

***Place Where God Comes:
Ottawa***

John 1:14

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It must have seemed like the strangest of sights to Joe. End of August, 1994 and the new family was going to move in next door. He and his wife were wondering what that family would be like. The home had seen a variety of owners over the last few years. None had stayed very long. None had paid a lot of attention to caring for the place. The last couple were always fighting, and now were locked in a nasty divorce. The dog had been uncared for, barking day and night, tearing up the yard. The place had turned into a bit of an eye soar, and was starting to be a liability to the neighbourhood.

Now the new family was moving in.
Hope they'll be better.
Quieter.
More careful.

And then there they came - dad, with kids in tow. Coming in the back gate, rather than the front. Joe stood and stared, pruning clippers in hand, pausing from his task of trying to tame the wild cedar hedge. Dad had a crowbar, and some rope. And before you could say, "*Jack Robinson*", they'd smashed out a basement window. Ripped it right out of the concrete, and lowered one of the boys in the opening.

They did that, rather than use a key to get in the front door.
Poor Joe - things certainly didn't seem to be any better with these new neighbours.

That's how it began with our next door neighbour when our family moved to Ottawa. True story - the key for our house didn't show up, and we broke in. The chair of this church's council was an accomplice to the break-in.

Joe's eyes went buggy.
He backed up a few paces.
Took him a while to warm up to us after that - can't blame him, quite frankly!

To this day I wonder what he really thought when the Gehrels family moved in?
Probably - "*There goes the neighborhood!*"

When someone moves in you don't have control.
You can't dictate if they move in or not.
And you can never be really sure about what they'll be like... when someone moves into the neighbourhood.

Friends, this season we celebrate that someone has up and moved into our neighborhood. But don't get worried. This is one move-in that works out far better, far bigger, far more glorious than anything we could ever hope for or imagine! This is one AWESOME move-in.

The cause of today's gathering, the reason for the whole Christmas season, is that God has moved into our human neighbourhood. Every Sunday during the past few weeks of Christmas preparation, what we in church language refer to as "Advent," we sang the carol "*O Come, O Come Immanuel.*" Some of you may well know what that word means. If you do, you're in a small minority here in Ottawa. *Immanuel* means "God is with us." That advent carol calls out, "Please come, God. Come and be with us."

Christmas celebrates that, in fact, God did precisely that!
He came to be with us.

Luke told us the story of the move.
As does St. John in the opening words of his account of Jesus' life. Eugene Peterson translates John's Greek phrase announcing the coming of Jesus. He refers to Jesus as "The Word," and then says this about his coming:

*The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighbourhood.* (John 1:14)

Out of heaven.
Out of glory.
Out of splendor.
Out of peace.
Out stepped Jesus.... and he moved into our human neighborhood.

Over the last few weeks we meditated on places that God came - places here on earth.

We remembered that God came to humanity in the first garden, in paradise. It was also a time of tragedy, for in that garden of Eden humanity faced temptation and wrestled with sin - they fell victim to sin's alluring siren call and rebelled against God's perfect plan for them.

We also remembered how God showed himself to His people in the setting of a journey, when things are unsure, on the way, not yet complete - the in between times of life. God was with his people there.

Third week had us focus on the temple, the place of holy worship and prayer where believers encountered the power and purity of God.

And last week we focused on the little place and the inconspicuous people of the nondescript village of Bethlehem. God showed himself to the people that many others would walk right by.

All of that is Old Testament history. And all of that divine appearing and working comes together in Jesus. Those four segments of God-encounter show up again in the life of Jesus – garden, journey, temple, village; temptation, transition, worship, smallness.

Garden - the garden of Gethsemane Jesus encountered darkness and sin in its most awful, powerful form. In the first garden, Eden, humanity succumbed to temptation and fell. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus faced temptation and stood firm. Jesus faced evil and did not buckle, but walked from there to the cross to reverse the curse that descended on earth in the first garden.

Journey - As Israel traveled and wandered for years, so Jesus traveled and wandered through his years of ministry. Someone who wanted to follow him was told, *"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* (Mt 8:20)

The son of God was a homeless person. He didn't fit in, didn't belong.

