

Message: "God Did What?" - 2-15-26

Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9

<sup>1</sup>Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup>Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>5</sup>While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" <sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup>But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." <sup>8</sup>And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. <sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Once upon a time, I was an avid backpacker; and, like any avid backpacker, I had a professional-quality backpack - several of them, actually. And what is more enjoyable than packing a backpack with packable things? I had my favorite backpack loaded to the gills with equipment like a whisperlite stove, zero-degree sleeping bag, water purifying filter apparatus, hatchet shovel, bear spray, and all the essential equipment for surviving deep in the wildernesses of Colorado and Montana. I believe in the mantra "a 10-mile hike needs 10 days of preparation" which is a quote I made up yesterday, but it holds true - to make a successful backpacking trip, meaning putting safety first and comfort second, you must have the right equipment, which means careful planning beforehand.

Based upon my experience, I would hereby proclaim that the most important item in a backpacker's inventory is the tent. I know there are people who would argue with me on this, but I would nonetheless defend my position for the simple reason that the greatest misery I've experienced on backpacking trips was when my tent was poorly chosen. I'll spare you the details of my experiences, but let's just say that a floorless pup tent made of non-waterproof canvas is not the place to be late at night when you're camping at 10,000 feet and a torrential rain breaks out sending a small river through your sleeping quarters - let's just say it was an unforgettable night (as were the next two nights with similar storms and drenched sleeping bags).

My point is that tents are pretty important when hiking outdoors -- which brings us to our scripture passage today. Peter probably had something like tents in mind when he said what he did in the face of the micro-narrative we now call "The Transfiguration." It's a pretty well-known scene which nonetheless is one of the most confusing and just plain weird moments of Jesus's time on earth. Jesus, Peter, James, and John are on a backpacking trip up on a high mountain. Of course, they didn't call it backpacking back then, but those were days when most

travel from town to town followed backpacker's methodology - travel was mostly on foot; you brought what you needed; you often spent the nights outside; you had to deal with whatever the elements had in store; and shelter was an obvious and regular need.

Shelter was doubly important if you had something precious you wanted to protect - and here we have the disciples suddenly finding themselves in the company of ancient Israel's VIP's, Moses and Elijah. (There's a side point here, for I've always wondered how they knew Moses and Elijah were who they were, for there was of course no photographic archive to consult, no Old Testament Directory, no pictures of what Moses and Elijah looked like, and they had been dead for many hundreds of years.....did they introduce themselves to the disciples? Did they wear name tags? Were their names floating above their heads like neon halos? Forgive me, I digress.....). But what a conference! Jesus and Moses and Elijah, here together on earth - but in the wilderness, exposed to the elements, in the natural world apart from any human habitation. It is perhaps a natural reaction to want to provide shelter; but perhaps Peter wanted to do something more? Perhaps he wanted to preserve the moment, encase the experience, somehow .....control what was going on? In any event, here we have an account of where divinity was on full display, and the witnesses were understandably stunned by what they saw. And when humans get stunned, they often revert to default responses to address what they can't readily take in. "Let me set up three tents for you all," says Peter; I have a feeling he instantly realized it was the wrong thing to say, as bright clouds gathered overhead and a voice came forth that carried overtones of divine impatience: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" I envision a somewhat angry voice that frightened the disciples, and that they quickly realized that speaking about tents was a ridiculous thing to do.

It is of course plain to see that God is saying God needs no protection from the elements, but there's much more to it than that, I think. Basic human nature is on display here, a nature that somehow gets off track quickly with God. Our human tendency to seek or provide shelter has its foundation in our basic human need for security and stability in a storm-tossed world - and I am not speaking now about rain and wind. There is something terribly common to the human race, and that is its fragility; we have all experienced suffering, we all know that we are limited in and of ourselves, we all know of so many things we have no power or control over that threaten and frighten us terribly. In facing these truths about

ourselves, we tend to overreact - we build tents that are unnecessary. We build up excessive wealth in order to cover any unforeseen financial burdens; we take out extensive insurance coverages to deal with possible catastrophes; we build privacy fences around our homes and wire them with ornate security systems; we build tents to protect ourselves. And often in order to protect ourselves we build tents for others, tents that cause great harm to those others. There are the figurative tents that we build to hide the truth - all I need to do is mention "The Epstein Files" to see what that looks like, with tent walls made of heavily redacted files meant to protect politically-powerful predators from the justice they deserve. Rarely have we seen such depraved activity from our government which is heavily in the figurative tent-making business these days. But we also build literal tents to keep others in their place; we demonize the stranger with different ways from our own, seeking to separate them from "us." We teach automatic suspicion of "the other," emphasizing the potential harm they may cause us; we build tents to keep them controlled, to keep them away from ourselves, to keep the way we treat them unobserved and unchallenged. And sometimes we do this with whole cultures and peoples, our fear of the unknown suffocating our more virtuous impulses.

