

Beginning with a God who pitches tents  
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So, here we are beginning again. Sometimes it feels as if my entire time at Leaside has been one of beginnings. I arrived just as the work of PW and Leaside coming together began, and our first months figuring out our new congregation. My own personal beginnings with Neil's arrival, followed by returning in the midst of many staff transitions, new connections with the North Toronto Cluster of churches, and planning for the renovations. More new beginnings for me as Kieran came in August, and while I've been away it's been a busy fall – there is a new Church for the Littlest Ones, Meet U @ the Loft launched, and Marilyn Smith shared her latest cookbook. The planning for the next Variety Show has already begun, and for the February 9 Choral Evensong service. There are new adult education opportunities and youth nights with the North Toronto cluster of churches, and of course our renovations have not only begun while I was away, but we now have a wonderful new kitchen and washrooms! All these new beginnings, without even mentioning all the things that have begun once again: the fall Awesome Sale, the El Hogar trivia night, the choir practices and children's program, Spirit Alive and Meditation group, Carols by Candlelight, the Christmas Pageant, the Christmas Tea... and so many other things as part of the ongoing work of our committees and the worshipping life of our congregation... And things are starting up quickly. Council meets Wednesday, three more committees and the renovation team next week... there is so much to look forward to – and to do – this coming year.

So, here we are beginning again, and again, and the thing is even when beginnings are exciting, they are hard too. Transitions take more work. They bring feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy to the surface. There can be more tension, more arguments or words unspoken, more doubts and fears. Each beginning changes us – sometimes just a little, sometimes quite a lot. Beginnings mean letting go of who we were before. With the renovations, we feel like we're on a camping trip in our own building, never quite sure which rooms can be used or which staircase to try. Things are packed up in boxes, hauled from place to place. We know we'll need to adjust, but we may not know how. In other parts of our lives, new beginnings can also feel like camping trips, as we pitch our tents on new ground and regret the inferior quality of our air mattresses.

So, here we are beginning again. A new year: 2020 – do you like the ring of that? Maybe this is a year when we hope for clear insight, or a perfect score? Even as Christmas continues – and I hope you enjoy the carols, because Matt and I tried to choose a few that haven't been sung enough this season – even as Christmas continues we are reminded that Christmas is all about new beginnings. After all, at its heart Christmas is about a birth, a new beginning.

So here we are beginning again, and we come to the beginning of John's gospel. While Matthew tells us about Joseph, Herod, a star and wise ones, and Luke talks about Mary, a humble stable and shepherds, and angel choirs – and while Mark just skips straight to John the Baptist shouting at people, John begins with these beautiful words of poetry, a completely different window into who Jesus was and what he means: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." It's poetry and mystery, too big or mystical to analyze in terms of our agreement. It goes back to the very beginning, the Genesis story, the start of all things, and reminds us that God is at the heart of each beginning.

This is what John says about this God: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

The verb *skenoo* means “to tent” or “to tabernacle” and so it can be translated different ways: “lived among us” “dwelt among us” “took up residence” “moved into the neighbourhood” “pitched a tent in our midst.” Jesus (and like Jesus, all of us) is a home for the divine. This is the heart of the incarnation, the idea of Jesus as Word-made-flesh. Jesus as Emmanuel, God-with-us. God living with us. God pitching a tent.

Now I know that if I asked each of you to tell me what is important about God and Jesus to you, I would hear countless different answers, some similar to each other and some completely unrecognizable. I think this is a gift, because it means we can learn and grow from each other – and it also reminds us that none of us can have any certainty about the divine. So, when I tell you about the God and the Jesus I believe in – believe as a verb that I try to have shape my actions, my very self, rather than belief as agreement that is about a nod and nothing more – when I share what is at the heart of my faith, I don’t expect it to be the same for you and offer it as encouragement for you to think and imagine deeply about the divine. If I were to choose a scripture verse that captures the heart of my believing, it might well be:

*And the Word became flesh and pitched a tent among us.*

The wonder becomes practical, the abstract becomes concrete. In Jesus we see made flesh what’s been true from the very beginning. What a gift to think about each of us, each person, all of creation, as a tent that contains the divine.

Speaking of tents - I was nine the first year my parents sent me to Sparrow Lake Camp. We stayed in cabins but one night was an out trip, and for whatever reason they decided to put all of us little 7 to 9 year olds in one large tent – I have no idea how we all fit. The tent was pitched on what I remember as mostly bedrock – I’m not sure if there were even any pegs to hold it down, but with all of us inside it worked pretty well. At least, it did until the morning after we had woken up, and it seemed like a good idea to try to shift away from one camper who was crawling and chasing us... we were crowded up against one side of the tent when the next thing I knew, the tent had flipped over and partly collapsed, sleeping bags were everywhere, and our counselors were rescuing us as we crawled from the chaos into the early morning light.

That’s the thing about tents, they can be easy to pitch, but they are not exemplars of stability. They’re not permanent. They’re designed to be moved with you, and while they might protect you, they will almost certainly lead to some pesky mosquitoes buzzing inside each night and maybe flooding if there’s too much rain. They’re practical and fallible. They’re versatile, and sometimes a little lop-sided, with pegs that are bent from bedrock and too much use.

A God who will pitch a tent next to you, or for you, or in you – in flesh – is not distant, transcendent, or all-powerful. And that’s the point. It’s about closeness rather than separation, flexibility and adaptability rather than stability, love rather than protection. It’s about being able to move and change with us. God, in Jesus, greets us smelling a little bit like campfire, with a few bug bites, and dirt on his cheeks.

This is a God who loves us not with condescension or from a distance, but working beside us, hauling boxes around the church as we take part in this renovation camping trip.

And so here we are beginning again, but not alone. We are together as a community, pitching our tents around this building and in our lives, hoping that we are ready to embrace the vulnerability, ask the questions, survive the rain, and remember that God pitches her tent next to us, pitching in with our work, is a part of our community.

And so here we are beginning again believing that our God is a God of new beginnings, finding all we do and all we are precious, meaningful, sacred. God pitches his tent with us and within us, risking everything for love. Amen.