

“Down and Up”
Isaiah 60:1-6
John 1:9-18
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Sunday, January 5, 2020

A tent is a good place to take refuge - - but it's not permanent.

After a crisis destroys David's world - - he lives on the edge of the wilderness - - taking refuge in a tent. / That's the plot of a new movie released just last month called: “The Tent”, / The people who threaten David's world are called, “Those Who Walk in Darkness”. / The SETTING of this movie by Kyle Couch, is basically the setting of dozens of disaster movies.

A tent - - is a place to take refuge - - but it is not permanent.

But - - after a crisis - - finding refuge is a good thing.

And it is usually refuge from a crisis - - or from some darkness.

Think of every disaster movie - - or zombie movie you have ever seen.

After the initial crisis and before the main action of the plot there is usually a brief time of temporary refuge - - where the main characters set up camp - - and they become acquainted - - and conflicts or alliances emerge.

In “Castaway” with Tom Hanks, he uses his life-raft to make a tent on the beach.

And then he befriends a volleyball named Wilson.

In the series “Lost” - - it was a group campsite on an island after a plane crash.

In “Gilligan's Island” it was the circle of huts.

A shopping mall can work in a similar way, as in two movies about Mall Cops.

Or a bar or pub after hours, as in “Shawn of the Dead”.

In “The Shining” it was the little apartment that Jack Nicholson’s family inhabited before he went crazy - - back when they were still a functional family. / Nicholson even called the apartment “cozy” in an early scene of the movie - - in which the lodge they are hunkered down in for the winter - - becomes anything BUT cozy.

In MASH it’s the tent where the doctors live called the “Swamp”.

In “Zombeland” it’s Bill Murray’s house.

Even Blair Witch Project - - had a tent for safety.

Well - - in the Bible - - particularly the Old Testament - - it’s the Tabernacle.

The Tabernacle was the PLACE where God lived - - in the midst of the people.

Hebrews even created a SEAT for God to sit in - - called the “mercy seat”. / The Tabernacle was originally a TENT that was carried around by the Israelites in the desert. It was set up whenever they made camp. / It was a sign of GOD’S PRESENCE - - and of God’s promise NOT to abandon them.

Eventually the Tabernacle was in the Temple in Jerusalem - - the center of Jewish life - - and the holiest place - - for which they had waited for centuries to build. It was a REFUGE - - against invading empires - - and a symbol of safety.

The entire history of the Old Testament - - and of the covenant - - revolves around this quest for a HOME. / The Jewish people seek it - - and they see it - - as a sign of God’s mercy. / When they go from wilderness wandering to building a home in the so called “Promised Land” - - the main thing they want to build - - is the TEMPLE to house the Tabernacle. / It’s why King David and then King Solomon are the GREATEST kings in Old Testament history: because they built the temple.

But before all that - - there was the TENT.

In the tent - - God moved around.

As God's people wandered around - - God was with them.

The TENT of the Tabernacle - - was a refuge from chaos.

AND - - centuries later - - at the beginning of John's gospel - - the word
 "tabernacle" is used to describe - - what Jesus did for us.

Jesus who was described by John's gospel as:

The pre-existent WORD...

And as the LIGHT...

Is ALSO said to - - have become FLESH.

"The word became flesh"

Which is to say, the word took on HUMAN NATURE.

And WHAT did the newly ENFLESHED word DO?

"Dwelt" is what most translations say.

But in Greek - - do you know what the word is?

The word is "TABERNACLE".

The word became flesh - - and "tabernacled" among us.

That is literally the best translation.

The word - - became Jesus flesh - - became the human Jesus, and...

...pitched a TENT - - among us.

That - - is how John's gospel begins.

With Jesus - - pitching a tent - - in our reality.

Over the next three weeks - - my sermons will unpack the first chapter of John.

I will hope to show you that the basic movement is: first down - - and then up.

“Down and Up” is a summary of John’s theology.

In John’s gospel, the word that is Jesus - - or the light that is Jesus - - is with the creating God - - to create everything. And then everything CREATED - - is set apart from the forces of darkness and chaos.

And THEN - - God enters INTO creation - - in Jesus.

God creates - - and then GOD pitches a tent - - in the midst of creation.

God comes DOWN.

The then God REMAINS with us.

God DWELLS with us.

God tabernacles here.

God is in covenant with us.

And THEN - - we are raised UP - - and GLORIFIED.

God comes down here - - and then - - we go back up there.

It’s DIFFERENT from the basic movement of all the other THREE gospels.

Matthew, Mark and Luke - - all - - basically move in one straight line - - forward.

They are the story of Jesus movement FROM baptism - - TO the cross.

They move Jesus along through human history - - going forward.

But John is more concerned about movement UP - - than movement forward.

So the other three gospels move - - basically from left to right - - in time.

But John - - moves in two lines: first down - - and then - - up.

So one question is: why?

What is - - God’s motivation - - to come down here?

And why would we want to go - - up there?

There must be - - EITHER - - something inadequate about here...

OR something really great - - about there.

Otherwise why not - - just stay put?

The only REASON people in disaster movies and zombie movies MOVE from their initial safe camp - - or shopping mall refuge - - or TENT - - IS - - because it is just temporary. / And there is some threat. / Something is not quite right.

The people of Israel had lived in tents for generations.

BUT...

They had lived in tents - - but - - they wanted a permanent home - - and a Temple.

And then when the CHAOS of invasion by a powerful empire threatened...

...that was enough to make the tents seem - - inadequate.

The TENT - - is BOTH:

AMZING grace, and

INADEQUATE grace.

It's amazing - - that God would pitch a tent here with us!

AND - - we can't live in a tent forever.

Both are true.

In all of the movies and TV shows I mentioned previously - - there was a sense of being a little LOST - - or in the wilderness - - in spite of temporary safety.

No matter how much fun Gilligan's Island is - - they are still castaways.

And in Castaway - - no matter how RISKY it is - - Tom Hanks finally risks taking a raft out into the open ocean - - to rejoin human community and society - - rather than die alone on an island.

It can be fun to be lost - - for a while.

But not forever.

Eventually - - we seek some kind of home.

So - - can you think of a time you felt - - lost?

I've been lost in a grocery store as a kid - - and in a parking lot as an adult.

I remember feeling lost when my mother died.

I remember feeling lost when I found out I had cancer.

I remember feeling lost when I lied to my best friend.

When I feel that way - - first - - I try to establish my footing.

Set up a tent - - as it were.

Get my bearings - - and figure out a plan.

But you can't live forever - - in your LOST-NESS.

Well - - you can - - but it's NOT recommended!

The question is - - how do you find your way home again?

And part of the ANSWER - - IS - - the tent.

God will set up camp with you - - in whatever challenge you face.

But you can ALSO - - set up camp - - next to someone else.

That's the whole thing about covenant life:

We NEED each other - - in order to be WHOLE.

We can't live forever - - in a disaster movie - - or on a deserted island.

We can't live forever - - in our grief.

We can't live forever - - in our guilt.

We can't live forever - - in our sin.

But the good news is - - we don't have to.

Remember the WHOLE movement of John's gospel:

Down AND up.

God came DOWN into our reality and pitched a tent - - SO THAT - -

- - eventually - - we might be raised up - - and glorified.

It might not seem like it - - yet.

But God lived for a while in a tent.

The tabernacle life - - lasted a while.

But not forever.

So hear again these words of amazing grace:

The word became flesh and dwelt among us.

FULL of GRACE...

Full of grace.

Amen