

Tent Glory Where God Dwells

John 1;1-5, 14 & Exodus 13:18, 21-22

Like many pastors, my favorite text for Christmas is not from Matthew or Luke. It's not that I have anything against the traditional Christmas story; having read, preached on, and dramatized the wonderful story of the first coming of Jesus, I tend to look for something with more substance in it for me. For that reason, my go to text for Christmas is John 1, specifically verses 1-5 and 14.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

This year, perhaps because of how heavy and dark 2020 has been, as I read it once again my eyes and mind rested on the words Light and Glory. Let's face it, the death and sickness that the Covid19 virus inflicted coupled with the needed response that separated people from one another just to avoid getting infected left people feeling alone and helpless. The political unrest, already filled with suspicion, accusation, and division, was further amplified this election year. Racial discrimination that many either thought was easing or had simply tried to forget was a problem has been exposed as the systemic virus that it is. Add to that the many fires, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, floods, and droughts and, well, it's understandable that 2020 should feel dark and that there is a longing for light.

So, I spent some time reading and studying the essence of God as light and the glory of God, which seemed to be synonymous much of the time. I was intrigued by what I found because it added so much meaning to my favorite Christmas text.

The first primary text that gives the essence of God as light is Exodus 13. God has just freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Rather than going the fast route through Philistine territory, and so avoid possible war, God leads them “*around by the desert road toward the Red Sea*” (18), and God led them this way:

By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

God chose a cloud of fire to represent him. Why? Could it be that these elements of nature have a visible form but no solid substance? From Genesis 1 we understand that man and woman were made in the *image of God* (form) and Jesus tells us in John 4 that “*God is spirit, and his*

worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (24). Form without substance – cloud of fire – was the only visible expression of God that Israel ever knew.

After crossing the Red Sea and gathering at Mount Sinai, God met with Moses on the mountain and gave the laws and instructions for living as the nation of God. God also gave instructions for the construction of the worship center. Israel’s tribal life was to center on the worship of God and the Tabernacle was placed in the center of the camp. When the construction was completed, the cloud of fire engulfed the tabernacle and then hovered above it appearing as a cloud by day and fire by night, leaving that position only when leading the Israelites to their next destination.

The next time we encounter God as light is upon the completion of the building of the temple. King Solomon has summoned the nation together to dedicate the Temple. As soon as the priests placed the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, God came with the same form without substance, a cloud of fire, and filled the Temple such that the priests could not perform their duties. 1 Kings 8 reads:

When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple (10-11).

When the Bible speaks about the cloud of fire descending on the tabernacle and the temple, it describes the overwhelming brightness as “the glory of God.” We have come to call it the “Shekinah Glory.” Now Shekinah is not found in the Bible, but several Hebrew words likely evolved into Shekinah. *Shakan* means “to live” or “dwell.” Put an M in front of *shakan* and it becomes *Mishkan*, meaning “tabernacle” or “dwelling place.” Another variation of *shakan* is the word *Shekunah*, which refers to “a neighborhood” or “to dwelling with others.” The Shekinah Glory in the form of the cloud of fire, in essence, refers to the glory of God taking up residence among the tribes of Israel – the tent glory where God dwelt among his people.

Fast forward to John’s Gospel. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory ...”*

John uses a unique Greek word for “made his dwelling.” It’s the word *Skenoo*, which means “pitch a tent.” The Greek word for “tent” is *Skene*, which is the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word for tabernacle. John understood Jesus to be a living manifestation of the Old Testament Tabernacle. *“We have seen his glory...”* In other words, the Shekinah Glory was back in the bodily presence of Jesus; the Word was God who became flesh.

As “tent glory where God dwells,” Jesus told us how he would or should be seen, *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk.4:18-19).*

Fast forward to Acts 2. God’s Spirit comes on the church in the form of flames of fire. More than that, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians, *“Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and*

that God's Spirit dwells in you?" and "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" (3:16, 6:19).

Now we have become the dwelling place of God and his glory. John instructs us in his 1st letter to stay in the tent glory where God dwells among his people, *"If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin"* (1:7). And Jesus instructs us what to do with that tent glory that dwells in us, *"Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven"* (Mt.5:16).

Oh, may it be that in this new year the Shekinah Glory, the tent glory where God dwells among his people, can be seen clearly in us and through us and all the church of Christ as we continue to shine having been given the responsibility to carry forward the mission of Jesus in this world. For has not *"The Spirit of the Lord is on us, because he has anointed us to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"*?

May the Light of that cloud of fire, that dwells in us all who have become *the tent glory where God dwells among his people*, dispel the darkness that hovers all over this land. For indeed, where light shines, darkness cannot overcome.