

I was six years old at the time, going on my very first camping trip. Now, this wasn't a real camping trip like many of you would consider it. A large group from our church was going to Creation, a well-known Christian music festival at a campground in the mountains of Pennsylvania. There would be up to 40,000 people there, with electrical hook-ups, shower facilities, and all manner of other luxuries.

But that didn't really matter to my six-year-old mind. All I could think about was sleeping in a tent. Not a house. Not a hotel room. A tent! Nothing between me and the big blue sky except a piece of fabric.

All my expectations were blown away when we arrived at the campground, however. You see, my mom had not just gotten us a tent. She had gotten a *tent*. A gigantic Army tent. It was huge. The doorway alone was big enough for me to walk in without bending over at all. I couldn't touch the ceiling if I tried. The canvas walls felt as heavy as the draperies in our house, with windows as large as the one in my bedroom.

Holding up this heavy fabric were aluminum poles almost as thick as my wrist, and pinning it to the ground were what looked like railroad spikes, driven into the earth with a sledgehammer by the congregation's strongest men. Me, my mom, and my two sisters were able to sleep in this structure with space to spare. This tent would protect us. There was nothing to fear.

As the week went on, I was grateful for the strength of the tent, because God had decided that this entire week it would pour rain. Inch after inch came down, turning the campground into a muddy mess. But the festival went on. Thousands of people standing in the rain as the "classics" of contemporary Christian music took the stage. DC Talk. Steven Curtis Chapman. Twila Paris. And on the last night... Michael W. Smith.

But it was just as he took the stage that the heavens really opened up. Lightning. Thunder. Huge gusts of wind. And that's right about the point that my mom had had enough. Covered in ponchos, we dashed through the downpour back to the campsite. And if I hadn't been crying before, I was now.

The tent was obliterated. Stakes ripped out of the ground. Poles bent and twisted. Triple stitched canvas loops ripped away from the fabric. What had been our only shelter from the storm for several days had been reduced to a pile of rags and scrap metal. What a fool I had been. This tent couldn't protect us from anything. And there was everything to fear.

I think you can understand, then, that I don't have a high view of tents, even today. And I don't think St Paul did either. Which is kind of surprising, when you think about it. I mean, Paul himself was a tentmaker. Yet, in our epistle lesson for today, he reveals the same qualms about tents that I do. They're thin. They're temporary. And they are very, very easily destroyed.

But what is even more surprising is that Paul compares this world to a tent. Now, that in and of itself is a bit of an odd analogy to make and Paul's language here isn't entirely clear, so let's walk through this.

First, he says this world is thin like a tent. It doesn't provide us any protection or warmth. Living in this world is like standing outside in the middle of a snowstorm. You've got to be clothed with the right stuff or it will simply destroy you. And Paul suggests that if we trust in the things of this world we might as well be standing out in the cold completely naked. That's how little protection they provide.

We have fragile mortal lives, lived in fragile mortal bodies. And as much as we might like to pretend that we can stand up to anything that life throws at us, truthfully... we have everything to fear. Money. Family. Health. Death. These are the things of which this world is made. And these are the things that will bring this world crashing down around us, like a tent in a thunderstorm, and leave us crying in the rain.

I can't even imagine what my mom was thinking when we arrived at that ruined campsite. But I know that it didn't take long for her to act on it. Within seconds, all three of us were scooped up and piled into the station wagon. The soaked luggage and sleeping bags followed us in the trunk a few minutes later.

We drove home through the storm. And then we pulled into our driveway. And I remember seeing our little Cape Cod house waiting for us unharmed. Of pulling off my damp, muddy clothes and putting on warm, clean pajamas. Of crawling into my bed and hearing the wind blow against my window. These walls – these real, sturdy walls – they would protect me. And here I had nothing to fear.

We who are in Christ have been promised a home. And it's a home even greater than the one I grew up in. It's a home not built by human hands. Not built of wood or steel or brick. It's a home built of things imperishable. Because it's built on the blood of Jesus Christ. It's built on His resurrection from the dead. It's built on our resurrection into a life that cannot perish or fade.

And the home he gives us is built to withstand more than wind and rain. It's built to protect us from worry. To protect us from fear. To protect us from pain. To protect us from death itself. As Martin Luther famously wrote, it's a mighty fortress and a trusty shield from all that we might face.

And so we live in this flimsy tent of a world knowing that no matter what storms come against us, no matter how our lives are ravaged, no matter how utterly it seems that our world has been destroyed, we still have the promise that, in the end, God will scoop us up and carry us to the home He has prepared for us.

Now I know, at this moment, there are probably a lot of you who receive this message with great comfort and joy. Who gain peace from knowing that there is something beyond this world, and hope to live another day. But I also know that there are pragmatists among us. Men and women who are sitting there thinking, "That's all well and good, pastor. But what about right now? What about this tent that's about to collapse in on me at this very moment?"

And you're right. Any one of us could leave this service and find life crumbling around us the moment we leave these doors. But for us, Paul has one more message, "*He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.*"

He has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. He has given us His Holy Spirit to bring together God's people in fellowship and worship. To reveal His Word. To be with us in the sacraments. To make for us in this place a little bit of that home He has prepared for us. The world out there may not be able to protect us from anything. The world out there may be nothing but fear. But not in here!

And it has nothing to do with the walls or the property or the name on the sign outside. It has nothing to do with our politics or our nonprofit tax exemption or our 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment rights. It has nothing to do with anything this world can offer. Like Paul says earlier in this passage and like I said last week, the things of this world are temporary and worthless. They are crushed and stripped from us as easily as a tent in a thunderstorm.

No, in here we have protection because we have the enduring gifts of God. Gifts of God's presence. Gifts of the Spirit, producing abundant fruit within us. Gifts of faith and fellowship that you can't buy with money, build with bricks, or secure with any army. Because they are the treasures of heaven that do not rust or fade.

So, as Paul continues, we do not live for ourselves. For our very flesh is part of this flimsy tent that will one day pass away. No, we live for the one who died that we may live. And we live that we may persuade others, that they may know Christ as we know Christ. That they, like us, may have the joy of putting away their groaning and longing for a home that is better than a tent. And enter into that house that it not made by human hands, eternal in the heavens.

You know, there was another tent in the Bible. It was called the tabernacle and it was where God's people worshipped for hundreds of years. And one day, King David prayed to God and said, "We shouldn't be worshipping you in a tent. It's thin. It's temporary. It's easily destroyed. How about I build you a big, strong house. A temple for you to dwell in."

And God answered David. He said through the prophet Nathan, "If you think it would be good to build a temple, that's fine. Start planning now. Your son can do it after you're gone. But remember this: I am always with my people. In a tent or in a temple. At home or at church. I am with you. And in all things, I will be the strong house for you." Amen.