"The Tent and the House"
2 Corinthians 5:1-10
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Pentecost 4 B
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Boise, Idaho
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The Word of the Lord from 2 Corinthians 5: “For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5:1). This is the Word of the Lord.

As many of you have already inquired, our family had a wonderful vacation of camping and bicycling up to Coeur d’Alene. It was, I think, one of the best vacations we have had. But I will say this: after a week of sleeping in a tent, it was good to be home. The camping was fun, the trip was great. Our traditional vacation weather—cold and rain—even kept the bugs away. But home is always much, much better than the tent.

So I found it ironic that my first sermon back would be from 2 Corinthians 5. St. Paul writes that we live in a tent for now, a description of this life and body. In this tent we groan, and the source goes far beyond rain and leaky air mattresses: because of sin, our bodies and lives face plagues of worry, trouble, disease and death. So, while we live in this tent, we rejoice amidst the groans because we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Jesus has gone to prepare a mansion for us, and we look forward to the time that we move from this tent and get to go home.

That’s our hope in brief: we live in this tent and we wait for that home. We honor this body and life despite the groans, even as we eagerly look for the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting in heaven.

This confuses the world to no end. One of the great puzzles to the world about the Church is this: if heaven is so great, why cling to life here so tenaciously? If we affirm that this is a world of sin and suffering and death, why do we seek to preserve life in this world? Why do we speak out to protect the life of the unborn, since they will be born into a world so evil? In that matter, why especially do we fight to protect the life of the unborn child who is known to be disabled, who will have a lower quality of life and less of a defense against the assaults of this world? At the other end of life, why pursue treatment when the disease is terminal? Why continue to live when the suffering will only grow worse? Why not instead reduce suffering by pursuing euthanasia, or—as the world puts it—“death with dignity”? What’s up with those Christians? Why preserve the tent when the home awaits?

All of this perplexes the world, and so they seek to come up with an answer: but when the world answers on behalf of the Church, the world is wrong. You see, the world believes that we seek to preserve life only because we’re afraid of disobeying God, because we seek to impose our narrow beliefs upon the world in order to coerce them into following us. They believe we do so because we seek to force our faith upon them by insisting they honor life. This is quite astounding to me, since the world speaks kindly of another big religion that actively seeks to force its beliefs upon all or else impose death.
However, the world is wrong in the first place. We do not seek to preserve life because we are looking to coerce the world into Christianity. We seek to preserve life because life is a gift from God.

Both the tent and the house are gifts from God. This tent—this body and life are given to us by God: we certainly did not will ourselves into existence. The eternal home—the resurrected body and the life everlasting is certainly given to us by God solely for Jesus’ sake, for Jesus has died on the cross to open the gates to that heavenly home.

We say again: both the tent and the house are gifts of God. As much as man would like to pretend otherwise, life didn’t just happen in a big, godless explosion long ago. And, as much as man desires otherwise, he can’t create life. He can’t restore it when it’s gone. Therefore, this body and life are priceless. The house in heaven is priceless, too. As much as man would like to believe that he can work his way to heaven by his labors, intentions, or just being nice, the house in heaven has been purchased solely by the holy precious blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

So let us speak of this priceless gift of this tent, this body and life. When you have a priceless gift, you don’t get rid of it—even if it becomes marred or tarnished, it remains a priceless gift. I tell you no secret when I say that sin has terribly marred this tent. You’ll groan. You’ll groan from disease, disability and emotional pain. Sin will work to drive you to the point where some days you may hate that gift of life. At such times, remember from God’s Word that it is not life that makes you miserable; it is the devil who seeks to destroy you and rob you of that gift of life. His fiery darts, however, do not make life less precious: it remains a gift of God. Therefore, when sin attacks this tent, either body or life, we Christians seek to make that life as good as possible in spite of the trouble that has come.

