

**LSBC Sermon – March 8, 2020 Charlie Fuller**  
**Text: Matthew 17:1-9**  
**“Pitching Tents”**

In the Arkansas newspaper they do these stories on local celebrities. You know, people who are prominent donors, political figures, people who have some kind of local renown. They usually do an extended story in the Sunday paper and tell the person's history, the kind of work they do, and explore something for which they are known. They might ask their favorite foods, books, music, movies, things like that.

And they ask them this question: What people from the past or present would you invite to your fantasy dinner party? People will respond with their ancestors, or a famous president, or Gandhi, or Mother Teresa, or Jesus.

Today's gospel reading is basically a first-century Jewish fantasy dinner party. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him to go hang out with Moses and Elijah. What good Jew in the first century wouldn't want to host Moses and Elijah at their fantasy dinner party? And along the way, Jesus is turned into this brilliant light, light so bright they can hardly look at him. *Then* they hear the actual voice of God. **What in the world is all this about?**

If I want to better understand what's going on in a particular passage of Scripture, I look at the context. What's happened in the passages that precede this story? Where have Jesus and the disciples been up to that point? What have they been doing? What's been going on that might shed some light on my understanding?

Let's hear what is going on in this passage from Matthew that precedes today's text:

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do **you** say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

And just a few verses later:

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on *divine* things but on *human* things."

In this sixteenth chapter of Matthew passage Jesus is alone with his disciples and he asks them a couple of questions. The professor is doing an assessment of his teaching. What have the disciples learned so far? He starts off easy. He says, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples answer, John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. Then the questioning gets harder: Who do *you* say that I am?

I suspect there was a rather deep silence for a few moments. I've experienced that as both a student and as a teacher. I can almost hear them thinking, "What does he want us to say? What's the right answer here? I don't want to get this one wrong." And then, in the usual pattern, Peter is the one to speak first. Peter says, "You are the Messiah." Peter's the guy in class that will fill the silence of a hard question, even if it's the wrong answer. You know that person. There's one in every class.

It was a shocking answer. The Messiah? There's a lot of baggage around being the long-awaited Messiah. And I'm not sure if Peter even fully believed what he had said. I think he might have been just guessing to fill the silence.

But he got it right.

Jesus responds, Yes, Peter, here's your gold star. You get the bonus points today.

But then Jesus begins to give them the syllabus for the rest of the class. They're going to head to Jerusalem, they're going to be rejected by all the religious celebrities there, and then Jesus will die and come back to life after three days...

Peter will have none of it. Probably emboldened by the bonus points he just got, he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. The student rebukes the teacher. Unheard of. And Jesus rebukes back in the strongest terms. He calls Peter "Satan," the accuser. Peter loses all those bonus points and then some.

All that to say, I still don't think that the disciples or the readers of Matthew at this point know who Jesus really is. They're still figuring it out. And that's why Matthew tells the next part of the story. The story of what happens on the mountain.

*I think Mathew includes this event in the life of Christ and the disciples in order to keep answering the question of who Jesus is.*

Here we are after Jesus has given the mid-term exam. Six days after Peter has had his highest high and his lowest low, they go up on the mountain and *God identifies Jesus* for Peter, James, and John. Jesus is now identified with heroes of the Jewish faith that can trump the elders, chief priests, and scribes in Jerusalem. Jesus is not just the latest in the long line of men who claimed to be the Messiah. Jesus is the very son of God, the *beloved* Son of God. God makes that declaration with God's own voice. Jesus is God's beloved Son.

Think about the words of God in this story: God's words are words of love. God declares his love of Jesus in front of the gathered audience. God validates Jesus not just in front of the disciples Peter, James, and John, but also in front of these two paragons of Jewish history and faith, Moses and Elijah. God declares once and for all that Jesus is God's beloved Son. God also validates the message of Jesus when God says: "Listen to him." God places the message of Jesus over and above the most highly revered messages of the Jewish faith, the messages of Moses and Elijah.

God says, "listen to Jesus." Pay attention to this Messiah, this anointed one. I love him. Pay attention when he teaches and heals and feeds. And pay attention when he talks about this journey to a cross. It's important. Listen.

*It's important because for Jesus suffering and glory go hand in hand.*

What can we learn from Peter's response? We've just been on a Peter pendulum of responses. Before the mountain Peter answers Jesus's question. First, he was right on and then he was as wrong as he could be. What was his response to this incredible gathering on the mountain and how might it inform our own journey with Jesus?

