

## CHRISTMAS EVE, YEAR A, DECEMBER 24, 2022 5PM

Did you ever go camping as a child? Or if you didn't go camping did you ever set up a makeshift tent in your backyard or even in your house? I remember as a child we had two tables, a small child's table and a regular height one, that we would set up in the backyard and put sheets or blankets over it and then camp out. It was a great place to think, to imagine and have lots of fun. In many respects the tent represented creativity, silence and even refuge.

When I think about building that tent, it's not so different than what the meaning of the Christmas story is. In John's gospel, he writes that the word lived among us. A better and more accurate translation of "Lived among us" is God pitched God's tent among us.

God has pitched a tent tonight just as God, during Israel's forty years of exodus wanderings, commanded them to pitch a tent in the desert so that God might dwell among them. This is what the Christmas story tells us that God not only comes in Jesus but God's presence is among us. In other words, in Jesus, God moves into the neighborhood and pitches a tent in the backyard of humankind.

And when God pitches that tent it feels and looks like what your heritage and traditions are. At our National Cathedral in Washington DC they have more than 700 nativity sets gathered and collected from across the United States and all over the world. In 1998 Beulah and John Sommer gave the Cathedral 600 creche sets which they had collected during their lifetime of travelling around the world while working for the government. And every year curators carefully unpack the sets and give a rotational representative sample of the collection.

The collection ranges from a variety of sets from the very small, some very grand, some very elaborate, some very simple, and even some very fantastic with pink and blue sheep. They have a set from Nepal that depicts the three wise men as a Buddhist monk, a Tibetan priest, and a Sherpa holy man. In the scene from Thailand the animals around the manger include a kneeling elephant, water buffalo, pigs, sheep, goats, chickens, and a dog, for good measure. There is also a small one from Peru that is a yellow public bus overflowing with people and sitting on the roof is the Holy Family. They all depict how God pitches a tent among humankind.

One of the nativity sets that has a powerful meaning for the Sommers came from Pakistan. The Sommers were in Pakistan at a time when it was dangerous to identify yourself as a Christian and many Christians were persecuted. The US embassy had given them a car and a driver to take them around. And they learned that the driver was a Christian and so they shared with him the story of how they were collecting these nativity sets as an effort to tell the story of Jesus by showing the universality of how each culture embraces him. But they were lamenting the fact that they weren't going to be able to get one in Pakistan because it was too dangerous. They would not put someone's life at risk to try and obtain one. The last day that they were in Pakistan, the driver came to them with a carefully wrapped package. Contained within it was his own family's nativity set, one that had been part of the family for years. You see, the driver didn't want his country not to be a part of the larger story. It was a sacrificial gift. Frederick Buechner says, "To sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love." That's part of what this evenin is about: a sacrificial gift given to us for all time out of love.

But there's another story about a nativity set and it's about our own outdoor set. Last year when I was putting the nativity set away, I noticed that the baby Jesus was missing. On top of that I couldn't remember if I had even put him out in the first place, so I searched for the baby Jesus to no avail. This year after putting the set out on the lawn, I once again searched for the baby Jesus and came up empty. What to do? Do we leave the manger empty or find a new baby Jesus. Well, with a few clicks on my computer keyboard, Amazon Prime came through and delivered a new baby Jesus to us this week.

However, I do wonder what happened to our original baby Jesus. And I wonder if someone took the baby Jesus and if they did, hopefully, it's because they needed or wanted to have the baby Jesus close to them. That's what I hope deep down that someone felt that by taking the baby Jesus they would be closer to him.

There is actually an animated film made in 2018 titled "Angela's Christmas" that is about this very topic. It's a story that the author of Angela's Ashes heard from his mother and is about her when she lived in Limerick, Ireland in 1914. It's a funny, heart-warming and poignant story about the power of family and the innocent desire of a child to ensure everyone is safe, warm and loved at Christmas time.

While attending the Christmas Eve service, Angela took note that the baby Jesus didn't even have a blanket on him to keep him warm and the church was very cold. After the mass Angela sneaks back into the church and takes the baby Jesus from the manger and puts him inside her coat. She talks to him all the way home where she is determined to keep him warm. When her mother discovers what she has done they troop back to the church to put baby Jesus back where he belongs. The priest, who was very angry, softens when he realizes why Angela took him in the first place. She hands him back to the priest wrapped in a blanket. After they leave the priest unwraps the blanket from the baby Jesus only to discover he is clothed in Angela's sweater to keep him warm.

What makes this short film really wonderful is the conversation that she has with the baby Jesus. She talks to Jesus like he is a baby alive in her arms. He is very real to her and someone she can talk too which, I think, we lose sight of the older we get. There is an amusing scene in the film when Angela is forced to hide in the church while two elderly people continue their prayers. As she hides behind the hay for the nativity set she suddenly sneezes and the two people look up at the manger and automatically say "Bless you" and she replies from her hiding place, "thank you". They immediately believe they have witnessed a miracle because the baby Jesus spoke to them and then mysteriously disappeared. They then cannot wait to tell others in the village about the miracle of Jesus speaking to them. It's a pivotal moment as Jesus once again becomes very much alive and real for these people. God pitched a tent among them.

Christmas is a time when God pitches God's tent among the people! Christmas is a time when God comes looking for us. People like us – who've been hurt by life and need to be healed. People like us - who have many more questions about God than we have answers. People like us – trying to raise kids and grandkids in a really challenging world. People like us – trying to live fully even as we face up to the realities of aging. People like us - who've lost loved ones and need to find a way to go on. People like us - who need to be forgiven. People like us – who've lost our way through life and need to be found.

In fact, Jesus is "God with you" even in those times when you are so angry with God that you refuse to acknowledge God. But his name says it all. Jesus – Emmanuel -

God is with us in all our ordinary times and days giving us the strength, the hope, the need to go on.

Because wherever hope abides amidst despair; wherever joy abides amidst sorrow; wherever love abides amidst hate; wherever peace is spoken amidst war; Love is happening there. This is the compelling truth of the Christmas story. This is what the child announces to us. In this time and this place, for us and for all beings—a love that is universal is born in us so we can create in us and others a life of peace and hope.

The gift to us this day is the greatest gift we can imagine—a love that surpasses all understanding—the desire of God to pitch God's tent in our backyard and invites us to come and play; to stretch the boundaries of our imaginations towards the mystery of God, born to us in Jesus; to speak words of our own, with our lips and with our lives.

On this day, pray that your hopes, your fears, your deepest desires and longings, will be met in the Christ child in the manger. And may you let God pitch a tent in your heart that it will be filled with light, love grace and truth. Amen