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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Christmas Day (One-Year Series)

December 25, 2017

Text: Exodus 40:17–21, 34–38; John 1:1–14

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus...a Merry Christmas to you all!!

Dear heavenly Father, on this most holy day we most especially give thanks to you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ, to be born of the Virgin Mary. Through Him, you have won for us salvation, eternal joy, and life everlasting. Fill our hearts with the joy of faith and forgiveness that we, in turn, might be able to live joyful lives of godly devotion and piety. Hear us for the sake of Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Isn't that a rather curious OT reading? On Christmas morning, one might expect a reading from Isaiah about the Virgin giving birth to Immanuel, God with us. Or maybe a reading from the prophet Micah about a ruler coming to Israel from Bethlehem, whose origin is from ancient days. But the construction of the OT Tabernacle?! On Christmas Day?! Why that reading on this occasion, of all things? Poles, frames, bases, pillars, screens, a mercy seat on the Ark of the Testimony. It all sounds so un-Christmas like. Let's face it; the Tabernacle was a pretty fancy tent the children of Israel used for worship as they journeyed in the desert wilderness to the Promised Land. Well, as strange as it might seem at first glance, the reading from Exodus 40 is a perfect reading for this day.

For today we celebrate the glorious news that God chose to come to this earth to dwell among us mortal human beings. The Tabernacle was a sanctified, holy tent of dwelling; the one place on earth that God's people knew God's presence could be found. Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, dwelt upon the mercy seat among all those poles, frames, bases, pillars, and screens. "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Ex. 40:34–35). Wherever the Tabernacle went, there went God for He was dwelling among men.

Through this Tent of Meeting, not only did God dwell among His people, but He also led them in their wilderness travels. “Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out” (Ex. 40:36). The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob truly led His people Israel. He dwelt among them, visibly and graciously. Wherever God went, their God’s people also went. The people of Israel saw God’s veiled presence among them in the cloud and in the fire, “For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys” (Ex. 40:38). Imagine being able to see the cloud by day and the fire by night. Through those means, they saw God. What a glorious experience it must have been. That visible presence led them into the Promised Land.

The Tabernacle, constructed in the 1440s BC, soon after Israel’s Exodus out of Egypt, was the beginning of divine fulfillment. Some 600 years earlier, God called Abraham to leave his hometown. God gave a promise: I will make of you a great nation through which all the nations of the earth will be blessed. And from Abraham’s offspring, God will raise up descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the shore. Israel was God’s people from the seed of Abraham. The Tabernacle is the beginning of God bestowing His blessings upon the earth. But it was only a beginning. The Tabernacle was a vivid and tangible picture of God dwelling among His people, blessing them, increasing them, leading them to a holy city whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10).

The Tabernacle, this holy Tent of Meeting, is also a symbol of humanity’s longing to live peacefully in God’s presence. Adam and Eve briefly experienced that joy, until they disobeyed God. And then they experienced something we know all too well: fear, shame, guilt, and a desire to hide from God’s presence. Much was lost because of their original sin. But what remains within every human heart is the desire to be in God’s presence. We were created to enjoy His fellowship and live with Him forever.

Fast forward about 1400 years to 1st century Israel. The angel Gabriel appears to a young teenage Virgin, preparing to get married. Gabriel’s message: Mary, blessed are you. For you will give birth to a Son, the very Son of God the Father Almighty. You will call Him Jesus. An angel was sent to Joseph, Mary’s intended husband. The angel’s message to Joseph: Mary’s Son is conceived not by a human father but by the Holy Spirit. He will save His people from their sins. Joseph, you are to name Him Jesus and raise Him as your own Son within the home established by your marriage to Mary. And yes, take Mary as your wife for she has been faithful and true.

These angelic visits which form such an integral part of our Christmas celebrations are telling us one thing: God is fulfilling His promise to live among the human race and bring His eternal blessings to all who trust in Him. The blessing of Abraham can be found but in a way not entirely expected, though the prophets bore witness to this great event. Mystery of mysteries....God chooses to dwell among men by becoming Man Himself! The main theme of last night's sermon was this amazing message: God has become a man, a man has become God!

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:1–4, 14).

John's description of the incarnation is filled with wonder, amazement, and mystery. But it's also grounded in the concrete things of this earth. When John writes that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, he is using the language of Tabernacle. All that Exodus 40 stuff with which we began! And the Word become flesh and “tabernacled” among us. The Tabernacle which reveals the presence of God, the Tabernacle which leads His people through this life to the Promised Land is the tabernacle made of human flesh and blood: Jesus is the Tabernacle of God.

How could we ever celebrate Christmas without considering angels, shepherds, and mangers? Maybe, just maybe, now we can say to ourselves, “How can we celebrate Christmas without thinking about the Tabernacle, that us, the dwelling place of God found in the flesh and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. For He is the eternal Word of God “tabernacled” among us. No longer need we feel guilt, shame or fear. God dwells among us. A man has become God – Jesus; the Son of God has become a Man, our Lord and Savior Jesus who dwells among us, leads us, and gives us all His blessings of joy, peace, and hope. This is why we can be bold in our confession, “I am a Christian. For Jesus tabernacles in me and I tabernacle in Him.” A Merry Christmas to you all.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.