

“An Earthly Tent”
Exodus 33:7-16; 2 Cor. 5:1
October 18, 2020
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What does it really mean to be with someone?

Do they have to be in the same room?

Do they have to still be alive?

I have an American flag in my study at home that is folded in a triangle.

Tucked into the flap is an old photo of my dad in his Air Force uniform.

Sometimes when I look at these things it is almost like he is with me.

When I was studying for my Doctor of Ministry degree I met online with others.

I had met these other students in person for a week months before.

And when we met up again online it was almost like I was with them.

Sometimes I felt more like I was with them,

than I did my next door neighbors who I hardly knew.

When Nancy and I are on vacation sometimes we spend the afternoon reading.

We don't talk to each other.

We sit in chairs that are 10 feet apart or so and read.

But it is nice to be with each other, even though we are sort of separate.

So these examples get me thinking about being with other people.

What is it about us that makes us want that?

And what does it take for a genuine or satisfying experience of “WITH-NESS”?

During the Covid virus we have experimented with “WITH-NESS”.

What do plexiglass and masks and computer interfaces and phones do?

Does all that help us STILL be with those we love in spite of a virus?

Do these barriers protect us and help us - - or does that stuff separate us?

Do we begin to treasure our relationships more when we have to work for them?

Which leads me to my second point: what about God?

What does it mean to say that God is with us?

That seems like a more complicated question.

And it is the question from the scripture readings for today.

Could it be that our recent challenges around being WITH other people could help us understand our relationship with God better? / After all - - God is not available to us through our 5 senses - - and yet one of the fundamental things we say about God - - is that God is WITH us. / It is at the heart of what makes the God of Abraham and of Jesus - - unique.

The whole Exodus narrative that we have been reading revolves around this idea that God promised to be with the Hebrew people. / And the heart of who Jesus is - - revolves around this idea that God is WITH us in Jesus. / God is incarnate - - and available - - to us earthlings.

Let's look at the Old Testament reading more closely to see what I mean.

Particularly - - the tent - - in the Old Testament.

The tent - - and the Tabernacle - - are the central symbol of "WITH-NESS".

God is WITH - - this Hebrew band.

The tent is described in chapter 33 of Exodus as the place Moses meets with God.

And there are 9 chapters of detailed description of how to construct a tabernacle - - which is basically a more complicated tent - - that took the place of the original tent of meeting. / So understanding that history - - and the movement from tent - - to tabernacle - - to temple is important. / SO before we go any further - - a little ancient history lesson....

When the Hebrew people were freed from slavery, God promised to be with them.

God and Moses talk back and forth about HOW God will be WITH Moses.

And in the wilderness, when things aren't going so well, the question is:

“Is God among us or not?” - - which is to say - - “Is God WITH us or not?”

Way back after the exodus through the Red Sea - - before the ten commandments - - there was a thing called the “tent of meeting”. / It was a tent set up at the edge of camp where Moses met with God. / The tent was in sight of the people - - but only Moses could enter. / And the relationship between God and Moses and the people was - - that God was with them - - in their wilderness journey.

But as things move along, God calls Moses up to the mountain top. / And that was the place God would give the 10 commandments. / These 10 laws were a NEW way for the Hebrew people to be WITH God. / They were to stay connected to God by acting rightly. / And along with the 10 commandments comes a set of instructions for a new tent - - called the tabernacle. / The idea was: get the 10 commandments and build the tabernacle and put the commandments in the new tent - - as a reminder that God is WITH us.

Much later - - a Temple will be built in Jerusalem. / The Temple took the place of the tabernacle - - and was considered by Jewish people as the dwelling place for God. / And again there were changes - - the temple was a much more PERMANENT symbol of God's presence.

But at the point of this reading for today - - that is WAY in the future.

In today's reading we are on the cusp of the transition from the tent of meeting - - to the tabernacle - - and the beginning of the 10 commandments as a way of life - - and a way to maintain OUR presence - - with God.

