



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“WELCOME TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 147:12-20; John 1:1-18

*This sermon was preached by Mrs. Suzy Edwards on Sunday, January 3, 2021
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

John 1: 1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, Our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The passage I just read was the prologue to the gospel of John, and in it are the themes for the entire gospel. And one verse stands out as a summation: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Listen to it from the King James: "And the Word was made flesh among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of an only begotten of the father, full of grace and truth." And now I want you to hear that same prologue from *The Message*, Eugene Peterson, a Presbyterian minister's translation: "The Word was made flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like father like son, generous inside and out, true from the start to finish." The Word was made flesh and blood, moved into the neighborhood. That's home. That portrayal of Jesus moving into the neighborhood, makes his dwelling with us real and close and personal, tangible and intimate. And if you have ever moved, you know some of the imagery that comes when someone moves into the neighborhood, whether you were the one moving in or if you were the one welcoming someone else.

I've had my fair share of being the new neighbor and one that welcomes a new neighbor, and in preparing for this morning, it made me think about what kind of neighbors have I had over the years. What kind of neighbor have I been, and how might God be calling me as a neighbor today? So, I invite you to think for a few moments about some of the neighborhoods that you've lived in, and some of the neighbors that you've had.

Fondly, I recall Uncle Harry and Louise. Not my real uncle, but a dear couple that lived next door to us when I was born in Memphis, Tennessee. Uncle Harry had a greenhouse, and he grew the most beautiful camellias. From there, I had more neighbors than I could count when our family moved to Toronto. There were families and children everywhere from blocks on, and we lived in the heart of the city. And then the opposite happened; we moved to a farm just north of the city and with those rolling hills and the distance between us, I couldn't even see one of my neighbor's homes. But there was one special neighbor, over the hill and around the bend, and I used to ride my bike to her house almost every day after school. Mrs. Douglas, she was a widow originally from England, and as soon as I came through her back door, she would put her kettle of water on and she would fix us a cup of English tea, and then she would go in the freezer and pull out one of her famous fancy bars. I never knew her to not have that homemade goodness just waiting for us to share.

There were certain times of the year that her son, David, would come over and bring his tractor; it was blue, I remember it. And it had a lift on the front of it, and I would sit in the front loader and I would be hoisted up to pick apples from her apple orchard. It might not have been the safest thing for me to do but I do remember riding in that. And truth be known, they probably weren't that tall anyway, but it was a great memory to have of my neighbor, and those apples were the sweetest most delicious things ever. Years later when Bart and I honeymooned in Canada, I was able to take him to meet Mrs. Douglas, and even though she was declining in health, the three of us sat at her kitchen table; she served us English tea and we ate fancy bars. She still lived in the neighborhood.

Fast forward a few years when Bart was in the corporate world before he went to seminary. He got transferred with his company to McComb, Mississippi, a temporary placement that lasted five years, and as Bart likes to say, "If you've ever driven into New Orleans, you've stopped and bought gas in McComb." It's a wonderful town to live in as new parents with a 3-month-old baby. After we moved in our last piece of furniture to the house, no sooner than that door had closed, there was a knock on the door. It was so soon after that I really thought it was the movers; they had forgotten something. But it was a different kind of a knock. It was more of a rap tap tap, the way a hand on glass makes. So I went to the door and I found a lovely woman standing there holding something. I opened the door and met our new neighbor, Nellie Jean. She handed me a warm sweet potato pie.

Not only have I had some wonderful neighbors, I have a slew of recipes in their handwriting, everything from fancy bars to Nellie Jean's sweet potato pie. And I won't tell you all of the neighbors that I've had, but I must tell you about one more, maybe one of the coolest neighbors that I've had. About 15 years ago, a young man named James Rogers, yes, our pastor James, we lived in the same neighborhood when we were in seminary together at Columbia. I won't tell any stories on him; I didn't get permission, but you can ask him if you feel like it. And as life

comes around so beautifully in God's way, now I get to be neighbors again with James, in the same city and know Kate as well.

