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ENLARGE YOUR TENT

Sermon delivered by Richard P. Poethig
(Ellinwood-Malate Church, April 17, 1966)

Isaiah 54:2 "Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; hold not back, lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes."

The prophet Isaiah spoke these words to a defeated people. The Hebrew people had been crushed by the Babylonian armies. The Babylonians had marched through their land and scattered the Israelites to the four winds. Jerusalem, their chief city, lay in destruction. But even in its desolation, people from all over were coming to find a place of security in the city. The picture was like Manila at the end of the second World War.

At a time when Israel was broken, the prophet Isaiah presents a vision of hope. In their despair, Isaiah points to a new day. He envisions a day when the Jews shall encompass the Gentiles, when their God will be recognized as the Lord of the whole earth. He tells the Israelites:

Your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts
is his name;
The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
The God of the whole earth he is called.

Isaiah speaks to Israel about their destiny. He tells them what kind of people they are meant to be and what they are to do. They are God's special people. They are the V.I.P.O.G.. The very important people of God. They are to reach out over the earth and tell the great things which God has done.

Isaiah illustrates all this by using the picture of a tent. He uses the picture of a tent to show what the people of God should be like. He speaks to us today.

I.

In speaking to us, Isaiah uses three words. All of the words are verbs -- they are words of action. These are the important words to remember in the Bible. Our God is the God who acts -- the Bible is the book of action. The three words are: enlarge, stretch, strengthen.

Isaiah tells Israel: "Enlarge the place of your tent."

Remember he was saying this at a time when Israel had been defeated and the land was desolate. There were many wanderers throughout the country.

The people of Israel lived in tents. The tents were large enough to take care of their family. The tent was the place of the close kin. It was the place of intimate fellowship. When you invited someone to eat with you in your tent, he became a part of you, and you could do him no harm. The tent symbolized for Israel, the closed circle of God's people. They believed that their God only belonged to them.

But Isaiah tells them: "Make your tent larger -- reach out for more people! You can't live to yourselves. Your God is the Lord of the whole earth." Isaiah uses the word enlarge. He does not tell them to bring people in ... but to push out their tent ... to make more room. The same love which holds

the family together is to be expressed in a wider circle. The same God who is over Israel is to be made known to those outside their family. They are to widen their horizons and see that their God is the Lord of all the earth and all who dwell on the earth.

This was the struggle that went on in the life of Israel. It was the struggle of keeping their faith within the security of their own tent or facing the insecurity of bringing their faith outside to the world. It was the fear of losing the uniqueness of their position as God's people, by seeing that even the Gentiles were God's people.

This is the same struggle which we face today. It is still a struggle for us to see that the earth is truly the Lord's. God is concerned outside the walls of buildings called churches. God is concerned with the life of men and women lived from 8 to 5 on the Escolta or Ayala Blvd.; or from 5 to 12 midnight in the editorial offices of the Manila Times and Daily Bulletin; or on the night shift from 10 to 6 A.M. in the factories of Pasig or Highway 54. Where the action is-- that's where God is -- because men and women are there -- either denying or affirming their faith.

So Isaiah tells us today: "Enlarge your tent ..." This does not mean pushing out the walls of sanctuary and making a bigger church. It means that you who are the people of God, you who God's new Israel -- are to push out the boundaries of the church into the city -- in your neighborhood, in your student dormitory, at your place of work, in your coffee break, or lunch hour. This does not only mean holding worship services or prayer meetings. It means asking the question: Does God have anything to do with our life in Project Six or Philamlife Compound? Is God really concerned with what goes on in the classrooms of FEU or Philippine Women's? Does God care what happens in City Hall or with the labor relations at San Miguel or Caltex? Is there any word from the Lord for us today?

God spoke to Isaiah in the midst of the politics of the sixth century B.C., does he speak to us in the midst of the politics of the twentieth century?

If we believe that our God is the Lord of the world, then we must answer yes to these questions. We believe that He is active in these places, and what is happening there is a religious matter. So our question then is not whether God is involved, but what does he demand of us.

II.

Isaiah has another word to say to Israel: "Stretch out the curtains of your tent!" Isaiah presents Israel with another sharp picture of its task. If your tent is to be enlarged, then you have to stretch the canvass of your tent further to make a covering. One can see in the mind's eye, the Israelite using all his energy to stretch out the curtains of his tent to make greater room.

Again, Isaiah has something to say to us today. If the church is to live in today's world, it must stretch itself to reach people outside its four walls. The church does not only care for its own people, it reaches beyond its boundaries to show God's concern for those without the means to protect themselves.

In a growing city there are many people for whom very few people care. The squatter is one example. Every major city in Asia has its squatters. The squatter is a symbol of the change taking place in Asia. The poverty in the

rural areas force people seek their livelihood elsewhere.

Many of them are among the 100,000 people which are added to the population of Manila every year. When they come to Manila, there are no jobs for them and there is no housing. When people have no steady work they are forced to live anywhere they can find room. In Manila, squatters have grown from 23,000 in 1946 to over 300,000 in 1964.

