

“Intense Tent”

Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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Many of us are familiar with the “Extreme Makeover” series of reality television. Extreme Makeover involves an exhaustive process of personal physical transformation, including surgery, exercise, nutrition, cosmetic and clothing makeovers. “Extreme Makeover – Home Edition” does the same for someone’s house, usually in response to a very touching story. In the last year it has returned with new hosts, Clea Shearer and Joanna Teplin.

This focus on one’s home has had increasing emphasis in the last several decades and is big business. Home Depot and Lowe’s are, excuse the pun, household names. Next weekend, Feb. 20-22, the 45th Annual Southeastern Connecticut Home and Garden Show (www.jenksproductions.com) will be at Mohegan Sun in Uncasville. The Connecticut Home and Remodeling Show will have a three-day extravaganza at the Hartford Convention Center March 6-8 (www.cthomeshow.com). For many people still, home ownership is a major step in acquiring financial stability.

So let’s consider the story of Moses on the mountain in Exodus and Jesus’ Transfiguration from Matthew from the perspective of “extreme makeover.” After our Annual Meeting on February 1, someone remarked *“I can’t believe how far we’ve come in two years.”* I reminded me of the story of the 19th century evangelist Dwight L. Moody, who heard a preacher say, *“The world has yet to see what God can do with a man fully consecrated to Him.”* Moody said, *“By God’s grace, I’ll be that man”* and launched an evangelistic enterprise and created the Moody Bible Institute. This church says love is spoken here and decided, *“By God’s grace, we’ll be that church!”*

Let’s not get things backwards; or, as the old saying goes, *“put the cart before the horse.”* The extreme makeover we are talking about is about the Christian life. Care and upkeep of buildings is important as a means to an end. The Christian life is about God, who created us in God’s own image. It is about God, whose heart was

broken and whose anger was kindled when we disobeyed and rejected our inheritance as sons and daughters of the Most High God. The Christian life is about God, who yearns for us to be “made over” in the divine image. It is about God, who finally said, “*Okay, you’ve made me come down there*” and cared enough to come in person in Jesus Christ. This yearning of God for us is deep and passionate.

So in these readings today we encounter the powerful and terrifying, electrifying and inspiring, image of a mighty God. This God does not put on fireworks for fireworks’ sake but encounters us to give us an exciting vision of life lived in the image of God.

In Exodus, God took Moses and the elders of Israel up on Mount Sinai. They were as we might have been: afraid at the awful and terrifying presence of the Living God who brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. Since no one could gaze upon the glory of God and live—in Hebrew, the “shekinah” of God—we might forgive their fear. The people even asked Moses to encounter God on their behalf so they would not be put at risk.

In the end, Moses encountered God alone in the fiery, living cloud. For seven chapters, God gives Moses the blueprint for the extreme makeover that would make this stubborn and stiff-necked people into what God told Abraham they would become: a people God-blessed in order to be a blessing. That’s the story from Exodus.

Fast-forward nearly 1,400 years (1) to Matthew’s Gospel: another mountaintop, another bright and fiery cloud. Four men are there. One is an itinerant Jewish preacher named Jesus of Nazareth. By now he’s made quite a stir. Those devoted to him see him as prophet and perhaps more. The other three are his devoted followers: Peter, James and John.

Suddenly, as Moses had been, Jesus is transfigured. Matthew stammers out a description: Jesus’ face shining like the sun, his clothes as bright and white as they could possibly be. But why are Moses and Elijah there? Moses is regarded as the greatest lawgiver; (1) Peake’s Commentary dates Exodus at 1250 B.C.; Matthew after 70 A.D.

Elijah, the greatest prophet. Meeting these two greats is Jesus, spiritual heir as the one who, by his own declaration, would fulfill the law and the prophets (**Matthew 5:17**). There on the mountaintop, as we just sang “*the Lord holds converse high and sweet*” where “*the law and prophets have their place, two chosen witnesses of grace.*” Pretty awesome, eh?