We have very visible examples of this going on right now (picture up on screen). These tents, which are huge, make up the new East Montana Detention Facility, which is an ICE detention center in Texas. I received this disclosure from an AI overview article, which states that "The Texas Tribune Camp East Montana is a major ICE tent detention facility located on the Fort Bliss military base in El Paso, Texas. The camp opened in August 2025 and holds approximately 2,700-5,000 detainees. It is described as the largest U.S. immigration detention center, facing intense scrutiny for alleged physical abuse, medical neglect, severe safety violations, sexual abuse, inadequate food, psychological trauma, hazardous conditions, poor sanitation, and limited or non-existent access to legal counsel; there are also reports of a tuberculosis outbreak and multiple deaths of those in custody." In other words, these are tents gone wrong; these are the concentration camps rapidly going up across our country. These are tents meant to hide abuse and criminality being done by our government. These are tents gone wrong.

And God makes it clear -- such tents will never do.

Our God is not meant to be encased in vessels of our own design; our God is a God of all, who howls at the ways we humans divide and compete and separate each

other, screaming at us to "listen to him," to listen to Jesus, who does not tolerate enclosure either. God's love is meant to be applied to all; God's justice is meant to be given to all; God's grace is made to be available for all; the keyword here being "all." Take down the tents, says God to Peter; Take down the tents, says God to DHS. Take down the tents, says God to the world; this is not how things should be.

I had an experience this past week that gave me a taste of what this looks like in an every-day type of way. This past Friday, I was invited to the local Masjid, which is the Muslim Community Center here in Missoula. Through the coordinating efforts of the Missoula Interfaith Collaborative, of which we are a partner, we were meeting to plan out interfaith activities coming up in the next few months. The meeting took place in a fairly small room; I counted fifteen people present, mostly women, a few children, and a few men. I and two other persons stood out for two reasons - we were the only ones who were not immigrants, and we were the only ones who were not Muslim. It's so valuable to personally feel the effects of minority status even in such a microcosm, and I was humbled by the experience. The meeting started well with the normal kind of pleasantries of sharing names and community roles we each had; as we were beginning the meeting, a young mother with a two-year-old son came in a bit late. As they came into the room, the boy's eyes quickly fixated upon me - they were wide-eyed and deep, staring at me as if I had a unicorn horn in the center of my forehead. I realized that I really did stand out, perhaps, being very strange to this child - but then, he did something that made my heart sink; while staring at me, he began to cry. I wanted to slink out of that room quickly; I wanted to share words of reassurance that I wasn't a monster but we didn't share a common language; when I smiled at him, he only cried more. What a wonderful effect I have upon children! I thought to myself, but then I tried not to make him more scared by trying to interact with him. The meeting went on - we talked about plans and dates and arrangements for celebrations marking the end of Ramadan, for the Eid meals for the Muslim communities in Missoula, for spaces that might be available and work well for the events, including our own.

That's when it happened, about halfway through the meeting, when I was engaged in the planning details. As the conversation went on without interruption, quietly, calmly, slowly, that young boy got up, walked over to where I was sitting, and sat down right next to me. He had cell-phone sized game he was playing with, and he played with it right next to me for the rest of the meeting, about a half-

hour in time. For a little while, he even leaned against me, using me as a back rest while he played with his gadget. We shared no words, we didn't even look at each other really, but I realized the tent wall between us had been taken down, at least somewhat. And out of all the plans and progress we made in that meeting, I felt that his growing comfort with me, and mine with him, were the greatest outcomes of our time together.

Tents may have their purpose when the storm clouds roll in and the weather becomes harsh; but tents outlive their usefulness whenever they promote division or hide cruelty or seek to control what cannot be controlled. And no matter what tents are made for, we must remember that they are meant to be temporary things at best, never meant to hide what's wrong or confine what's true for any length of time. We must always remember that our God is unconfined, and that God desires for us to learn this nature for ourselves - that we are not meant to live in separate tents of our own making, but under the canopy of God's grace, where there is room - and love - for all.