

God Pitched His Tent with Us

John 1:1-18

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Advent and Christmas are times of new beginnings and unexpected joys. There's mystery, there's wonder, there's amazement at who Jesus is and what God is doing.

A writer named Robert Fulghum captures some of this in a story from his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. He says that one year he didn't receive many Christmas cards. This was back in the day when most people still sent Christmas cards. Fulghum says it hit him one day in February that he didn't get very many cards at Christmas. He's not sure why he started thinking about that. Maybe he just needed a reason to feel crummy and there it was. But he didn't say anything about it. "I can take it. I am tough. I won't complain when my cheap friends don't even care enough to send me a stupid Christmas card. I can do without love."

The following August, he was in his attic, trying to organize the mess. And he found stacked in with the holiday decorations a whole box of unopened greeting cards from the previous Christmas. He'd tossed them into the box to open at leisure. Then he ran out of leisure in the scramble around Christmas and the cards got caught up when he tossed stuff in the attic, thinking he'd straighten it out next year.

I hauled the box down, and on a hot summer day, middle of August, mind you, in my bathing suit, sitting in a lawn chair on my deck, with sunglasses, cocoa butter, a quart of iced tea, and a puzzled frame of mind, I began to open my Christmas cards. Just to help, I put a tape of Christmas carols on the portable stereo [this was years ago] and cranked up the volume.

Here it all was. Angels, snow, Wise Men, candles and pine boughs, horses and sleighs, the Holy Family, elves and Santa. Heavy messages about love and joy and peace and goodwill. If that wasn't enough, there were all those handwritten messages of affection from my cheap friends who had, in fact, come through for the holidays.

I cried. Seldom have I felt so bad and so good at the same time. ...
As fate always seems to have it, I was discovered in this condition by a neighbor, who had been attracted to the scene by the sound of Christmas caroling. She laughed. I showed her the cards. She cried. And we had this outrageous Christmas ordeal right there on my deck in the middle of August, singing along with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir to the final mighty strains of "O Holy Night." "Faaalll on your kneeeees, O heeeeeer the angel vooiiiiceess."

What can I say? I guess wonder and awe and joy are always there in the attic of one's mind somewhere, and it doesn't take a lot to set it off. And much about Christmas *is* outrageous, whether it comes to you in December or late August. (87-89)

New beginning, wonder, awe, joy, life, light, love—all of these come together at the start of John's Gospel. This Gospel opens with a new beginning. John looks back to the very beginning, echoing the first line of Genesis: "In the beginning...." But the Gospel also looks forward to telling the story of the new beginning, new creation, in Jesus the Messiah.

Both the first creation and the new creation come through God's Word—God's self-expression and communication.

"God said, 'Let there be' ...and it was" (Genesis 1:1).

"By the word of the Lord were the heavens made" (Psalm 33:6).

Sometimes God's word is personified in the OT:

"The word of the Lord came..." (Isaiah 38:4).

"My word...will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Is 55:11).

Hebrew thought also identified the word of God with Wisdom (especially as wisdom is personified in Proverbs and other writings). Greek thought saw the Logos/Word as both personal reason and the rational principle of the universe that governs all things.

In the Gospel, the Word isn't simply a personification, but is personal reality. The Word is identified with God—"the Word *was* God"—yet is somehow distinct from God—"the Word was *with* God."

The Word here is the agent of creation and gives life to creation. "Life" is one of the themes of this Gospel. God is the creator and source of life. *Into the emptiness of our alienation from God, the Word comes giving life.*

And the life he gives is *light* (that's another major theme in this Gospel). The life of the Word is the light of humankind. This light overcomes darkness. Light in this Gospel represents goodness and truth. Darkness represents evil and falsehood.

John the Baptizer came as a witness to the light. He was like a lantern allowing the light to be seen. John the Baptist isn't the one this Gospel is named after. Tradition has it that the "beloved disciple" who's mentioned in this book and who's an eyewitness source for much of the Gospel is the apostle John, son of Zebedee. That's why it's called The Gospel According to John.

Back to John the Baptist: he was a man sent from God. Jesus was God's Son sent by God. The disciples are followers of Jesus sent by him into the world.

John the Baptist was sent as a witness to the light. God gives light to all people. We sometimes speak of "general revelation," that is, God makes something of himself and his will known to everyone—through nature and conscience and desires for something more. We also see this light that enlightens everyone as an example of God's "prevenient grace." That's the grace that comes before—before our awareness or acceptance of it. God's Spirit is in the world, bringing the light of God in Christ to every person to some degree.

We may worry about how commercial Christmas is in our culture. And we can get overwhelmed by advertisements and shopping and all the busyness of this time of year. But in the midst of all the Christmas music we hear, the good news of Jesus slips through. All the tinsel and lights may reflect the light of God in Christ. The many TV movies and specials may have hints of the story of Jesus in them. One of the most-beloved, *A Charlie*

Brown Christmas, even has Linus reciting the story of Jesus' birth from Luke. And, at the end, the kids sing Charles Wesley's "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." This is the time of year when people may be most susceptible to Christian witness. God's light sneaks in and shines on everyone's life at one time or another, in one way or another—here in late December or in the middle of August, or any time you can imagine.

But not everyone recognizes the light or receives it. The world he made didn't recognize Jesus. His own people—Israel—didn't receive him.

But those who *do* receive Jesus and put their trust in him are enabled to become children of God. God authorizes and enables us to become what we can't become on our own. We can be God's children, born from above, born of the Spirit, part of God's family. There can be new beginnings in our lives.

