

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

THE TENT

A sermon preached the 24th of December 2016, The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Christmas Eve, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on John 1: 1 – 14.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

— Luke 2: 9

And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

— John 1: 14

One cold Christmas Eve I was playing in my backyard with my friend Lance. My father had put up a blue nylon pup tent nice and tight. There was a yellow-handled screwdriver on the porch. I took it by the sharp end and tossed it at the tent; it bounced back and I caught it on the fly. Lance and I thought *Let's Play!* That's all the game was. Toss the screwdriver. Catch it on the fly.

Lance's first toss was too fast. It trampolined swiftly, the butt-end smacking him in the forehead, watering his eyes. It struck us: *This is dangerous*. We were at that age where boys are just learning to shape their behavior. Now the wiser, one of us would go inside the tent, put the back of his hand against it, count, "One thousand and one!" and pull his hand back. In that one second the other, from outside, would throw the screwdriver at the hand. Hit a hand, score a point. Three tosses and we'd switch places. This would be safer.

To decide who'd start inside the tent, we played *Jankenpon*, a game my Yokohama mama taught me. You know it as *Roshambo* or *rock – paper – scissors*. Lance won. I crawled into the tent, put my hand against the side, counted "one thousand and one," and he missed the tent entirely. I put my hand up again. He hit the tent but missed me; the screwdriver falling away. A third time. "One thousand . . ." and it's faded now, all these years later, but I can show you the scar at the top of my left wrist, impaled by the screwdriver. This ended the contest.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only Son of the Father." The Greek verb *eskénosen* translated 'he dwelt' means literally "he pitched his tent among us." Its root *skénoun* derives from the Hebrew *shekinah* as in God's *shekinah* glory. John's sentences are poetic, but they mean to take us by the elbow about what happened in our backyard. The ancient Hebrews

believed that if the glory of God were to shine on a man's retinae he'd go up in smoke. They had their reasons. When Moses asked God to show him his *kavod*, the weight of his glory, the Most High had him stand in the cleft of the rock, put his divine hand over him to protect him, then passed by revealing only the back of his glory.

They believed, our forbears, that the High Priest alone could enter the Tent of Meeting to approach the *shekinah* glory of God. There's a rabbinic legend about that. Bells were attached to the hem of the priest's vestment and a rope was tied to his ankle so that if things went 'sticky end' (as the Brits say), what was left of the poor fellow could be pulled out of the Holy of Holies. John is telling us that the Tent was a 'type', an adumbration, that Jesus is the One in whom and through whom our sweet flesh can survive the glory of God. The High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity became flesh. That's the first half of the miracle. The second is that the Blessed Virgin Mary, Blessed Joseph, the shepherds abiding in the field, old Simeon and Anna, they all beheld His glory. And they didn't go up in smoke.

Later in his gospel, John records Jesus saying, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. . . . Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name. . . . Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." [John 12]

Jesus pitched his tent among us who do stupid things. He took up his cross. The only begotten of the Father put his hand against the wood, and we pierced him. And the glory of the Lord shone round about him, and we were sore afraid.