Here's how Peter responds to this amazing experience on the mountain. He says, let's make three dwellings. The King James Version uses the word "tabernacle." What do you think that was about? This making of dwellings? This building of tabernacles?

First of all, I think Peter just said the first thing that entered his mind. Imagine for yourself what you might do or say in that situation? The text says they were terrified. Wouldn't you be? Peter at least had the presence of mind to say *something*. I'm more than willing to give Peter some slack here. It's hard to know what to say when your teacher has become so bright you have to avert your eyes. Peter was a man of action. He wanted desperately to DO something, anything, in response to this incredible event.

So, he asked Jesus if he could pitch some tents.

Have you ever slept in a tent? When Cindy and I were first married, we lived out our own tent story. One of the consistent things about tents is that when a person first goes camping in a tent, it will always rain. It just always happens. Whenever anyone in my extended family went camping for the first time in a tent, there would always be a downpour.

Cindy and I went camping for the first time in Palo Duro Canyon in West Texas. Palo Duro Canyon was formed by the headwaters of the Red River. Did you hear me say "Red" River?

My brother had loaned us a 2-person canvas pup tent that we took to the canyon for Cindy's first camping trip. We settled in for the night and here came the rain. Big drops, lots of them, all night long. The canvas began to leak and by morning we were pretty

wet. Did you hear me say that Palo Duro Canyon is the source of the “Red” River? Not only were we wet, but everything we brought had a thick coating of bright red mud.

We went home and laid our things out to dry and that very afternoon we went to the store and bought a new 4-person nylon tent with a separate rain fly.

Tents are wonderful things. They keep away the rain and the light so you can sleep.

*They indicate that you’re going to stay somewhere for at least a while.*

When we talk about tents in our affluent and modern culture, we’re often thinking about a transient form of existence. We only use tents if we’re camping out. We never think of them as primary dwellings. In the first-century world, that was not necessarily so. Lots and lots of people lived their entire lives in tents in the Middle East during the first century and for many centuries thereafter. Lots of people live in tents or less today. It seems to me that to put down tent stakes was to plan to stay there for a while.

Peter, just like we would have been, was so enthralled by this event that he wanted it to last. He wanted to be sure he could take care of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah so that they could stay there for a long time.

*But they were not going to linger there.* God spoke and Jesus is back on the road. Back on the road to Jerusalem. The journey that would lead to a cross.

Back when I was a music major at Baylor, one of our choral directors was Euell Porter. Dr. Porter used to refer to this Scripture in an interesting way. Sometimes when choirs are singing they come to an important note. It might be one they’re supposed to hold a long time; it might be a particularly high note. If someone wanted to make the note too long (usually some sopranos)(look at the choir), he would say, “Don’t build a tabernacle up there.” He meant don’t camp out there. Don’t stay there too long. Come on down off the mountain.

Which is what I think is at least a part of what our text is saying here today.

Peter’s intentions were good and his motives were likely pure. He was speaking out of instinct. But good intentions and pure motivations were not enough. They had a journey to take. They didn’t have time to stay on the mountain. They didn’t need a bunch of heavy tents to weigh them down and **block the light** from the transfigured Jesus.

What are *our* tabernacles today? What tabernacles do we share as the community called Lake Shore Baptist Church? What practices should we give up in order to make the journey with Jesus? What attitudes as a church do we need to examine and maybe drop by the side of the road? What tent stakes do we need to pull up and leave behind in order to make our way with Jesus?

As we continue our transition, there will be tabernacles that we need to leave behind. There will be tent stakes to pull up and canvas to pack up. There are things we've done in the past that we no longer need to do in the future. What are those things? I'm not the one to say. But God will speak as we work through the process together – as an entire community of God.

What about your own individual tabernacles? What practices do you need to leave behind in order to join Jesus on the journey? What attitudes are weighing you down and slowing your steps on the way? Quit pitching tents. Quit building tabernacles. They only weigh you down and block the light.

We leave our tabernacles behind in order to join Jesus on the journey. We don't need them for this journey. They just weigh us down and block the light. The light of a Jesus who glowed with the love of God on that mountain long ago.

Let's remember that as we pass through the contemplative season of Lent. We're moving through the darkness toward the cross. Remember from the Scripture how Jesus was illuminated with the light of God on the mountain? *As we travel through the season of Lent, the light of Jesus from the Transfiguration shines from behind us to light our way forward and the light of the resurrected Jesus shines from ahead of us back toward us beckoning us to come forward with Hope and with Joy.* Thanks be to God!