

Theme: God makes his home with his people once again!

Has there ever been a year that you've spent more time at home? Because of things like "safer at home" order, our dwelling places were used for more dwelling than ever before. At times, that has led to a welcome change of pace--less distractions, more time for the family, more time to focus on your Christian home. But as the time drags however, maybe staring at the same four walls of your dwelling place has started to drive you stir-crazy. Since this year has given us a chance to reflect on our homes and dwelling places, it's also fitting at Christmas this year to focus on God's dwelling- the place where he makes his home.

The opening verse of the book of Hebrews told us that in the past God spoke to his people at many times and in various ways. All the way back at the beginning, in the garden, it appears God had a habit of walking and talking in some sort of visible form to Adam and Eve **"in the garden in the cool of the day"** (Genesis 3:8). But after Adam and Eve's sin, they were banished from the garden and from this regular dwelling with God.

God did however continue to make short appearances here and there, called "theophanies," where he appeared as a man and stopped for lunch at Abraham's tent or he had a 12-round wrestling match of prayer with Jacob. But it wasn't until God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and commanded him to lead the people out of Egypt, that God started consistently dwelling among the people in visible form.

As the Israelites came up out of Egypt, **"The LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people."** (Exodus 13:21,22).

Soon God's presence in this pillar would make its regular dwelling in the tent of meeting, called the tabernacle. **"Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle."** In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. **So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.** (Exodus 40:34-38).

The God who fills the universe and everything in it was merciful enough to make a covenant with his people and to make his dwelling in a tent in the wilderness as he delivered them to the promised land. His people could see this constant glimpse of his glory and presence, except that no one, not even Moses, could see his face and live!

After following the pillar of God's presence to the Promised land, God's people became a powerful nation. King David along with his son King Solomon was able to upgrade God's dwelling place from a portable wilderness tent to the most glorious temple ever built by the hands of men. Even then, Solomon had to wonder, **"But will God indeed dwell with humans on the earth? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (2 Chron.6:18)**

Answer? Of course God would dwell with his people, because God had promised to make this temple the dwelling place for his Name. **"When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. (2 Chronicles 7:1).**

God's dwelling in this place was, however, conditioned by his covenant with the people. He warned them, **"If you turn away and forsake the decrees and commands I have given you and go off to serve other gods and worship them, then I will uproot Israel from my land, which I have given them, and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name. This temple will become a heap of rubble."** (2 Chron. 8:19-21) And that's exactly what happened! Sin has consequences! The glory of the Lord departed from the temple. He abandoned it to be destroyed by the Babylonians and uprooted his people from the promised land, sending them off to captivity. Take a moment to consider whether God is truly serious about what he says will happen, and if you want to be on the wrong side of him when he decides to act.

When the exiles returned, God instructed them through the lesser-known prophet Haggai to rebuild the temple and he promised to return to it, **"In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the Lord Almighty...The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house, and in this place I will grant peace."** (Haggai 2:6-9)

But when they consecrated the second temple, nothing happened. God didn't beam himself down and fill it with glory the way he had in the past. Physically speaking, this temple was nowhere near what the first one was, and on top of it, the glory didn't come to fill it. At least by appearances, it seemed like God was done dwelling with his people, and so the temple loomed in the darkness of God's unanswered promise for the next 400 years. Sin has consequences, and if 400 years seems unimaginable to wait in darkness, imagine eternity apart from the gracious dwelling of God. Yet that is exactly what will happen to those who hold onto sin, close their eyes to the light, and remain in darkness.

All of this forms the backdrop of darkness into which the Light of the World came. Israel was waiting for God's earth-shattering coming with his great and glorious visible presence, but this time God chose a much different method to fulfill his promise. **"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son."** (Hebrews 1:1,2)

So **"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."** The Son of God was coming to town and coming to stay! That word for "made his dwelling" would bring to mind the tenting imagery of the Old Testament dwellings. But their tents, though portable, were not just for a weekend of camping, they were the place where they lived, and dwelled and had their homes. The Tabernacle itself was a tent where God chose to dwell for a time. Just as once God made his dwelling in the Tabernacle with his glory, now the Word was coming to make his dwelling, his home, among us, but not just in a cloud of glory in the temple. Instead, the angelic hosts shook the heavens with their announcement that the Son of God had been clothed in true human flesh to live among us.

God had always been faithful to his part of the covenant as God, but now he was coming to be faithful to our part of the covenant as well! The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us to fulfill our end of the bargain. The Son of God came to dwell with us so that the sons and daughters of men could dwell with him as children of God. **God came to make his home with his people once again!**

In this way, God's promise through the prophet Haggai would not go unanswered or unfulfilled. Jesus, the Word made flesh, did enter that second temple and so filled it with the glory of God--**"the true light that gives light to everyone."** (John 1:9) It just wasn't the light or the glory they expected. **"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. (John 1:9-11).**

Imagine that thought--that God could walk into a room and you wouldn't know who he is. But we don't need to imagine because that is exactly what God does in his immense love for the world. God ushers himself into his own world and seats himself in the lowliest place, a manger bed in a humble cattle stall. The world did not know him, but he makes his presence known to lowly shepherds out in the fields watching their flocks by night! **And to all who do receive him (like those shepherds that glorious night) to those who believed in his name, he gives the right to become children of God.** (John 1:12). Not a choice or human decision for Christ on their part; instead, they simply receive the light and believe.

"John [the Baptist] came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him all might believe." (John 1:7). He pointed people to the light, and after that John, there

came another John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, who also testified concerning the light he witnessed. **“We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)**

Nothing about Jesus looked great and glorious, but both John’s testified to that glory. Much later, the Apostle John got to see that glory and live when he saw Jesus transfigured before him in all his brilliant radiance. John got to witness what the writer to the Hebrews also says, **“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” (Hebrews 1:3).**

Through the life of the Word made flesh, the apostle John got to witness just exactly what Jesus came here to do. **“No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship to the Father, has made him known.” (John 1:18)** He came in lowliness to reveal the Father’s love and glory to the world, so that people might believe and love both the Father and the Son. To all who believe Jesus says, **“My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” (John 14:23):** John, the disciple Jesus loved, heard him speak those words the night before he went to his death for the world. This is how he displayed the full measure of his grace and truth among us. And all of it was for **God to make his home with his people once again.**

The word became flesh. He made his home with us, so that soon our home will be with him. John got to see a vision of that day coming true as well. From Revelation 21:3,4 **“Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”** Let every heart prepare him room, **for God to make his home with his people once again. Amen.**