

# Beyond the Tent

February 21, 2016

Today it is about beyond the tent. When I was growing up in the hills of Pennsylvania, outdoor activities were highlights of my day. From the playgrounds at school, to the thickly wooded hills, and streams, and valleys around my home, my days were active and my imagination equally active.

Neil was my closest cousin. Neil and I were born three months apart to sisters who were very near to each other as sisters should be, but maybe not always are. But Neil was my favorite cousin, and he was my best friend growing up.

My cousin and I wanted to explore the wilderness around my home one night, and we packed a tent and headed off to explore the forest and the streams nearby. About half a mile from home we pitched the tent – a two-person tent; a remnant from my father’s years of military service in World War II. We cleared a little space at the edge of the forest near a large marshy field and a small pond and a stream nearby.

When evening drew near and darkness began to close in, we snacked on our s’mores and settled into the tent for the night. And we slept well for quite a while until we were awakened by the eerie sound of an owl off in the distance. “Who! Who!” But it got louder as the owl seemed to come closer. But we steeled ourselves and steadied our nerves. And that worked for a while, but then we heard a rustling sound from just outside our tent.

Now, as third graders, neither of us had really considered what kind of monsters could indeed be lurking in that part of the forest at that time of night. Could it be a rabbit or a squirrel? Although they were often out in the day time, not so much in the dark of night. Perhaps it was a fox, or a raccoon, or a mink, or an otter. But the sound was much bigger than that. Could it be a deer? But they were not as noisy when moving through the woods, and by this time late in the night or early in the morning...whatever it was...they should be bedded down in the tall grass. Could it be a bear? They had often been seen in this area.

Now the tent felt fairly secure and safe – relatively safe and secure. But neither one of us was willing to open the flap and discover what was moving menacingly outside of our little tent. After what seemed to be a very long time, the sounds subsided, and we decided to brave it – to peek outside – but we were ready to run for the hills if our worst fears were realized. And it would have been a daunting run – a half a mile through dark, difficult terrain and thick woods.

Our investigation revealed that the origin of that menacing sound had not left, but was standing motionless just outside the flap of our tent. It was a huge English sheepdog. It was the neighbor’s pet who had decided to investigate the peculiar activities of these two young adventurers at the edge of the woods. Notice that the only antidote, really, to the

deep anxiety that we were experiencing was to crack the tent open and look and see what was there – to venture outside.

Now, again and again, the Bible talks about the safety and the sanctuary and the faithful provisions of Yahweh God. In the Genesis story today, Abram and Sarai are found in a tent, and they're called out of the tent. They are called from the safety of their old-age retirement abode to an open horizon to count the stars and to imagine that God was not yet finished with them, all evidence to the contrary. And the back story of an earlier promise which God had made to Abram is recalled and renewed. And faith which Abram showed is restored and vindicated in the promise of an heir and solemnized in the graphic ritual of a covenant establishment. The line will continue and God will bless the earth. God will bless humankind with many descendants.

Now my reading of this ancient, spiritual saga is that Father Abraham and Mother Sarah are stuck in a tent of disappointment and unrealized hopes and aspirations. Anybody here able to relate to that? You don't have to raise your hand. And the faith aspect is believing that God Yahweh will still pull off the promise that seems to be, to all appearances, impossible.

The stories are about God's faithfulness, about safety and sanctuary. The metaphor for God in Psalm 27 says, "For God will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; God will conceal me under the cover of God's tent; God will set me high on a rock." In safety. Safety and sanctuary are the theme. Even Jesus as he broods over the resistance and wayward tendencies of the inhabitants of the holy city of Jerusalem says, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing!"

So here's the thing: We are tented; we are gathered in the church, a kind of tent. We celebrate God's care. We even call it the sanctuary, right? And it is, in a sense, representing the way that God shelters us from the craziness of the world even if it is for a moment or two.

Our personal histories bring us together in this place, in the church. Now, unlike Sarah and Abraham, we did not come from Ur of the Chaldeans. In fact, a couple from that particular geography today would not be able to pass the security tests of our nation. They would be vetted to the nth degree and probably rejected, whether God had called them or not. But as the body of Christ, I believe Jesus wants to tuck us under his care like a mother hen protecting her brood from the dangers of the world to gather together in sanctuary and safety. And the only thing that can thwart that care is if we refuse to allow the envelope of God's compassion and care to fold us in.

In a way, like Sarah and Abraham, it took some gumption to get here today, didn't it? You left the comfort of your home to come here in a brisk, if not brutally cold, February morning. The immediate sense is that you could have stayed, and read the paper, and had another cup of coffee, and done the crossword puzzle. But in a larger, sweeping sense, we gather here to step outside of the comfort of our culture and the norms of our day. We

step outside of the social standing. Maybe you haven't noticed this, but not everybody flocks to church on Sunday morning anymore...if they ever did.