So when an unborn child is diagnosed with a disability, the world recommends termination. The child is going to have a low quality of life, and shouldn’t have to suffer through it. The world blames life for the problem, not sin which seeks to plague it. But the Lord declares that He is the one who forms us in the womb, and He declares that that child is one for whom Christ has died: therefore, He has prepared the tent and the house for that little one, according to His purposes. And no matter the troubles of this tent, He desires to deliver that little one through Holy Baptism to a perfect mansion for eternal life, for Jesus’ sake.

Likewise, when an adult is diagnosed with a terminal illness, the world argues that he should end his life whenever he desires. Eventually, the suffering will grow so great that life is the enemy and death becomes the friend. Once again, the world blames life, not the sin that brings suffering and seeks to destroy life, and then looks to death for help.

In the case of both the unborn child and the terminally ill, we do well to remember that we are always God’s instruments. Sometimes, we are active instruments whom the Lord uses to serve others in need. Sometimes, we are passive instruments whom the Lord uses to teach others to serve. The disabled and terminally ill are often passive instruments, but they remain God’s instruments all the same. Dear friends, many of our departed brothers and sisters in this congregation have given good testimony to family, friends and medical staff as they sought to honor God’s gift of life in the midst of their suffering and last days; and their loved ones have given good witness of Jesus at their bedsides.

With them, we thus bear witness today: life is a gift from God. Death is no friend. Death is the
enemy, but it is the enemy that has been conquered by Christ. And because our sinful flesh cannot forever sustain God’s gift of life in this world, our Savior uses that last enemy to deliver us from this earthly tent to our home in heaven. But despite the sufferings and groans we experience now, life in this world remains the precious, priceless gift of God.

Don’t be deceived. This is not an easy confession of faith to make. When it is given you to agonize about events that you have suffered, you will blame life—not the sin that afflicts it and you. When you must witness the suffering of loved ones, the devil will whisper that death with dignity is far better. If it is given to you to care for one with a disability, those special needs will completely reorder your life and rewrite the personal plans you had. Furthermore, the world will keep up its relentless assault on life as God’s gift. The world will never recognize that suffering and death are the wages of sin: if the world recognized sin, then it would have to repent and maybe even see the need for redemption; and the world is not about to turn to Jesus. Yes, be sure: it will be hard for you to rejoice in the gift of this tent, this body and life, when you must groan to the depths of your being—and when all you see in the world is change and decay, suffering and death. It will be hard to believe in the heavenly home when all you can see is the grave.

That is why you walk by faith, not by sight. That is why, when it comes to the tent and the house, you close your eyes and you open your ears. You hear God’s Word, and it is there that you find your comfort and joy, because it’s there that you hear the faith in which you walk.

This is that faith: because man brought sin and death into the world and destroyed the tent, Jesus was born into this world of sin and death. He became flesh and dwelled—literally “tented”—among us. He took on the fragile, scourge-able, crucify-able tent of this body and life, humbled Himself and was made man. He did so for this purpose—to prepare a place in heaven for you. He became flesh in order to die for you. He took every infirmity that afflicts your body and life, and bore it to the cross so that those may not curse and torment you forever. He bore every sin that would rob you of life and suffered God’s judgment for them—so that you might be forgiven your sins and delivered in God’s time from this tent of suffering to the eternal home of heaven.

Hearing that, you walk by faith. This suffering world is not God-forsaken; rather, God so loved the world that He came into the world to suffer so that the world might be saved through Him. Your Savior, who made you His by Baptism, still visits you by His Word and Supper, keeping you in the true faith until you arrive home. The suffering of this world does not contradict God’s Word; rather, it confirms what God’s Word says about the effects and wages of sin. Those who suffer from disability or disease are not to be dismissed or destroyed: they are numbered among those for whom Christ died, and it is given to you and to me to serve them.

And as for you, you live in this tent—and you groan. But walking by faith, you know this: you are among those for whom Christ died. Solely for His sake, this tent of body and life are not the end. Only by His grace, the heavenly home is yours. Take heart, dear Christians, and be of good courage in suffering: your mortality and groans will be swallowed up by life everlasting, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen