

Sermon Christmas Day 2021

December 25, 2021

John 1:1-18

In the Name T of Jesus. Amen.

As we listen to the readings for any particular service, my hope is that you hear them and not only try to understand them individually, but also try to understand them together. The reality is that they are not put together by accident. They are intentionally paired because of a common theme. This is especially true of the Old Testament Lesson and the Gospel readings, not only for a day like Christmas Day, but for any given Sunday as well.

As we consider that, then, do you see the connection between the Old Testament reading for today and the Gospel Lesson? To start that conversation, first what is happening in the Old Testament lesson? Well, this is the final construction of the Tabernacle. This is the culmination of all that the Lord had revealed to Moses. If you recall, Moses had led the Israelites through the Red Sea out of their slavery to Pharaoh. He had fed them in the wilderness with Manna. And in the midst of their time in the wilderness, He had given Moses all sort of instruction on how they were to live, and especially what that life would look like in relation to the Lord Himself. In other words, what would this life look like as they worshipped?

The Tabernacle, was then the center of that life. In fact, if you read later in Numbers about how they would camp in the desert, even the structure of their camp had the Tabernacle in the very middle. There were three tribes on each of the four sides of the Tabernacle, and that showed they were gathered around this life of worship. But what did that look like?

**On the first day of the month, the tabernacle was erected. Moses erected the tabernacle. He laid its bases, and set up its frames, and put in its poles, and raised up its pillars. And he spread the tent over the tabernacle and put the covering of the tent over it, as the LORD had commanded Moses.** So Moses took these poles and placed them around. Then there was a covering like a tent covering that went around the whole framed part. This covering went over the whole structure. And in the middle of it there was a screen, we'll hear about in a minute. Now to be clear this tent was one that went inside a larger wall that had a tentlike covering around it. Inside that outer wall was the altar where they would sacrifice daily offerings as the Lord had told them. There was a laver, a bowl with water in it for the priest to wash, and there was this tent that was covered. And inside the tent was the Ark of the Covenant. And it says Moses, **“took the testimony and put it into the ark, and put the poles on the ark and set the mercy seat above on the ark. And he**

**brought the ark into the tabernacle and set up the veil of the screen, and screened the ark of the testimony, as the LORD had commanded.”** So you see the Ark was like a big golden box. And Moses put the tablets with the Law on them in the Ark, and then covered it with the top that was called the mercy seat. That mercy seat had angels on it facing each other, and it was important on the Day of Atonement. It was the place that the High Priest went to bring the blood of the goats for the sins of the people. But that Ark, like it just said, was in this tabernacle. There was a room for it in there, divided from the other section by a “screen” as it was called here. Later when this Tabernacle became the Temple in Jerusalem, that screen became the curtain that tore at the death of Jesus.

But in any case, at this point you’ve got the Israelites around this tent, and the box is in the room in the tent, and then what happens? **Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.**

If you remember as Moses and the Israelites came out of Egypt, as they walked in the wilderness, there was this pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night that led them. This was the presence of God. And where did it go? It went into the tabernacle, it went into the Holy of Holies, that part of the Temple where the Ark was.

So, to ask that good Lutheran question, “Was ist das?” What is that? What did that mean? It meant that this is where God was with the people. Now this is a weird thought for us, isn’t it? And I reference this somewhat regularly, but this is a weird thought. Why? Because we don’t think of God in a place, right? We think of God as being everywhere. So, where was God when this glory went into the tabernacle? Did He stop being everywhere? Well, no. In a sense, He couldn’t stop being everywhere, right? But somehow, He was there with His people in a special way in that room. In fact, elsewhere in Exodus it talks about how they would come here, and God would meet with them that He could bless them.

So, what’s the connection of all of this with the Gospel Lesson? What’s this have to do with Christmas? Well, to start the Gospel of John, He begins with those words just like the beginning of the book of Genesis at the beginning of the Bible. Of course, in Genesis, it said that God created the heavens and the earth, and it tells how that happened. But what does John say?