The new plan is: put the commandments in the tabernacle and God will be with you there. / But the people don't take to this new plan so well.

When Moses goes up the mountain they feel separated from God.

And the golden calf incident that we read last week is a major interruption.

It interrupts the plan for the tabernacle.

Nevertheless - - even after that - - God promises to be with them - - again.

It takes a while to get there...

Moses and God talk - - and God expresses frustration - - according to the text.

But the promise is ALWAYS that God would be with them.

The QUESTION was - - HOW?

God will be with you - - the people are told.

HOW will God be with us? - - they ask in response.

And it turns out that the HOW - - CHANGES.

God will be with us - - always.

But HOW God will be with us - - - - CHANGES.

And it is important for us to - - understand that - - and accept that.

Today's reading from Exodus chapter 33 - - is in fact kind of a history lesson in this change. / The story had progressed all the way to the 10 commandments and the tabernacle plans - - but then we get this glimpse back - - to the OLD tent of meeting.

It's like the text is calling to the Hebrew people to - - remember...

Remember - - - back when Moses went into that tent?

Remember back - - before the 10 commandments?

God was really with us then.

Things were simple.

But - - - don't give up!

God is STILL with us - - just in a different way.

And NOW - - we are called to respond - - and participate.

Build a tabernacle - - and follow these 10 commandments.

God is still with us - - just in a different way.

God is always WITH us - - but the WAY God is with us - - CHANGES.

Like my dad is always with me - - but now after his death - - I look at his folded flag.

And like we are still with each other - - even though it is through Zoom and Facetime.

It's important for us to hold on to that hope...

Just like - - it was important for the Hebrew people to stay IN IT with God.

The question for people of faith is NOT IF - - God is with us.

God IS with us.

The question is HOW - - and can we understand how that CHANGES.

Staying faithful to God - - in the midst of the changes is our challenge.

That IS what faithfulness is about.

And if WE can remain faithful - - and trust - - that God is WITH us even if the WAY changes - - then GOD continues to promise - - to BE with us - - no matter what.

As I thought about this - - I came across a poem by Billy Collins about some chairs - - that came alive for me in a new way - - when I heard the poem through the lens of this scripture reading. / It's called: "The Chairs That No One Sits In"...

You see them on porches and on lawns, down by the lakeside

usually arranged in pairs - - implying a couple who might sit there

and look out at the water or the big shade trees.

Trouble is you never see anyone sitting in those forlorn chairs.

Though at one time it must have seemed a good place
to stop and do nothing for a while.

Sometimes there is a little table between the chairs
where no one is resting a glass
or placing a book facedown.

It may not be any of my business, but let's suppose one day that
everyone who placed those vacant chairs
on a veranda or a dock - - sat down in them!
If only for the sake of remembering...
...remembering what it was they thought deserved to be viewed
from two chairs, side by side with a table in between.

The clouds are high and massive on that day.

The woman looks up from her book.

The man takes a sip on his drink.

Then there is only the sound - - of their looking,
the lapping of lake water, and the call of one bird
then another - - cries of joy - - or warning.

It passes the time - - to wonder - - which.

So think of the chairs - - in this poem - - and think of the tent of meeting.

God promises to be present to us - - all of our lives.

So will we stay present to God - - even if things change?

Hundreds of years after the Exodus - - and after the tent - - and after the Temple - - Jesus
presence was the heart of faith - - for Jesus' followers.

For Christians - - our BODY is the Temple - - God is WITH us - - in these bodies.

And our bodies are described in the Bible as - - not ONLY a temple - - but looking further back in history - - ALSO as a tent.

Paul writes in his second letter to the believers at Corinth - - in chapter 5:

If this earthly tent we live in is destroyed - - we have a house not made with hands - - eternal in the heavens - - with God.

But - - until we are in God's hands - - eternally - - here we are.

Living in this earthly tent...

Vulnerable maybe...

But also WITH God.

God is not with us - - *eventually*...

God is with us NOW.

The HOW may change.

But the promise does not.

Amen.