

On this Christmas morning, you may be wondering why did we read Exodus chapter 40 as our Old Testament reading? What does that have to do with Christmas? What does Moses in the wilderness building the tabernacle have to do with Jesus being born in Bethlehem? Maybe you even think it was a mistake, like we should've been reading something else and we got a misprint as if this was something that didn't have anything else to do with what we're reading today. But the truth be told, Christians, this passage from Exodus chapter 40 actually helps us to understand something in the Gospel. And that is John chapter 1 verse 14 where John says this. He says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." And it's that word "dwelt"--the word became flesh and dwelt among us--that we want to focus on. Because the word "dwelt" here is not talking about just living somewhere, and it's not even talking about living in a house. It's talking about dwelling in a tent. Jesus came among us, he became flesh, and he pitched his own tent, so to speak, among us, so that we have him with us today. And when we realize that--that Jesus has pitched a tent, so to speak--it helps us to understand how Exodus 40 fits into Christmas morning, because it helps us to understand just what John is talking about.

So if we look at our reading in Exodus chapter 40, we meet Moses. And God has given him very specific instructions about how to build this tent, about how to build the tabernacle. Because God was going to dwell among his people and he wanted to give Moses these specific instructions to make sure that he would build the tabernacle exactly the way that he wanted. I don't know if you've ever read the book of Exodus all the way through. If you have, you'll know that the second half of the book, starting around chapter 21 all the way to chapter 40, is primarily focused on the tabernacle itself. It talks about how it was supposed to be built. It talks about the materials that were supposed to be used, like gold and silver and other metals and wood and cloth, all these things. And God is even so specific as to give Moses the exact measurements of everything that was going to go into the tabernacle. Everything down to the smallest details forms half of the book of Exodus. And then when he gets done talking what it was supposed to look like, getting done with the blueprint so to speak, it then repeats itself. It says all of the same details all over again as Moses builds the tabernacle right down to the same measurements and the same materials and everything. And maybe we're starting to wonder: well, what's the point? Why would Moses go to such detail? Why would the Lord be so specific about how this tabernacle is supposed to be that he says it twice in the book of Exodus?

You have to understand something, Christians. When God gives these details, it's because this is how he is going to be among Israel. The tabernacle was the place where Israel would go to meet God. And so it's important. And that's why he repeats himself, because it is so important. He wants Israel to know that they will have God in their midst. If they want to find God, if they want to go and meet him, all they have to do is go to the tabernacle and they can find him sitting over top of the ark of the covenant, which was inside the tabernacle. It's how they found comfort in the midst of their troubles.

But now maybe we're wondering, as people who live in the New Testament, why they have to go to somewhere specific. Isn't God everywhere? Couldn't they just worship him wherever they were? Couldn't they just pray to him wherever they were? Why do they have to go to somewhere specific? You have to understand something, Christians. God made the promise to us to hear us wherever we are in the New Testament. He made the promise to us that we can find him

wherever we are only in the New Testament. In the time of the Old Testament, Israel had to go to the tabernacle. They had to go to the place where God promised to be, because he hadn't made that New Testament promise yet. So if they wanted to find him, that's where they had to go.

And Israel had all kinds of proofs that God was actually there. That's what the whole business with the cloud is about, the cloud which shows that God is present here in the tabernacle. And the fire which burns in the tabernacle by night, it was another sign to them that God was actually among them. And we learn in the book of Numbers too that the tabernacle was always set up right in the middle of the camp. They would set it up and then they would put all of their tents around it, so that God was always right in the middle of his people. And whenever that tabernacle set out and went somewhere else, they would follow it. Not that they would pick it up and just go wherever they were going, but they would literally follow wherever that cloud went. When it went, they went. When it stopped, they stopped. Because God was leading his people through the wilderness. God was with them every step of the way. And even when they were wandering for 40 years because of Israel's sin, yet God was still with them because he was going to keep his promise to bring their children and their children's children into the promised land.

And so in those dark hours when a believing Israelite would wonder--is this going to go on forever? Is this something that I'm never going to reach the promised land? Where is God in the midst of my troubles? Where is God in the midst of my grief?--all they would have to do is to look to that tabernacle, to look there and know that God had literally set up his tent among them. And he was going to be with them always. And they had that proof right in their midst.