He says, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”** Try to understand what that means, right? Huh? So there’s the beginning like in Genesis. Check. Then there’s this Word. OK? And that Word was with God. Ah so there’s God creating at the beginning and there’s this Word with Him. OK. And the Word was God. Wait! How many Gods? Well, so that I don’t go too long on this, we’ll acknowledge that we know and confess that there is just one God. It says it all over the place in the Bible. But what is

this talking about? John sort of goes and talks about this Word being there for creation. And we see that in Genesis, right? The Word is spoken and the action happens. “Let there be light,” and there’s light. “Let us make man,” and there’s man. All the way through. And John tells us that nothing was made apart from this Word. Then He gets into light and darkness—which hopefully is clear is about our fall into sin and how we suffer in the midst of it. And there’s John the Baptist bearing witness about this light, and all that. Then we get the hammer.

**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.** There it is. The Word is the Son from the Father. The Word is full of grace and truth. But most importantly for Christmas, that Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And here’s the connection to that Old Testament lesson. It’s hidden in this word “dwelt.” That word can be translated “tabernacled.” The Word tabernacled among us. Just like the glory of God went into that room with the Ark, now we have seen, we have beheld that glory in this Word made flesh. Now, you want to know where God is? You look at this Son.

In other words, as the glory flowed into the tabernacle, when the baby Jesus was born on that first Christmas, there was that glory in that manger. And His Name told people that. If you remember He was called Jesus because He would save His people from their sins. He was called Jesus because that Name means “the Lord is Salvation.” He was also called, “Immanuel,” which means God with us.

But why? We could have God in His glory in this tent in the wilderness. We could have God in His glory in the Temple on that mount in Jerusalem. Why that glory in this tiny child?

If I could, I think this could be explained a bit by a discussion of opposites. One thing that we all have had a lot of experience with lately is technology. As we have endured so much with the pandemic, technology use has skyrocketed, hasn’t it? And to be clear, this hasn’t all been bad. I know what a blessing it was for us to be able to get on our iPad and see loved ones who we were separated from. In fact, it’s still a blessing that we can take advantage of. We can still see the faces of those we love when we are at a distance. But if anything, I think we have all come to see just how insufficient that really is. It has maybe had to make do, but it isn’t the same. It’s not the same to look at someone you care about on a screen. It’s not the same to hear their voice reproduced over a tiny speaker behind a screen. And the reality is the size of the screen doesn’t matter. The size of the speaker doesn’t matter. I’m sure I could find a way to connect my computer to a 50” TV and have the sound blast through a 700 Watt THX 7.1 sound system and it still wouldn’t be the same.

Being in the same room with someone is different than seeing their face electronically reproduced and hearing their voice replicated by the vibrations of paper cones.

And you see the difference between that glory in the tabernacle, and the glory of the Word that became flesh and tabernacled among us. You see it in that illustration and you see it in the life of this Christchild. As He grew up He experienced in that flesh all the things you do. He knew the heat of the sun, the cool of the breeze. The sting of sunburn, and the burn of frostbite. He knew aches, pains, and sorrow. He wept human tears, and laughed human laughs. And when He healed, He showed the joy of human touch, human presence. And of course, it wasn't just the presence He could have being with His people then that was important, it was the goal of that flesh in particular: it was to redeem it.

There is a very in-depth discussion in the earliest days of the Church about what this meant, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Was this Word really God like the Father, or different? Was His body like a human body, or more "spiritual?" Was the soul of this flesh like yours and mine, or merely replaced by the divinity of God? These are deep questions. And you know what the resounding answer was? This flesh was just like your flesh. His body was just like your body. His soul was a soul just like yours. And you know why? So that yours could be redeemed. So that this God could be present not just making contact with people, but that His blood could be finally shed on the cross and presented on the mercy seat in heaven for your sin. So that His body could die the death you deserve, that His body and soul could experience the hell that your sin has earned, and in His resurrection, then you could know that you would be raised completely. This God had to present to do all of that.

And He still comes to you in that presence. He still comes to touch you and care for you. He contacted you in the waters of your baptism, and His body still comes to you under bread, His blood under wine in His meal. He's still dwelling, tabernacling with you in that way. And why?

Because He wants to be present with you now. He wants to be present with you now to take away your sin and give you His holiness. He wants to be present with you now so that you can be present with Him forever. Christians, that's the beauty of this Day. God tabernacling with His people that He could tabernacle with them forever in His kingdom. And that's the beauty of the word of the Scriptures, their unity every Sunday and through all its parts: the message of the Word who became flesh, dwelling among us to forgive our sins so that we could dwell with Him forever. Amen.

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