Temple - Israel went to a building of brick and stone to observe times of worship. Jesus also went to the temple. He also observed times of worship and prayer and devotion. He worshipped with the rest of the community. And in that worshipping community he made the bold proclamation that his body was a new temple, replacing the stone and wood temple. His body was the new way and place where God would be found. People would meet God through the body and person of Jesus.

Village - Jesus identified with the little person right from the start with his birth in Bethlehem. His core group of followers were all essentially nobodies. The people who received most of his attention and affection were the folks on the margins - the condemned, the ostracized, the ignored ones, the poor, the powerless. Jesus lived for and with the little guy.

Jesus moved into all those corners of human life, getting involved in all those corners of the human neighborhood.

Yes, the Son of God became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.

That's the whole point of Christmas.

Christmas celebrates that Jesus was not content to live quietly in his own heavenly place, minding his own business. He's one of those involved type of neighbors... some might even call him a meddlin' neighbour. He gets right involved in the human neighborhood -

- in the places and times of temptation, challenging evil
- in the uncertain places, the insecure times, the inbetween chapters
- in the times of devotion
- in the little times, the small places, the obscure corners.

Not only does he do that in the immediate context of Palestine where he was born and lived and worked. The Christmas message is not just a message of long ago events in far away places. It is a message that comes right close and plunks itself down in your very neighborhood.

On this Christmas Day, remember that the neighborhood into which Jesus moved includes your neighborhood. It includes the city of Ottawa. If you wonder why there is a copy of the city's emblem on our bulletin and video screen, that's why. It's the message of Christmas - the son of God has moved right into our neighborhood.

And remains here.
He has made our place his place.

That's Christmas.
When we sing about Immanuel - *God is with us*, we're singing about us.
God is with **us**.
God has moved into **our** neighborhood.

God cared enough for human life and history to roll up his sleeves and get involved - to move right in.
God cares enough about your life to move into it, too.

The Bible's promise is that all who surrender their lives to Jesus – every one – receives the gift of Christ's Spirit. That divine Spirit moves right into your life, moves right into your mind and body and soul.
He moves right in.
And stays put.
That's God's gift to all believers.

So think about the four categories of life that we've unpacked this December:
garden, journey, temple, village;
temptation, transition, worship, smallness.

God cares enough to move right into those parts of your life experience!
You are not left to fend for yourself.
You are not alone.

In the times when you are wrestling with temptation, know that you don't wrestle it alone. And when you're feeling like life is in a dark space, when you are feeling the effects of life's curse and imperfection, the down times, when you are standing toe to toe with real evil –
remember Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane,
remember his battle with evil there,
remember that He won the battle, and that the victory extends not just over his life, but over yours, too.
Jesus' power is greater than the power of evil or pain or imperfection and it is the power, divine power, that will have the last word in your life, believer!
Remember that.

And in the times when life is very incomplete, when things seem at best halfway, when there doesn't seem to be anything certain, when you perhaps are homeless, or when you're feeling like you're not getting to any of your goals,
remember Him whose birth we celebrate, the one who also was homeless and constantly on the move, traveling.
Remember that every moment of your life's journey is under his watchful gaze, and he won't let one minute of it fall in some meaningless way to the ground. He gathers it all up and will somehow grant it meaning and a place in His divine master plan as He works human history towards the day of His return.
Through His presence, your life becomes part of that master plan.
Every minute of it.

And when you gather with other believers in times of worship - perhaps in a small group, or in a larger setting like this - Jesus has moved into those moments and events, too.
More than just a gathering of people - this is sacred time and space.
Jesus said that where 2 or 3 believers come together, he'll be there – move right in.

And finally, on this Christmas Day, give thanks for the coming of Jesus into the small places, the little moments and the insignificant corners of life - including my life and yours.
He sees them and cares - doesn't overlook them.
And he moves right in.
There isn't anything you live or do that doesn't matter to him - right down to how many hairs are on your head.

There isn't anyone of you that is too old or too young or too rich or too poor or too smart or too simple to be of value in the eyes of Jesus.

Hear the great news, the central news, the Christmas news:

*The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighbourhood.* (John 1:14)

Believe it, friends.

And take courage because of it.