We hear a great deal about the professional squatter who makes money out of squatting on other people's property. But the professional squatter makes up only a small percentage of the growing squatter community. Most squatters are forced by circumstances to live in sub-standard conditions. A United Nations survey in 1963 showed that 80% of the squatter population lived below subsistence. A recent study of a Tondo squatter area indicated that 86% of the heads of families receive less than P200 monthly; 17% receive no income at all. Forty per cent of the family heads had no skills which they could depend upon to get a job; 63% of them had less than a high school education.

All these factors add up to the kind of conditions under which people must live. The United Nations gives us a picture of these living conditions from a survey of squatter colonies throughout the Philippines:

Fifty percent of the squatter families share their one room barong-barongs with another family. The squatter communities are generally located in offshore areas, along esteros or in swampy places. There are usually 300 to 400 persons per hectare. There is no sanitation facilities and usually has at least one of more of the following sicknesses every year: cholera, gastro-intestinal, respiratory sickness, pneumonia or tuberculosis.

These are the people and the areas to which the church is to stretch out in concern. Ellinwood as a church has responded to this concern. It has stretched out its tent to reach into North Harbor, into Sapang Palay and now into the new tenements. But the church's concern cannot end there. It is not only concerned with this group of people, but it is concerned with a city. The problem of the squatters is only one part of the problem of the whole city. As Christians we want to see the healthy development of the city. We want a city in which families will not be forced but have a job to do. We want a city in which families will not be forced to live in corrupting circumstances, but will have a chance to live in healthful surroundings. We want a city in which children's lives will be thwarted by poverty and disease and crime, but will have the opportunity to become useful citizens. This means that as Christians we will be concerned with how our city grows with the kind of politicians that govern it, with the kind of police force which keeps law and order, with the kind of universities which provide education, with the kind of industries and businesses that bring money to the city, with the kind of entertainment and recreation in which people spend their leisure time. The question is not whether God is concerned with what goes on in this city, but how we are to bring about the change which will bring the city closer to the city of God. How are we to effect the way decisions are made in City Hall, or in Congress, or in the University, or in business or industry, so that the city will grow into a community where human values are placed before personal self-interest.

To stretch out one's tent means just this -- it means to see the extent to which our Lord leads us into the life of the city, to transform the life

of the city by our obedience to Him.

III.

Isaiah gives us one more word. He presents us with one more imperative. Strengthen your stakes. We called back to the picture of the tent. As we make our tent larger, as we stretch out our canvass and pull tight the ropes, we must sink the stakes deep so that the tent will hold. This is a wise word from the prophet. For if we are to enlarge our tent--that is, widen our mission in the world--if we are to stretch out our canvass ... that is to involve ourselves in people's needs ... then we will need to strengthen our stakes ... that is, have a sure foundation ... so that our tent will not come down on top of us.

Our stakes are Jesus Christ. The foundation of our action in the world is Christ. We are to strengthen our belief in Him. It is He who has widened the horizon of our mission. It is He who has shown us that our faith is concerned for all of life.

Isaiah spoke to Israel. He spoke to Israel about their mission. They were to become a light to the Gentiles. They were to show that their Lord was God of all the earth. But Israel did not enlarge its tent. Israel built its Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple represented the tent in which Israel had worshipped in the wilderness. At the back of the Temple, a wall was built. This wall was meant to separate the Gentiles from the Jews worshipping in the Temple. On the wall there was placed a sign which warned all Gentiles that they were forbidden to pass beyond the wall into the Temple. To pass beyond the wall would mean to defile the Temple. It would mean punishment.

Israel refused to enlarge its tent ... so God took matters into his own hands. Christ came and fulfilled the words of Isaiah. He pushed out the tent and made room for all men. The Apostle Paul reminds us of this wall which stood in the Temple, when he writes to the Ephesians:

For Jesus Christ is our peace, He has made us both one by breaking down the dividing wall of hostility. He has removed the hostility of the Law, with all its commandments and rules. He has created in himself one new man in place of the two. He reconciled us, Jew and Gentile, in a single body to God through the cross.

Jesus Christ became the fulfillment of the words of Isaiah. He tore down the wall which separated the Jews from the Gentiles. He tore down the wall between all men -- He showed that we all need one another. We know we need one another when we come to Jesus Christ. He has prepared the way for us to meet other men ... because he has shown us that we all have the same fears, the same anxieties, the same insecurity.

This is important for us who live in the city. Christ has freed us from living behind the walls of the church. He has created a community for all men. He has made us his messengers to bring men into this community.

The Christian is one with those who are lonely in the city ... he goes out to meet them in their loneliness. The Christian is one with those who are insecure

in the city ... he leads men to

The Christian is one with those who want to make the city a better place to live ... he gives himself to working for a city in which others might have a fuller life.

IV.

I began this sermon by saying that we needed to enlarge our tent. God has given this command to us. As a church we all need to move together. Each one of us are to share in this mission. This is imperative in growing city.

The strength of the church, as the strength of the family, is that there is a place for each one of us. The joy of belonging to the church is that we find our place and do our share in the ministry of Christ. This is an invitation to take part in this ministry...

To enlarge the community of Christ by reaching out into the vast city

To stretch out the concern of Christ among the people who stand in need

To strengthen our knowledge of Christ, by growing in his word and helping others to grow in his word...

So that all men might become one.