Do you see God's light shining in Jesus? The light reveals God and shows us who we really are and who we're meant to be. *Into the darkness of our separation from God shines the true light.*

He gives us light each step of the way and finally dispels all darkness. I remember an old story about a lamplighter who described going up the street lighting one lamp after another, seeing the next step in the light of each one. Someone asked, "What do you do when you reach the end of the road?" He said, "By the then the dawn comes—and who needs a lamp when the sun is shining?" (Jim Buskirk, "God's Family Evangelists" tape, First UMC, Tulsa, 1984).

Verse 14 is the highlight of this passage (and, really, of the entire Gospel in a way). It speaks of God's *incarnation*, becoming flesh. The Word, God the Son, became flesh, became fully human. *Into the aloneness of our wandering from God, comes God in Jesus Christ.* That's what we celebrate at Christmas.

In verse 1 we read that the Word *was*; in v 14, that the Word *became*. In v 1 we see the Word *in God's presence*; in v 14, we see the Word *among us*. In v 1 the Word *was God*; in v 14 the Word *became flesh*.

God's eternal Word, the eternal Son of God, became flesh. He became human. God's Son becoming human dignifies and affirms humanity—every one of us—as part of God's good creation. The body isn't a prison-house or

a tomb, as some have taught. And salvation isn't escape from the body, but redemption of the whole person.

The Word became flesh/human and dwelt among us. The word for "dwell" there means "to pitch a tent." He pitched his tent with us. This most likely refers to Israel's tabernacle where they worshiped before they built the temple. The glory of God—the shining light of God's presence—was seen dimly and temporarily in the tabernacle and the temple. Now it has come to stay in Jesus. The glory of God shines in and through Jesus. God makes himself known.

When we think of pitching a tent, we probably think of camping trips. Most campers probably have at least one story of things going wrong, of the discomforts involved. Most campers probably wouldn't want to live in their tents all the time. Even when they have a great time camping, they're glad to get home.

The summer Nancy and I met, we were working as youth directors at her home church in Moore. One of our events that summer was a youth camping trip. We took thirty-some kids and some adult sponsors to Jellystone Park near Branson. Nancy had done lots of camping growing up. My only previous camping experience was a couple of Boy Scout overnights and staying outside in a friend's back yard.

On the way to Branson, one of our trailers had a flat tire. One of the other drivers stopped to help, but the other went on. When we got to the campground, it was dark and starting to rain. We finally found our campsite and somehow got the tents up well enough to get to sleep. My admiration for Nancy began to grow as I saw how well she handled that situation. It turned out to be a great trip. And those adult sponsors liked to take some of the credit for Nancy and me getting together.

The eternal Word of God pitched his tent among us. Sent by the Father from the realm of glory on a mission to save us, he camped with us. He lived here as one of us. God came to us in Christ. God's great desire is to be with us. Eugene Peterson puts it this way: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (*The Message*). And he has stayed with us. In his resurrection and in glory, Jesus remains human.

The eternal God, the Lord of the universe, squeezed into a human cell, grew inside a mama, and was born a human baby in a stable. Those who know him see his glory. And that glory shows us grace and truth.

When God revealed his glory to Moses, God showed *steadfast love* and *faithfulness* (Exodus 33, 34). The word for “steadfast love” there is *hesed*. It’s an amazing word. I went to a workshop last year that was all about how *hesed* is used in the Bible and what it means. That workshop presenter has a book about *hesed* that’s just been published. I anticipate it being one of my Christmas presents. *Hesed* appears 250 times in the Old Testament. When God describes himself in Exodus 34:6-7, he uses this word twice. It’s a word that’s almost impossible to translate into English. The King James Version translates it fourteen different ways. In the 1530s, Miles Coverdale invented the word “lovingkindness” to translate *hesed*. It most often speaks of love, covenant love, faithful love, mercy, or grace. It’s often paired with the word for faithfulness or truth.

That’s in the background of what John says about the Word made flesh, full of *grace and truth*, and his saying that grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (v 17). “Grace and truth” is a way of talking about God’s character of steadfast love and faithfulness. Jesus embodies God’s love and faithfulness. *Hesed* is hard to translate. It really has to be demonstrated. It has to be incarnated. Jesus is the incarnation of God’s faithful love.

The Word who became flesh was full of grace and truth. And out of his fullness, we’ve received grace—grace upon grace. In Christ we receive one blessing after another. Wave after wave of grace comes to us through Jesus. We can never exhaust God’s grace. When we think we’ve experienced all God has, God gives more.

There’s something greater than the Law here. In the Law, the Word became words. Now, words are important to us. And God’s Word comes to us. Jesus *is* the Word of God. In him, the Word became flesh. Yet for centuries God gave words to the Hebrews and those words became the OT. For fifty to sixty years after Jesus, God gave words to his followers and those words became the New Testament. Without the Book, we wouldn’t have expected Jesus and we wouldn’t know about him. But the Word of

God isn't contained in ink and paper. The Word is alive, becoming human, communicating, expressing and revealing God (Ellsworth Kalas, lecture notes, Aug 11-15, 2003, Ocean Grove, NJ).

John says that no one has ever really seen God. But God makes himself known in Jesus. "It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (v 18). Jesus, the Word, sent from the heart of God, shows us God and makes the way for us to know God, to get close to the Father's heart, to be in close relationship with the Father. Later, Jesus will tell his disciples, "If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. ...Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:7, 9). The God that no one can see is seen in Jesus, the Word, the Messiah, the Son of God.

I mentioned earlier that there are references in this Gospel to the "beloved disciple," or "the disciple whom Jesus loved." This disciple is the one who wrote these things or spoke them to a community that wrote them down. The beloved disciple was found and called and transformed by the love of Jesus. This disciple wants us to know what it's like to be loved by Jesus.