There's nothing like a good neighbor, and when I read this translation from John 1:14 from *The Message*, "The Word was made flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." That connotation tells me that Jesus moved into my neighborhood, into your neighborhood, and your neighborhoods. Jesus has moved into the neighborhood. It doesn't matter the address or the zip code or the state or the country, the Word made flesh, became one of us, and dwelt among us, moved into the neighborhood, into our hearts and into our lives to stay. The Word, the very expression of God that called the world, the universe and all of us into being, has moved in, has moved in, folks, to our neighborhood and dwells among us still today.

Emmanuel - God with us. The word *logos* in Greek - the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. The embodiment of grace and truth lives and dwells among us. The very one that from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. That's the kind of neighbor that I want to have. That's the one who I want living on my side of the street, and across the street, and down the street from me, don't you?

I wonder if that is the kind of neighbor that God is calling us to be in response to the first and greatest commandment and the second, that we love God and we love our neighbor? One that is filled with grace upon grace. The Word was made flesh and dwells among us.

So what kind of difference does that make? What kind of difference does it make that Jesus lives and dwells in the neighborhood today? Do we recognize him? Do we even see him? Do we stop and talk? Do we know his name? When he was asked, "Where did I see you when you gave me something to drink when I was thirsty, when you gave me something to eat when I was hungry, when I was naked and you gave me clothing? You saw me." Do we reflect this neighbor in our own neighborhoods? Do we enjoy and delight in this neighbor at every turn or is the very presence of God so familiar that we often don't even see or recognize the one in our midst?

A few weeks ago, when I was putting out one of my nativity sets, one that was handmade by Prudence McGehee, an artist in McComb, Mississippi, I was almost finished but I couldn't find the angel, so I went back to the box. I pulled out all of that cloth and tissue paper that had wrapped those pottery pieces thinking that, of course, it was still in the box, but it wasn't there. There was no angel, and I was so upset wondering where could that angel have been. And you know when you miss a piece of something, it becomes your obsession, that that was your favorite thing because you can't find it. I did that all day until dinner, and there on my counter was the angel, the one that had been sitting on my island in the kitchen all year, almost in plain view, tucked maybe a little bit, I like to tell myself, under my orchid. But every time I cleaned my counter and watered that orchid, I moved that angel all year long. I was looking for my angel in the box. It was out of context; she was there in front of me all year long; I just didn't make the connection; she wasn't where I thought she'd be. She had moved to a new neighborhood. I left her out last Christmas on purpose to recall the angels of Christmas, and she was right in front of me every day but I must have gotten used to her being there, and I couldn't recall her whereabouts until I looked for her, and I needed her. Could that be how it is sometimes with our

neighbors or the neighbor who dwells with us, the one that is nearer than every breath until we have a need?

I'd say these past few months, coming up on a year, have been a time of need, a time when our faith has been at the forefront of our minds and hearts as we and our world have seen darkness loom in cities and towns and villages with a pandemic of epic proportions, with racial tension and strife and injustice and political angst and natural disasters of fire and storms. We've seen enough illness and death and pain to know firsthand that the darkness is real, but we also know as people who believe, that so is the light, the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Later in the gospel of John the 16th chapter, the 30th verse we have: "In this world you will have trouble but take heart, for I have overcome the world." Like the angel said, "Fear not, for I bring you good tidings of great joy." The light indeed shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not and will not overcome it. I'm going to put my angel back on my counter this year, and I may put the manger there too, maybe a star. Maybe I'll leave the whole set out this year, hopefully then with refreshed and renewed eyes, we can all live confidently and faithfully and with hope because we know the light is indeed stronger than the darkness, and love is stronger than hate, and life is stronger than death.

