

Date: June 5, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 10

SERMON: Tents and Altars

Text(s): Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 9:9-13

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How many of you here have had the experience of camping in a tent at some point in your life? How many of you still enjoy camping in a tent? I see that I'm not the only one who prefers more creature comforts in my recreation at this stage of my life. I still remember, however, how I learned some basic facts about tent-camping when I was a youngster of about ten. One of my friend's parents had bought him a small two-person tent from an army -and-navy surplus store. Back in those prehistoric times, tents were made of canvas rather than the new hi-tech materials they're made from today. He and I were really excited at the prospect of pitching that tent down in the woods behind our home. We started out late one summer afternoon while it was still light, and we picked a spot on a relatively flat ledge of a steep hillside in the beech and maple woods, above a small creek. We spread the groundsheet, set up the tent on it, hammered in the stakes to secure it, and felt like real outdoorsmen. During the night, a sudden thunderstorm brewed up, and as you know, thunder is very loud when there's only a piece of canvas between you and the storm. Then the rain began to fall, heavily. At first we were OK, but we didn't know that if we touched the inside of the canvas during the rain, it would break the surface tension that held out the water, and so we learned that little lesson the hard way. Soon our tent was dripping in a number of places. We also discovered we hadn't sited it with the expectation of rain, and within a few minutes, a small river started running in one corner, and it got bigger by the minute. At that point, we decided that houses were better than tents, and so we abandoned our plans to become frontiersmen and went home, arriving in a bedraggled enough state that we provided our parents with a good deal of amusement.

Portability is the defining characteristic of a tent, whether it's made from Teflon-coated nylon or canvas or goat hair. It is not a permanent structure. It is an appropriate dwelling for people on the move.

Altars, on the other hand, are more permanent structures. Altars are not as portable as tents. When we went to visit our younger daughter Kate in Berlin this past February, we made another trip to the Pergamum museum to see the Pergamum altarpiece again. It is the actual temple facade, steps, and frieze, along with the stone altar from the Greek temple in the city of Pergamum mentioned in the Book of Revelation. If you've been to Berlin and seen the altarpiece, you'll remember how massive it is; the room it sits in is more than a hundred feet square and at least sixty feet high. It's designed to create an overwhelming feeling of awe and humility in the face of divine power and grandeur.

Altars represent the deep commitments that people make that bind them to the particular deity whom they believe has the power to give them stability and permanence and meaning. Altars express something of our desire for permanence, for a link with that which is eternal and stable, something that endures beyond the "changes and chances of this fleeting world," as the old prayer book puts it. That longing for stability, the comfort of knowing what to expect, is why all of us are uncomfortable with change.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, this contrast between the portability and transience of tents and the solidity and permanence of altars figures rather prominently. Three times in this short passage, the writer says that Abraham moved on, in response to God's call, and went to a new place, "*and there he pitched his tent. . . and there he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.*" I'd like to suggest that this activity of pitching tents and building altars is an appropriate metaphor for the nature of the Christian life. I'd also like to suggest that we frequently get it backwards much of the time. As we move

through our life's journey, we often make the mistake of pitching our altars and building our tents.

The call of God to Abraham was a call to get up and move out. There's no suggestion that prior to this call Abraham was a nomad. In fact, he appears to have been living a settled life in the city of Haran with his family. Well, I suppose I should say with his relatives, because Abraham doesn't have a family of his own. He and his wife Sarah are childless. They have been unable to conceive children, and they are now in their old age. In the ancient Hebrew culture there was no concept of personal immortality like the ancient Greeks had. There was no concept of an afterlife for the individual beyond death. The individual survived only in his or her descendants. So if Abraham and Sarah have no descendants, then they are at a dead end, literally. They have no future. Their history comes to a full stop when they die. The barrenness of their bodies mirrors the barrenness of their hopes for the future.

Their life in Haran may be settled, perhaps even comfortable, yet is nevertheless hopeless, without a future. And it is precisely into this hopeless situation that the call of God comes to Abraham. The call is both a word of command and a word of promise. It is a word that uproots Abraham from his settled life in Haran, his dead-end life of comfort but no future, and sends him on an incredible journey. God's call turns Abraham from a settled homeowner into a pilgrim. *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

Now what would your reaction or my reaction be to such an incredible word? How was Abraham even able to hear such a word? We don't know. The storyteller doesn't explore any of the motives or psychological states that we'd

love to know about. This call comes seemingly out of nowhere. Yet it follows logically out of what has come before. The dead end of Abraham and Sarah's personal story mirrors the dead end at which the human race, whose follies have been described in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, has arrived. Immediately before this story we've had the stories of Noah and the Flood and the Tower of Babel, with the result that the human race is scattered, fragmented, without the ability to communicate with one another or form a common purpose. Like the hopelessness of Abraham and Sarah's personal history, human history has been a fruitless history of disobedience to God's will, leading nowhere. Until this command from God which comes from "out of the blue" so to speak, there is no future on the horizon for anyone. Yet when it comes, it promises a future of blessing, not only for Abraham, but for "all the families of the earth."

