Sermon for The Feast of Transfiguration

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, August 4, 2019
Title: Pitching a tent

A few weeks ago, while walking up to the Church with my kids, my four-year old daughter excitedly cried, “Mommy! Mommy! There’s you’re office!” pointing urgently toward my windows. “Yep,” I said, smiling, “that’s my office.” “Yeah,” she continued, “where Deanne and Eric live.” I let out a giggle and said, “Well, I’m sure it sometimes feels that way to them, but Deanne and Eric don’t actually live there, sweetie. We just work together.” “Huh,” she said, struggling to process this information before giving me a look that said, “I’m not buying it.”

It was such an understandable misunderstanding. Children often think their teachers, priests, doctors, and other adults with whom they interact repeatedly in set environments, “live” in those environments. And, really, in light of their limited life experience, why wouldn’t they? I mean, what makes an office a place where we “work” and a home a place where we “live”? Don’t many of us, for better or worse, often feel like we “live” at work? In a more positive sense, isn’t feeling fully alive in all the places we inhabit something we hope and strive for?

My kids have never been to Eric or Deanne’s homes, but they spend quite a bit of time in the parish offices. I sometimes bring them by before dropping them at school. My husband often swings by midday after picking them up. I’ll occasionally bring toys and drawing supplies up to occupy them for a few minutes while tending to something I need to do at my desk. And some days we just walk over to say hi to whoever is around. So, the offices are a place where they color and laugh, where they meet up with friends and get chocolates and lollypops from Deanne, where they zoom toy cars and help Eric pull bulletins out of the copy machine – a real highlight - and not infrequently a place where they play hide and seek or tickle or chase with our Parish Administrator and Director of Music. Sounds like the stuff of life to me. No wonder Safina was confused when I said Deanne and Eric don’t live here. The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if she didn’t have a point.

It seems to me that when Jesus’ disciples witnessed the transfiguration they, like my daughter, tried their best to make sense of it in light of their own limited life experience. I mean, really, what could have possibly prepared them for this? Jesus leads them up a mountain to pray,
where suddenly his appearance changes and his clothes begin to glow. He is dazzling, bright and shiny, and all the sudden there are Moses and Elijah with him. What framework could they draw on? What past experience was relevant? What lens would be helpful? His thoughts rushing by, Peter grasps at the thinnest of associational threads: hospitality. Moses and Elijah – whoever they are, whatever they are - are visitors. Guests. And guests deserve to feel welcome. They deserve a place to rest and relax. Good food. Good company. So, he stammers, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

It is such an understandable misunderstanding. And God, like a loving parent, moves in to offer a bit of a corrective. Whereas Peter had suggested he make three dwellings, or more specifically three tents, for these heavenly guests, suddenly a cloud comes and overshadows them – literally en-tenting them – which pretty well scares the crud out of the bewildered disciples - and a voice speaks, saying, “This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him!” Peter thought has was in a position to welcome Moses and Elijah, even to welcome Jesus. But along comes God, saying more or less explicitly, “you’ve got it all wrong. It is not for you to welcome my son, my priests, and my prophets; it is for me to welcome you. This mountain, this nation, this world, this creation – they are where you live and work, they are familiar environments, but they are my home. My tent. My dwelling.” God speaks, and the cloud recedes, and Jesus is left alone, leaving the disciples struggling to process this information, shooting each other confused, surprised looks.

But you know, the more I think about it, the more I wonder if Peter didn’t also have a point. After all, even if all of creation across all times and places is indeed first and foremost God’s, a central tenant of our faith is that God also chose to come among us as one of us: a visitor indeed; a guest; a resident alien; utterly dependent on the hospitality of others – on Mary, making a home for him in her womb; on Joseph, making a home for him in Nazareth; on his many disciples, especially the women, who opened their homes to him; on everyone willing to make a home for him in their hearts. The beginning of John’s Gospel puts it like this: the word was made flesh and dwelt among us, which also reads– you guessed it – the word was made flesh and pitched a tent among us.

Tents bring to mind a lot of contexts and connotations, but common to them all is their temporary nature. The tent is the dwelling of the in-between. The transient. For Jesus and his contemporaries, as for Jews today, tents would likely have brought to mind the Jewish holiday of
Sukkot, also known as the Feast of Booths, an annual commemoration of the tents God provided the people of ancient Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness, walking away from Egypt and toward the Promised Land. Sukkot is celebrated by building a booth or tent out of palm branches which a family then occupies to some extent for seven days, year after year. As with so many Jewish holidays, this is a time to remember the God who delivers, who provides, who sustains: the God who led their ancestors toward freedom, and who leads us in that same path to this day, if we are willing to follow.