So what do the disciples do with “awesome, wow!,” with this celestial sound and light show, God’s voice declaring “*This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased, listen to him!*”?

Whether James and John are just smart enough to keep their mouth closed or Peter beats them to the punch, we’ll never know. But what Peter does is offers to put up a tent. All right, three tents: one for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Yes, your translation said “dwellings” but the Greek word is *skene* (skay-nay), literally, a tent or cloth hut. Let’s just take *awesome* and make it *ho-hum*.

I don’t know about you, but I’m Peter. In an ordinary, every day sense, I like working with my hands. You don’t ever want me doing finish carpentry, but I’ve built shelves and tree houses and playhouses. I know how to run a table saw and a circular saw and a chain saw. I finished a basement and built a non-loadbearing wall. Carol and I have done nearly all of the painting in our several home renovations; and what we did stacks up pretty well against the pros. No, I don’t hire out. Again, excepting the painting, none of it is pretty but all of it is functional.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, spoke and wrote about “practical Christianity.” So when I am in the presence of the mysterious; when God decides to remain anonymous and I call it “coincidence;” when people pray and prayer is answered in glory and power, I am sometimes confounded. Not because I don’t believe, but because the goodness of it all seems so overwhelming. And when it happens to me I feel so undeserving. I feel, as this same Peter said on another occasion in the presence of God’s power, “*Lord, depart from me for I am a sinful man.*” (**Luke 5:8**)

And yet....maybe Peter wasn't that far off. When he said, "*Let us build three skenes,*" the word is translated *tabernacle* in the King James Version. Students of the Bible know that the tabernacle is that part of the Temple in Jerusalem where God was believed to live. Maybe you've been to the tabernacle at Ocean Grove, New Jersey or Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. The antecedent of this tabernacle, this *skene* where God lives, is a tent. It was God in a tent that led the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. God in a tent. God on the move. God who will not be constrained by human edifices.

In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, the writers say that Peter said this because he didn't know what he was saying. Matthew omits that comment. Maybe Peter was closer to right than we give him credit for. God in a tent. God on the move.

There's a movement within United Methodism called "Rethink Church" (www.rethinkchurch.org) that asks the question "*What if church wasn't just a building?*" Which, of course, it isn't: at least not exclusively. Luke Shay, Connor Langdon and I talked about this in our Confirmation tutorial last week as we answered the question, "*What is church?*" Our building makes possible many ministries, not the least of which are worship, "*Transition Academy*," "*Faith and Fiction Book Group*," seasonal studies, music ministry and so forth. Yet without people, people called by God and willing to roll up their sleeves, it is an empty building. Churches have been without designated buildings since the earliest days of Christianity, from the house churches of the first century to meeting in the catacombs during the oppression of the Roman Empire to the Methodist societies that met in homes in the 18th century.

Yet this physical plant is also part of our inheritance of which we are stewards. Every one of us should thank our Trustees for their care of this edifice and for the ministries it makes possible. And those who support this ministry financially have been thanked, in your annual end-of-year statement, with a list of the many ministries your giving makes possible. With God on the move in

our time, among **our** people, this is the “tent,” the “dwelling,” the “tabernacle,” the “skene” we must continue to use for God.

And remember this, with Lent around the corner: it means sacrifice, not a popular word in this or any other age. Peter said, *“Let’s put up three tents”* and then came down off the mountain, immediately into the human need of a man with an epileptic son. None of this (point to the building) matters if we are not doing Christ’s work. None of it matters if we are not witnessing to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. None of it matters if we do not, in the words of the mission of The United Methodist Church, *“make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”*

The good news is that what we find when we submit ourselves to the guidance of God is what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration: an “intense tent” where God is experienced in powerful and life-changing ways. A community who listens to and follows God’s Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

It’s frightening. It’s exciting. It’s anything but status quo. What a great time to be the church! Thanks be to God!