When this word from God interrupts Abraham's life, he is faced with a crisis, a moment of decision. Either he will trust the promise of this God and uproot himself from his comfortable, though hopeless, life, or he will stay where he is, choosing the barrenness that he knows over the journey full of unknown risks in pursuit of a promise he can barely credit. Abraham knows that he and Sarah are incapable of making the promise come true. They're 75 years old and people don't have babies at that age, (thank God! most of us would say). If Abraham believes and acts on this promise, it will either be an act of great faith or great foolishness or madness. If he follows this word, this impulse, he will risk, not only his reputation for being a person of sound mind; he will risk losing even the security he has built up for himself in Haran, barren and ultimately futile though it is.

Would he and Sarah go on living their comfortable, though dead-end life in Haran, or would they sell the house and buy a tent and become pilgrims in response to a fantastic

promise of a land and descendants and a future—to become the instrument of blessing for all the families of the earth? We're not told if Abraham and Sarah spent sleepless nights pondering the decision. All we have is this spare and elegant line, "*So Abraham went as the Lord had told him.*" Sounds so simple, and yet, what a crisis of decision it must have been, and what momentous consequences it carried with it. Abraham chose the tent rather than the house, and so became the prime example in the scriptures of what it means to live by faith. That fundamental decision to trust God, turned him from someone who clung to his own security systems into someone who became a pilgrim to a new world of promise, from someone who built houses into someone who pitched a tent so that he could be flexible enough to seize the moment of opportunity and follow the leading of the God who called him. From this point on, it was his altars that he built for permanence—those deep commitments to acknowledge God's presence and follow God's leading.

The life of faith, whether for ourselves as individuals or for our life together as a congregation, is to be a pilgrim people who are on the move in response to God's leading. We give at least lip service to our pilgrim heritage in the motto that we print in our bulletin regularly, "A Pilgrim people still." But do we really mean it? The problem, both as individuals and as a congregation, is that we tend to confuse what is permanent and fundamental with what is contingent and transient. We often build our tents and pitch our altars. We get comfortable, settled down in Haran, when the real future beckons us from Canaan beyond the Jordan. Or to put it in the language we often use, "Better the devil we know than the devil we don't." That's not pilgrim language, is it? So then, when something comes unbidden and unexpected and re-arranges our comfortable lives, something that shakes us out of our comfort zone, we don't know where to go or what to do with it. It is a

crisis which could either drive us to cling ever more fiercely to those things which are familiar and comfortable, or which frees us for a pilgrimage of growth in faith where we begin building some altars instead of trying to build our tents.

In one of my parishes in New Jersey there was a couple in their mid-fifties who were fairly regular attenders at worship, but not overly-involved in the church. I knew the man owned his own business—a small advertising agency which specialized in making training films and brochures for companies which were launching new products.

One day after church he came to me and asked me if he could begin making regular weekly appointments to see me. He explained his request. "I'm 55 years old," he said, "and for the last twenty-five years I've poured my heart and soul into my business, trying to make it a success. And I have. I was doing well, paying myself a salary of over \$100,000 a year, saving a good deal of money for my retirement. Now, however, in the last year, the recession has just devastated my business. My client list has dried up, the corporations are all cutting back on their advertising, I'm getting no new business, and I'm seeing everything I've worked for all these years go down the drain." Not an unfamiliar story so far, is it? We probably all know someone who has been through a similar experience during a time of economic recession. But, here's where his story was different from others like it that I've encountered. He went on, "I've decided that this really isn't an economic problem as much as it is a spiritual problem. I've been so busy developing my business that I've completely ignored my relationship with God. (He'd been building his tents and pitching his altars.) I want to begin meeting with you regularly so you can help me develop the spiritual resources I need to be a faithful Christian again, because I know that unless I can grow spiritually strong, I'll never have the resources to cope with this crisis."

I don't think I had ever encountered such naked honesty before. For that man to say that took an incredible amount of courage. We began meeting together weekly, and continued that for the next five years that I was there. For the whole five years, his business was a nightmarish burden. Through threats of bank foreclosures, inability to pay property taxes on his building, the elimination of most of his retirement IRA's and the threat of losing his home, he concentrated on growing spiritually. We prayed together, agonized together, discussed the scriptures together, read the writings of spiritual mentors together. He told me that he had always lived by the theological notion that "God helps those who help themselves," and when he discovered that he was powerless to help himself, the whole structure of his inadequate faith came crashing down around his ears. Little by little, that inadequate faith, that common, though faulty, theology of self-help was replaced by a genuine sense of trust in God, despite the hopelessness of his circumstances. Long before any change in fortune was on the economic horizon, he learned the difference between tents and altars, and he had begun again to pitch his tents and build his altars. His business never did come back to where it was before, but eventually some new directions opened up, and he and his wife had to work well into their seventies before they could really afford to retire, and their retirement will never be as comfortable as they imagined and hoped it might, but he has continued to grow spiritually, and has learned not to place his trust in things that are not permanent, and never can be.

Learning the difference between tents and altars is essential for all of us. For none of us is self-sufficient. All of us are utterly, and finally, dependent upon the grace of God. God's call to us, as it was to Abraham, is always a call to trust, a call to be a pilgrim, a call to travel lightly so that we can be open to the unforeseen future toward which God beckons us and which God

alone can bring about. Only when we learn to pitch our tents and build our altars will God's promise of blessing for us, and for others through us, become an experiential reality in our lives.