So we are doing something that, in a large sense, is counter-cultural. We leave the comfort of an old world to venture into a new possibility each Sunday when we gather in worship. We are here to follow the promise that we have received from God about a better place...about a better world...about a better life. Or, we are here in a journey and a search for a better life and a better world than we have yet to claim and are in search and hopes of finding. We have stepped out of our comfort zones, such as they are, to venture out on a cold Sunday morning. And yet, in a sense, the fulfillment seems to be delayed. We gather, expectant, curious, duty-bound to live out the sense of God's calling and God's claim upon our lives. And yet, the faithful gather. We pray and plan and pledge to do better, and the world continues to spin out of control, and the craziness threatens to surround and suffocate us with a greedy and sordid spirit of the age.

And so I say today God calls us, like Abraham and Sarah, to get beyond the tent. Come out and discover the stars. Discover the light and the faithfulness of one who offered that earlier promise and established that earlier covenant still being worked out in the face of the earth. When individual and institutional racism runs rampant and class warfare is an excuse to deny basic human rights to whole segments of our population of our country and our community, we need to step out of our tent. Outside the tent we offer a prophet's voice. The work of Jesus this day and tomorrow is to engage in ministry and to trust the results...today, tomorrow and the third day...to do what we can in the same style and ways of Jesus, but then, in the third day – a reference to the cross and resurrection – to trust the results to God's direction. We can care for and reach out to other human beings whether or not they have a picture ID. Ministries of caring for the sick, educating and clothing the poor, feeding the hungry is a norm by which many of our culture today has left behind, but which we need to live out with all the faithfulness and all of the energy that we can muster.

Others have ensconced themselves in other tents, happy tents of one sort or another. Moving our comfort zones – our tents – begins to redefine the norm for our culture.

I grew up to be a good citizen, but not to really be terribly prophetic, to speak out. I'm a quiet person to begin with, for the most part, and it's easy to say, "Well, I don't know if I can really make a difference." "I'm only one person. Our efforts seem so meager. But those are just not valid excuses."

We gather in the sanctuary of God's promise and faithfulness, and we step out to engage the scary and challenging circumstances in a prophetic witness in the world around us. And here's how we do that: it's not a particular pamphlet that you need to hand out or even a particular law that needs to be addressed, although there are plenty of those out there. But it happens as we go from this place and live in a way that has the attitude of a risen Christ.

I want to close with a study that was reported recently, conducted a couple of years ago by a marketing professor, Robert Cialdini. He directed a research team to go door to door in San Diego, in a suburb, placing hangers on the doorknobs with messages about energy conservation. For some homes, the sign urged the homeowners to save energy in order to protect the environment. Another said that they should conserve energy for the benefit of future generations. A third pointed to the cost savings that would result from the energy conservations. And the last stated that most of the homeowners' neighbors were taking steps to save energy every day.

At the end of the month, Cialdini and his team returned to the homes that received the door hangers to read their meters, and then compare those readings to the homes that had received no message at all. They hoped to discover what kind of messaging affects people's behavior the most. After comparing the energy usage for the homes with the door hangers, they found that in only one of the four groups of houses that received hangers actually reduced their energy consumption compared to the houses that had not received any door hangers. The only door hanger that made a difference in people's behavior – can you guess? – was the one that said your neighbors are doing it.

Vast amounts of money were spent for this research from the university to find out that peer pressure is still alive and well. The homeowners who received one of the other three messages touting the benefits of energy conservation did not change their lifestyle and kept on living as they had before. Cialdini summarizes the most important conclusion in the study when he said: "People are looking at those around them, like them, in their particular environment, in their particular context, to decide what to do." In other words, people decide what's important – in fact, how to live – by watching those around them. And when the followers of Christ leave the sanctuary and live a life that is exemplary; that is, committed to the values and the core understandings of Jesus, the world begins to be changed. There is a prophetic statement that is made by God's people in that way.

Our world hears the truthfulness of the gospel and the faithfulness of God through the ways that we live out our faith and our lives each day. It may be shaky at times. It may be frustrated with delays at times. We may be wondering if we are really making any progress. But living boldly, knowing our God is with us and faithful to the promises – all evidence to the contrary – makes the difference and begins to build up the community of faith beyond the doors of this sanctuary.

Here the call, then. Get out of the tent – beyond the tent – to count the stars, to tell the stories of all that is happening in our lives and in the life of the faithful. God's redeeming love and God's faithfulness will be evidenced most powerfully and profoundly by the way we live. So may it be. Amen.

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February 21, 2016