

Leaving Home: Pitching Tents

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on John 1:1-14
on January 4, 2026, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

I.

In my memory, I was about 8 or 9 years old, and *I'd had enough*. I can't recall what set me off – probably the annoying younger brother, or maybe just general frustration with it all – but I decided it was time to run away from home. That year for Christmas, I'd gotten a duffel bag in the most fabulous early 1990s electric purple and teal, and that's what I packed. In the duffel bag went about five pairs of underwear, a banana, the most recent *Babysitter's Club* novel I'd been reading, and my Bible. (I know. Insufferable.) I didn't have a plan, a route, or even a thought, other than to announce with dramatic flair to my family, "I'm leaving!" My oh-so-wise parents, using all the reverse psychology wisdom of the day, cheerfully called after me, "see you later!" I remember feeling astonished – *they were just going to let me walk out of here!* – but that only made me more determined. I grabbed my duffel and with one final flourish, slammed the door behind me.

Our home in the small town of Laurens, South Carolina was the church's parsonage: a lovely white brick home on Main Street with a very long, long driveway. I set off down the driveway, slowly, trying to sort out a plan and feeling more irate with every passing step that my family – *my family!* – had let me leave just like that! I'm pretty sure there was some audible huffing and puffing and sighing, along with the banana banging up against my Bible as I walked along. I snuck a glance behind me and was shocked - *shocked!* - that no one was chasing after me, begging me to stay. Well let me just tell you that I made it to the end of that long, long driveway,

took one look down the street that way and another look down the street the other way... and turned right around and went back home.

And thus concludes the one and only time I ran away from home.

II.

But leaving home? That I've done. You have too, of course.

We did it this morning, when you bundled up, and defrosted your car, and put on some nice clothes, and made the inconvenient trek to the church house to meet God and each other when you could have just stayed in the cozy confines of your couch. (Perhaps you're wishing right now you'd done that!)

In the years before Door Dash and remote work and Telehealth, we would actually leave the house each time we needed to buy groceries, or went to the office, or had a doctor's appointment.

We leave home for travel and adventure, to see friends and family flung far and wide or to see spaces we haven't yet found. We leave home when we feel the mysterious beckoning into a new journey, a new calling, a new path. We leave home when home no longer has space for us: a relationship ended, a status changed, something we know about ourselves that we can't forget or hide any more. We leave home when home is too filled with violence or fear or anything but safety and calm.

By now, you've deduced that the experience of leaving home is one that we'll be talking about this season. In these Epiphany days, we'll hear stories of Jesus who calls us to take step by single step on his Way of life, even as "we see it only by stages as it opens before us," as Jan Richardson describes in her exquisite blessing on the cover of today's worship guide.¹ But for today, on

¹ Jan Richardson, "For Those Who Have Far to Travel," *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*.

this last Sunday that the Christmas decorations will orient us to the season, we remember how stories of leaving home are intimately woven into the Christmas narrative. Mary and Joseph leave Nazareth. The shepherds leave their flocks for Bethlehem. The Magi leave their contemplations for brighter visions beaming afar. But no story of leaving home is more powerful, more complete, more transformative than the time God left home and came to make a home in the world.

III.

But *where is God?*, we wonder. “In the beginning,” the Gospel of John begins. For in John’s telling, the beginning was where it all began. In the beginning, echoing the divine sweep of creation. In the beginning, placing Jesus right in the heart of all that was made and all that would be made.

Where is God? God is beginning. God is in the beginning of all things, creating and bringing all life into being.

Where is God? God is Word. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* God who spoke creation into being knew how central the spoken word is to make meaning. Words persuade and give perspective, words create worlds and shape relationships, words mark beginnings and endings, words color our very lives. These first century Greek Christians who heard John’s message framed against the philosophies of the day remembered that when God created, God didn’t think the world into being, or move it into being, or magic it into being, rather God spoke, and the world came to be. So where is God? God is Word.

Where is God? God is light. *What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.* And the verse that always gets me, *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* We remember that

the light does come, the light is in the world, the light permeates everything, the light cannot be overwhelmed by darkness! For there is no corner of this world where there is not light, and thus there is no corner of this world where there is not God. So where is God? God is light.