And Christians, we too have Jesus among us today. Jesus has set up his tent among us by being born of the Virgin Mary. He has become one of us. And if we want to know where he is and where God is in the midst of all of this, we only have to look towards Jesus, who has pitched his tent among us and is now with his people always. God gives us that comfort in his Son Jesus Christ. And so whenever we are afraid, whenever we are worried about what the future might hold for us, we can look to Jesus, Jesus who has pitched his tent among us by becoming one of us at Bethlehem, and we will know in that moment, Christians, that Jesus will not leave us or forsake us. God has all things in his almighty hand, and Jesus is the proof that God has not left us alone. Whenever we grieve over the loss of a loved one or grieve over some other disaster in our lives, we can look to Jesus who pitched his tent among us by becoming one of us at Bethlehem, and we will know that he has promised to us a joy far beyond anything this world can provide us. He will give us peace beyond our understanding. And when we are tired of all of the evil which we see around us in the world today, wondering when is it ever gonna come to an end, we can look to Jesus, Jesus who has pitched his tent among us by becoming one of us at Bethlehem, and we will know that God does not forget us. God is with us even when we cry to him. And God will give us justice for everything that we have suffered in this life. And whenever we wonder if things are ever to get back to normal, if life is ever going to be what we remember even in recent years, we can look to Jesus, Jesus who has pitched his tent among us by becoming one of us at Bethlehem, and we will know that even if our lives are never the same again, yet we still have Jesus, and that is something far greater than anything this world can provide. God is among us Christians. God has given us his Son, his Son whose name is Immanuel, God with us. He is the proof that God still is with his people. Jesus is our fire in the wilderness, lighting up our darkest ways. Jesus is that cloud leading us on our way. Jesus is the very promise that the Father has

given to us, that he will be with us always, and that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I want to close today with an example, one that I think really drives home the point of what we're trying to say here today. And that's with a Christmas carol. One you may actually know, although it's not all that popular these days. You don't hear it on the radio very much. If you're a fan of Bing Crosby, you might know it. That is, "I heard the bells on Christmas Day." And the poet who wrote it, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, wrote it during a very difficult time in his life. Because when he wrote that poem in 1863 on Christmas Day, two years previously he had lost his wife in a tragic accident. And in the following year, in 1862, he very nearly lost one of his sons in the war. And then in 1863, they were right in the middle of the Civil War, a time when the nation was being literally torn apart. And he was starting to wonder, what was going to happen in all of these things? Where could he find peace in the midst of such personal turmoil and in the midst of a nation being torn apart at the seams? And so on Christmas Day, he wrote these words, and I'll read part of them. "I heard the bells on Christmas Day / Their old, familiar carols play, / And wild and sweet / The words repeat / Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!" So as he was sitting there on Christmas Day listening to the bells that were ringing in all the churches around him, it made him start to reflect about what was happening in his life. Because then he wrote: "Then from each black, accursed mouth / The cannon thundered in the South, / And with the sound / The carols drowned / Of peace on earth, goodwill to men! // And in despair I bowed my head; / 'There is no peace on earth,' I said; / 'For hate is strong / And mocks the song / Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!'" How could there be peace? How could there be Christmas joy when the world was being literally torn apart? When everything that he knew had been taken away from him? But then he wrote this: "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: / 'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; / The Wrong shall fail, / The Right prevail, / With peace on earth, goodwill to men!'" No matter what happened in his life, Christians, Longfellow knew that God was not dead, that God was with him always, and that God would never leave him nor forsake him.

So when you are afraid or worried about what the future might hold, remember God is not dead. He has given you his Son who has pitched his tent among us this day. Whenever you are wondering whenever you will find peace again if you are grieving, remember that God is not dead. He has given you his Son who has pitched his tent among you today by becoming one of us. And when we're wondering if the world will ever get back to the way we think it should be, remember God is not dead. He has given us his Son who has pitched his tent among us by becoming one of us at Bethlehem. And because we have Jesus among us today, Jesus who has been born, we have a hope that nothing can take away. We have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

To him be glory, now and forever. Amen.