We know that as Christians, and yet when we are truthful, we will also acknowledge that the same heart that holds this great joy also hurts, and sometimes deeply. We still lose loved ones. We still have broken relationships and heartache, and addiction and physical and mental illness. We will still experience natural disaster. Just because the light of the world has moved into the neighborhood does not mean that there is no more darkness. It says, "The darkness did not overcome it. In the darkness the Light says, "Fear not," just as Tracy shared with the children. The light breaks the darkness. Jesus came to walk in our lives in the soles of our shoes. Jesus knows our human frailties, and our heartbreaks, and weeps with us. Jesus entered our darkness from the glory of heaven to be with us and to shine in the darkness. The light comes to change the darkness, to make it better, to soothe it, to diminish it, but it doesn't obliterate it like we sometimes wish or beg or plead for it to.

One of our neighbors on Harmony Lane, believe it or not, was one of our pastors at J. J. White Memorial Presbyterian Church in McComb, Mississippi, Reverend Dr. Steve Ramp. In one of his sermons, he quoted Jesus saying from Matthew 11: "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you for my yoke is easy and my burden light." When we carry a heavy load of pain or grief or darkness, Jesus says I will give you light, I will give you rest. Jesus did not say I will take it away from you, that I will banish or rid you of all disease and darkness in your life. I wish it said that but what it does say is I will give you rest, I will lighten the load you bear. The light comes to change the darkness, to make it better, to soothe it, to diminish it. Light has come to dwell in our darkness.

We had a dear friend whose wife died young. They had three children, our children's age, and after the funeral, his next-door neighbor took him offshore and he said he took him as far out as he could, and he curled up on that top deck, and taking in that sun, he slept for hours. The darkness and the pain wasn't taken away but he got some rest. "Come take my yoke upon you

for my yoke is easy and my burden light.” In our darkness, Jesus offers a yoke of light, grace upon grace. We sometimes see that grace, neighbor by neighbor as their very presence seems to let the streaming light of Christ in.

Our family knows that firsthand. Almost ten years ago, our son was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes, and a few hours after receiving that diagnosis, we were sitting in the living room shellshocked by that news, holding a meter that I had been given to check his blood sugar. I had no understanding at all of what to do, then there was a knock at the door. Not one, but two people angels in disguise were standing there, Stephanie and Christian. Stephanie was a nurse and Christian was her elementary age son who was a Type 1 diabetic. They came in and Stephanie and Christian walked us through only what we needed to know that day; only what we needed right then, almost the way a light illumines your path when you're walking through a dense fog. She said, “Here's how to use this meter, and here's what to do when you see these numbers, and here's my number. I'm here.” Light came streaming in and the darkness did not overcome it. The darkness didn't go away but it was lessened, it was lifted. We had a yoke of light with flesh and blood standing in front of us.

As children of God, we learn to live as people who seek the light, who look for it and welcome it and usher it in. And maybe most importantly, we learned to bear that light to others, the very presence of a neighbor, an Uncle Harry, a Mrs. Douglas, a Nellie Jean, a James, a Steve, a Stephanie, a Christian can point us to Christ, and has the potential to show us a glimmer of God's radiant and beaming light. Light attracts and draws us near and beckons us to the source.

This is a good week to recognize that light and remember because we celebrate Epiphany on Wednesday, the time when Jesus' far-off neighbors, the Magi, the wise men, followed a star traveling from the East to see and worship the newborn King. In their own way, they said welcome to the neighborhood, the big wide world neighborhood that brings together the East and the West and the North and the South. “We're so glad you're here,” as they knelt and gifted their treasures of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

As we celebrate Epiphany this week and usher in a new year, we have an opportunity to ask and ponder and wonder what's going on in our neighborhood. Is our Christmas cheer still open to the neighbors or have we taken our wreaths down and boxed up the angels and packed up our lights? I suggest leave something out this year. Remember the presence of the One who was made flesh and dwelt among us. Let's let Christmas linger, for there is much to do in the neighborhood.

And I want to close this morning because I think Howard Thurman's words are good to us and they speak to us. It's his poem entitled, “The Work of Christmas.”

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among the people,
To make music in the heart.

Welcome to the neighborhood! The work of Christmas has just begun!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All God's people say, "Amen."

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.