that tomb. They saw His power when he endured the excruciating punishment at the hands of his enemies and was nailed to the cross, but simply prayed forgiveness for them. They saw his power and glory when He arose from His grave victorious over death and went back to visit His disciples to reassure them the grave held no power over Him. Because in Him was life and the life was the light of the world. He tented among them, but when He left He sent another Comforter to carry us the rest of the journey. And in the Holy Spirit we still see the power and glory of the Lord.

III. The One and Only

A. Can only revealed by God’s one and only Son

This expresses the uniqueness of Christ. He is the one and only Son of God.

That makes Christianity distinct; unique; one of a kind; incomparable. Christianity is not merely another player in the game. Christianity is not one branch of many equally valid religions. Christ is not one good prophet among other major prophets in history. He is the one and only Son of God. It is not that there haven’t been others to make similar claims, but Christ validates His claim by His resurrection. The world can barely tolerate Christ. At best, they might concede He was a good teacher, or a prophet. But they refuse to accept Christ as the one and only incomparable Son of God. However, we must understand that our confession of His uniqueness is vital to our salvation and our relationship with
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God. God will not accept any other explanation of Christ that falls short of the fact that He is the one and only Son of God.

The early Christian martyrs faced death over this very issue. They refused to acknowledge any other religion or deity alongside Christ. They died confessing His uniqueness, His matchlessness. They denied the paganistic religions of Rome. They denied the Emperor’s claims of deity. They refused to bow their knee to another. They paid the ultimate price to declare without compromise that Jesus Christ alone is the Son of God.

B. Further Proof: Full of Grace and Truth

These are two characteristics usually reserved for God alone. The claim reinforces the uniqueness of Christ. Nobody else fully embodies the characteristics of God except God.

The word “grace” pictures Christ to be a man full of mercy, kindness, compassion. He was “full” of grace. Not just occasionally gracious, but saturated with grace. He loved people. Children were drawn to Him. Sinners felt His loving compassion. He came to minister to the broken and the wounded and the lost. He did not lead a campaign of vigilantes through Palestine exacting vengeance people. He loved and He forgave. A broken reed He will not break, smoking flax He will not quench. However, John makes only this brief mention of the grace that filled Christ. Paul had much more to say about that in his writings.

But the big theme in John’s mind was truth. Christ was full of truth. Truth stands out clearly as a major theme in John’s gospel. The word has subtle implications of such virtues as faithfulness, steadfastness, and consistency. You will see John continue to put an emphasis on Christ being the truth throughout His gospel. It was John that recorded the famous declaration by Christ, “I am the Way and the Truth, and the Life.” It was in the very next chapter of John we have the beautiful passage that begins with “I am the True Vine”. It was John who recorded Christ’s prayer, “Sanctify them by the truth. Your word is truth.” John also reminded us that Jesus said, “But when He, the Spirit of truth will come, He will guide you into all truth.” And, it is on John’s gospel we read those famous words, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.”

Those are but a few examples of how important the theme of truth through Jesus Christ was to John.

People want truth. I know there are some people and some occasions when people don’t want to hear truth, but that doesn’t mean they are completely satisfied being totally bamboozled by lies. As long as they know what truth is, they make a conscious decision to reject the truth. But truth is an anchor. It is a necessary standard for life. We want to know truth. We want access to the truth. We may reject that truth once we discover it, but we are not at ease until we know truth.

It is like the time Ahab wanted to go take Ramoth-Gilead and all his false prophets told him God would be with him if He did it. However, Micaiah was a godly prophet that Ahab wanted to hear from. He didn’t trust his band of “yes”
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men. Micaiah first told the king the same flattering lies of the other prophets, but Ahab didn’t want flattering lies, he wanted truth. Then Micaiah told him if he tried to take the land he would die in the process. Now that Ahab knew the “truth” - now that he knew it was a dangerous mission - he figured he could take extra precautions and outsmart death. It didn’t work.

We are having some unique problems with the generation we call Millennials today. This generation is somewhat defined as a group who have lost the value of hard work and the necessity of making your own way. They are often lampooned as being the generation who graduates school and lives in their parent’s basement, more interested in their video games than personal productivity and accepting the adult responsibilities of life. They have been brainwashed with an entitlement mentality that the world owes them something. They have been lied to about personal responsibility. They have been lied to about God and Church and Christianity. They have been lied to about morals and ethics. They have been lied to about the Bible. They have been lied to about American history and World History.

But I can’t help but believe with all my heart that, given the fact that lies do not satisfy, but always disappoint, there is one day going to be a great awakening among the Millennials and they are going to want truth. They will discover they have been hoodwinked and they will start their quest for truth. That is when the message of Christ will be there to fill the void.

We are bearers of the light of truth. No matter how the world may try to quench the truth, we cannot let the light expire. There will be a renewed interest in truth and we must be prepared when that time comes.

A few years ago, the Olympics were preparing to start. The tradition has been for a torch to be lit at Olympia, Greece, then a series of runners carry that lit torch (except for the use of boats or plans to span the oceans) all the way to the site of the Olympics where the official Olympic fire would be lit. The journey takes many weeks, many runners, and covers thousands of miles. In the year 2000, some people had the lame idea it would be funny to try to quench the torch before it reached its destination. Each runner bearing the torch had to then use extra caution to avoid the malicious people who tried to throw water on the torch, or who tried to tackle the runner and take the torch from them. It was bizarre.

The runners managed to fend off all efforts to stop the flame and the relay was once again a success.

We are the bearers of the torch of truth, taking the light of truth into darkness. The enemy is devoted to extinguishing the truth, and we have to battle incessantly to keep the torch of the truth burning. We battle against lies, we battle against slanders, we battle against persecution, we battle against distracters who intend to disrupt our race. But we must pledge not to allow the enemy to quench the light. The world is hungering for truth because they are sick and disgusted with the lies of Hell. Keep the light of truth burning. It is needed today as much as it has ever been needed in the history of the world.