

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

Saint John's Abbey Publications

Saint John's Abbey

1-1959

God Pitched His Tent

Kilian McDonnell OSB

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, kmcdonnell@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/saint_johns_abbey_pubs

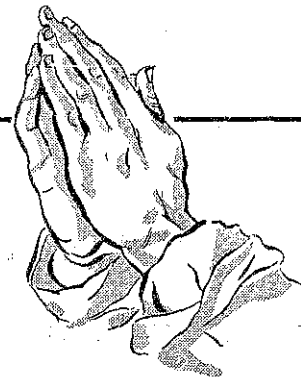


Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McDonnell, Kilian OSB. "God Pitched His Tent." *Sign*, 38 (January 1959) 45.

Reprinted with permission.



God Pitched His Tent

by KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.

In the long history of man's search for God, man has attempted to bring God near. Man would say to himself, "God is everywhere, therefore He is here. I am near Him, and He is near me." The religious man has always practiced the presence of God.

If man desired this, so did God. To Abraham God said, "Walk in my presence and be perfect." Abraham was asked to be always aware of God's presence. Wherever Abraham went, there God and His love would be.

The practice of the presence of God has lost none of its validity. But however praiseworthy the practice, neither man nor God has been satisfied with it alone. Besides remembering God's presence everywhere, man has always wanted to tie God down geographically, specially, to some particular measurable place where God would be with him in the more intimate, perhaps in a more human, way. To do this he would build a temple. Here, in this particular place, in God's house, man felt that he met his Creator.

Nor was God satisfied with man's keeping in mind His universal presence. It was a holy practice, but it was not enough. God too desired to localize His presence for the sake of man. In this particular place man could meet His God, pray to Him, speak with Him.

On the top of Mount Sinai God spoke to Moses of His people Israel: "I mean them to build me a sanctuary so that I can dwell among them." The sanctuary was usually called the dwelling or tabernacle, which means tent. God gave detailed specifications for the tabernacle: "You shall make me an altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits wide and three cubits high . . . the tabernacle (or tent) you shall make out of sheets woven of fine linen twisted . . ." The tabernacle was a collapsible structure. By day a cloud, and by night a fire, hung over the tabernacle as a sign of God's presence. At times the cloud would move, and then the Israelites would pull down their

own tents and the tabernacle, and follow the cloud until it stopped. At that place they would pitch their own tents and pitch the tabernacle: "Whenever the cloud rose from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on a journey. But if the cloud did not lift, they would not go forward; only when it lifted did they go forward. In the daytime the cloud of the Lord was seen over the tabernacle; whereas at night fire was seen in the cloud by the whole house of Israel in all the stages of their journey."

God dwelt with the Israelites as they wandered through the Sinai desert and when they entered the promised land: "I will dwell in the midst of the Israelites and will be their God."

This presence of God in the Jewish tabernacle or tent was God's presence in a special manner, in a given geographical place. Though the Jews could

• To speak heart to heart with God you must love to be with Him alone.—St. Peter Celestine

boast that Yahweh was with them in this unique way, God's desire to be with man was not satisfied. So it has always been. God's ambition for man is always greater than man's ambition for himself. God would give Himself to man more perceptibly. God would tie Himself, not only to geography, but also to culture, language, and to human conditions.

In the fullness of time God sent His Son: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt (literally 'pitched his tent') among us." Christ is the new tabernacle. Man no longer sees merely the sign of God's presence, the cloud or the fire. Man now sees the Presence itself, God with us, Jesus Christ, true God and true Man.

While still being everywhere, the second Person of the Trinity tied himself to a geographical place: Palestine; to a language: Aramaic; to our human condition: He became tired and had to rest by a well. St. John writes of the Christ

who pitched His tent among us: "I write of what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have handled."

Since the Ascension Christ is no longer with us in His human nature. But Christian piety has again found a way to localize God, to make Him dwell in our midst in a way that we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands. As a reminder of how God dwelt in the tent with the Israelites when they wandered for forty years in the Sinai desert, and of how God was made flesh and pitched His tent among us, the Church calls the dwelling place of the Eucharist a tabernacle, or tent. More than that, the Church decrees: The dwelling place "by its very appearance should represent the actual tent of God among men."

God invades the city of man to conquer by power. Not the power of arms, but the power of Presence. With the Jews He wandered in the desert, with the Apostles He walked in the flesh, with us He tents among us in the tabernacle.

A warning. The first purpose of the Eucharist is not for placing in the tabernacle so that we can visit Christ. Rather, is it to make Christ's death present so that we can offer it to the Father. Retaining some of the Host consecrated at Mass so that we can come to kneel before Christ outside of Mass is a secondary purpose; but not unimportant nor to be neglected.

We visit the Blessed Sacrament not because Our Lord is lonely—which He is not—but to recall the graces we have received at Holy Mass, to renew our desire to offer up our lives and our bodies in union with the sacrifice of His life and His body. We come to God's tent to praise Him for His wondrous works. Or we come to ask in our need. Sometimes we come full of words to kneel in His presence, sometimes with nothing to say. We just kneel before Christ's tent in silence. It is good to be here.