

# THE TENT

A sermon preached by the Rev. Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr. the First Sunday after Christmas, December 27, 2009, at Saint Francis Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland. Based on The Gospel according to John, 1: 14 –18.

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*Et la parole a été faite chair, et elle a habité parmi nous, pleine de grâce et de vérité; et nous avons contemplé sa gloire, une gloire comme la gloire du Fils unique venu du Père. — Jean 1: 14*

Growing up in Texas and New Mexico, my father used to call me “a barrel of monkeys.” An athletic boy growing up on military posts in the Southwest spends nearly all his waking hours under the open sky. I played so hard my father says that he would tuck me into bed at night and I’d be asleep before my head hit the pillow.

And it came to pass in those days, the days of Lyndon Baines Johnson, that Lance Broyles and I were playing the way my puppy Mena does: with someone else’s things. In our case, the things were a tent my father had put up in our backyard and a screwdriver he’d left on the porch. The games children most enjoy are the ones they invent themselves and we enjoyed this one while it lasted. Someone inside the tent would put the back of his hand up against the side of the tent while the other of us was outside poised with the screwdriver. We had discovered that when a tent’s pitched nice and tight you can throw a screwdriver at it and the screwdriver will bounce back to you.

That’s all the game was at first. Throw the screwdriver at the tent. Try to catch it off the bounce. We altered it when one of us threw the screwdriver and it trampoline’d off and hit the other of us upside the head. It must have been Lance’s head. I’d remember this better had the head been mine.

So in the enlightened version of the game one of us, as I said, would get in the tent and put the back of his hand up against the side and count “One thousand and one!” In that second the other had to see the target and throw the screwdriver. Hit a hand and you scored a point. Avoid being hit and you scored a point. Three throws and we’d switch places. To decide who would begin the game inside the tent, we played *Jankenpon*, a nineteenth-century Japanese game my mother taught me. You know it as Rock – Paper – Scissors.

I lost. I put my hand up and Lance missed the tent entirely. The second time was closer; he hit the tent, the screwdriver caroming away. I put my hand up a third time and the scar is faded now forty years later, but I can show you what remains of it on my left wrist, impaled by the screwdriver. This ended the contest.

“The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth, the glory as of a Father’s only son.” The Word became flesh. He dwelt among us or,

more literally translated, he “pitched his tent among us.” In the Greek the verb is *eskénosen*. Its root *skenoun* derives from the Hebrew word *shekinah* as in God’s shekinah glory.

John’s sentences are poetic and metaphysical but they take us by the elbow about what happened in our backyard. The story he tells is a tent story. To the ancient Hebrews it was only the High Priest who could enter the Tent of Meeting, or later the Holy of Holies in the Temple, to encounter the shekinah glory of God. John is declaring that Jesus Christ is the meeting place where mortal flesh can now encounter God’s glory and live to tell about it.

The ancient Hebrews believed that if the glory of God were to shine on a man’s retinae it would kill him. They had it on authority. When Moses asked God to show him his *kavod*, the weight of his glory, the Most High — who spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend [Exodus 33: 11] — knew that to show Moses his glory would make the man go up in smoke. So the Almighty tucked him safely in the cleft of the rock and put his divine hand over him to further protect him, and then passed by revealing only the back of his glory.

This same Almighty became flesh. The High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity entered into time and space. That’s half the miracle; its other half is that Blessed Mary (the only one besides Moses so fully taken into God’s confidence), Blessed Joseph, the shepherds abiding in the field, Simeon and Anna, the magi, the boys whom Jesus chummed around with, the Apostles, Herod and Pilate — they all beheld his glory. And they didn’t go up in smoke.

Later in his gospel John records Jesus saying, “The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. . . . Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name. . . . Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

He pitched his tent among us who do stupid things. He took up his cross. The only Son of the Father put his hands against the wood and we pierced him. And the glory of the Lord shone round about him, and we were sore afraid.