Beginning, and word, and light are all beautiful images, ones that stir our imagination of who God is. But here's where it all changed: *The word became flesh, and dwelled among us.* The Word there from the beginning, the Light that enlightens all people – the Word became flesh! Took on human form! Entered the sinews of muscle and bone, organs and veins, broken hearts and full minds. As one translation says, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” Or from another, “The Word became flesh and tabernacled – or pitched a tent – among us.” See, God didn't need to stay ethereal, only in the ideas and concepts and beliefs, as beautiful as they are. God didn't choose to keep a distance, unmarred by the mess of this world. Rather God came close. The Word, the logos, the light, the divine tongue of God we call Jesus left the home of heaven to come and dwell among us.

No suffering is too wrecked, no relationships are too chaotic, no shame is too muddled, no countries are too irredeemable, no places or people or things are too disordered, no one is too far gone from themselves, or their home, or God. By dwelling with us, God says yes to this world. Yes to creation. Yes to humanity. Yes to you. Yes to me. *I will be with you. Do not be afraid. For I will never leave you. My home is with you.*

You might even say that the Christmas story is mostly a story about God. A story about how God comes to the world – not with bombs or tweets, not with trumpets or fanfare. Rather, God slips down from the home of

heaven to a quiet stable in a tiny town. How silently the wondrous gift is given! And the gift, that holy yes to the world, that nearness with humanity, that tent pitched right among us? It's love. Love is why! God loves this world so much – enough to leave home one place and make a home in another – that God came to us in Jesus. And because of all the love God has for us, there's nowhere that we go that God isn't. There's no road we walk that God hasn't. There's no home we make that God won't make, right alongside us.

IV.

Several years ago, a young soldier from a small town in Wisconsin spent his Christmas abroad in Afghanistan. He was used to cold Christmases: you know the kind, where the snow made the pine trees hang low and the home fires burned bright and long. Those Christmases were lit up by his mom's beautiful decorations and his grandma's home-cooked meals. "But that Christmas," he said, "there was none of that. No snow, just a hot desert outpost. No tree, just scrawny shrubs here and there. No lights, just cut-out paper decorations taped to those scrawny limbs. They served turkey in the mess hall," he remembered, "but it couldn't hold a candle to the ones my mom would bake and place on the table alongside her yams and cheese and pumpkin pie." As he remembered that holiday abroad, he felt again the rush of disappointment, of dislocation, of loneliness.

"That evening," he said, "the chaplain set up an altar in the mess hall. Some of us gathered there and listened as he read the story of Joseph, Mary, and a baby born in a place just as desolate as the one we [felt like we] were in. When he read the words, 'unto you is born this day... a Savior,' suddenly I felt my spirit lift. It dawned on me that the same Jesus who was present in Bethlehem and in Wisconsin could be just as present in the desert of

Afghanistan. I began to sense that Christmas really is about more than snow and trees and pumpkin pie. Instead, Christmas is about the one who comes in the snow or in the desert, in the church or in the mess tent, in a home or in a manger. As long as we remember that," he concluded, "then we discover 'good news of great joy' wherever we are."²

V.

About that truth of God at home with us, Tom Long says this: "To affirm the incarnation does not imply that life is rosy or that people always do the right thing or even the best they can. It does not mean that people do not waste their lives, get hurt, or hurt other people. It does not mean that there is no hardship, no drudgery, no evil, no tragedy. It would be an illusion to pretend otherwise. What it does mean is that there is no corner of experience so hidden that grace cannot find it. There is no soil so sterile that the seed of holy wonder cannot grow in it. There is no moment so dark that it can extinguish the light of God which even now shines in it."³

Friends, these early days of January are flooded with all the encouragements of the new year – resolutions to make, rooms to organize, tasks to complete. But my prayer for you is that you know in the marrow of your very life that no matter where you are, that no matter how you are, that no matter who you are, the God who came in Jesus to be home with you is the God who will follow you – even when you're far away or when you've run away – all the way home.

Amen!

² Story as told by Michael Brown, *A Long-Ago Birth in a Right Now World*, p110-111.

³ Tom Long, *Something is About to Happen*, p59.