But for most of us, tents might bring to mind slightly different associations. A camping trip, maybe. A chance to get away from the rush. To draw nearer to nature. Or maybe they make you think of the tent cities that have sprung up under freeway overpasses around the Bay Area in recent years. Humble homes for the otherwise home-less. Or maybe you think, in this time of tremendous human migration driven by climate change and political instability, of refugee camps and detention centers. Huge spaces built not of palm leaves but plastic sheets. Tents tragically lacking their temporariness.

When I think of my experiences of each of these, I’m struck by how often in our in-between times and places we look for fellow travelers. As my husband and I start camping again, now with two tiny people to care for, we keep an eye out for trips coordinated by their school or our wider family. Somehow hitting the great outdoors sounds less daunting, safer, more fun - and the bugs and the bears a little less fearsome - if we aren’t alone. And while there are pros and cons for unsheltered individuals and families congregating together in make-shift booths along 101 and 580, it’s striking how often people nevertheless band together in this way, making improvised neighborhoods, desperate for some kind of community. I saw my first refugee camps while on pilgrimage in Israel and Palestine almost fifteen years ago. We were driving toward Jerusalem from and a sudden turn revealed a vast expanse of tents set against the base of a red rock mountain. On and on it went: a city no one ever planned. A temporary settlement turned alarmingly permanent. A congregation of booths where people ate and slept, where children went to school and adults looked for work, where babies were born and people took their last breaths, and had for generations.

It makes a certain kind of sense, then, that if God wanted to know us – if God, too, was inexplicably drawn toward community, longing for human connection – that God would pitch a tent among us, and even specifically pitch a tent among those already living in them. This is
what Jesus did in choosing to be born of Mary, a poor Jewish woman in a country occupied by a powerful empire. It is precisely what Jesus did in actually coming in to the world while Mary was on the road, driven by powers beyond her control to take to the streets, like migrants and refugees today. Throughout history, God has deigned to pitch a tent among us right in the middle of our uncertainty, our in-betweens, our unsettled scenes, and specifically among those who don’t know – who maybe never knew – the safety and security of a more settled state.

Where in our world is Jesus pitching a tent today? Where would Jesus find others just like him and his people – people on the move, people running, people afraid, people in desperate need of hospitality? Would we be so foolish – or so courageous – as to join him? Or so foolish of Peter as to offer to pitch him a tent? One way to answer that question is to think about how we’re doing this for our other neighbors, for the strangers and wanderers and people in between we encounter in our own lives. Because if we’re not – if we’d rather retreat down the mountain when faced with unfamiliar guests – odds are good we’ll do the same when Jesus himself comes a knocking. Who knows - maybe we already have?

Jews celebrate Sukkot each year to remind themselves of their kindship with just these types of people – to remember that, once upon a time, they were these types of people, and therefore the suffering – and the humanity – of the stranger are not foreign to them. I wonder if we don’t hear the story of the Transfiguration so frequently – twice a year, every year – because we need the same reminder. Because our lives and our world might be changed if we could just remember that God pitches a tent in the most unlikely places, and, from there, delivers us all from bondage and leads us to the Promised Land. It can be hard to notice where God is moving in our world, perhaps especially in the wake of a week marred by three mass shootings, particularly if we see by the light of our limited life experience. But today we remember that we can see our world in an entirely different light: the light of Christ, which shines from the mountain top, filling the vast expanse of God’s tent and all of creation with it.

Author and activist Helen Keller, the first person both deaf and blind to earn a B.A., once said, “Do not pity me because I am blind. Pity those who can see but have no vision.” Jesus came into the world to give us eyes to see. To save us from our own short sightedness. To give us vision. If we look at the world in his light, I wonder if we’d see a people in the wilderness, on the move, somewhere between Egypt and the Promised Land. A people in between, tired of running, tired of violence, tired of lies, tired of fear. The hope of our faith is, in Peter’s own words, a
source of comfort and encouragement in just such times as these. “You will do well,” he writes, “to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” The word was made flesh and pitched a tent among us, that we might look around and cry, “Look! Look! Our Churches. Our offices. Our homes. Our world. Where God lives.” And know with every fiber of our being that it is true. Amen.