

Living in God's Presence
John 1:10-14
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
January 2, 2022
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So we started this service talking about letting go, about leaving behind the things that hinder us from being fully who God created us to be, the things that get in the way of our being our best and most loving selves. But the reality is that when we let go of anything, there is empty space left behind, space that we generally fill with something else.

At least most of us have seen this happen in our own homes. We work with our children to clean out their toy room, but before the year has passed it seems things are as full as ever. We clean out our own closets and revel in the way our clothes hang without crowding, but before we know it, we are shoving hangers back into a crowded space on laundry day.

We tend to fill the space left behind - not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually. So, while letting go is one step, it isn't the end. Too often we know what we want to let go of without knowing what we are moving toward.

But maybe John 1 gives us some guidance on this. In the few verses from that chapter that Kyle read for us, we heard about how the Word came into the world, but not everyone recognized it. But, those who were open to receiving the light and the presence of God-with-us, were given a gift. In fact, I love the way Eugene Peterson translates verse 13...he writes, "But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves" (*The Message*)

Friends, every day is an opportunity to claim again our "true selves, [our] child-of-God selves," our belovedness. And yet the new year and this season as we move from Christmas to Epiphany, as we celebrate God being made manifest, being made more clear and available to us, is a special time for us to do so.

We have talked a lot already this season about how the Christmas story is about more than an event of the past. It is an invitation...an invitation for us to not only believe something with our brains, but to be changed by the experience of Jesus, to become different because of the story we have heard *and* the ways we have experienced God in our lives.

If we believe that in Jesus we have come to see God more clearly, then as followers of Jesus we should show God more clearly.

If we believe that in Jesus God was made available to all people, then as followers of Jesus we should live in ways that grant welcome and affirmation to all people.

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If we believe that in Jesus we were given the opportunity for life in its fullest, then as followers of Jesus we should live in ways that share the opportunity for abundant living with others.

And, friends, this is not just about using the Christmas story as a tool to bring new people into Christianity or our congregation, but this is about living in ways so that those who we meet in the grocery store or on the street corner or in our own homes see the light and love of God shining through us. It means living in ways that allow ourselves to live fully in the truth of our belovedness, something that is good for us and good for the world.

Earlier today we shared in an activity where we wrote down something of which we wanted to let go. Those of us in the sanctuary watched what we wrote down dissolve in the water; those at home tore or burned or dissolved their own paper. But now the question arises: with what will you fill the space that is left behind?

And how does the arrival of Jesus, of the Word, of the Life-Light, of God-with-us in this world help us answer that question?

Again, I am drawn toward Eugene Peterson's version of the Bible, *The Message*, where he translates verse 14 saying, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood..."

Friends, this life we live has plenty of challenges...if we didn't know that before, these last two years have proven it time and time again.

And meanwhile, it has many gifts and opportunities that await us. This life we live is valuable enough that a primary story of the Christian message is about how God came to live not only among humans but as a human, one whose central purpose was to share the love of God with others.

So, as we look ahead to this new year, are you willing to receive God's love, to truly believe in your own belovedness, in your own value and purpose, in your own God-createdness?

Henri Nouwen, in the book *Life of the Beloved*, a gift he wrote for his friend, Fred, said, "We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved or wounded us. That's the truth of our lives. That's the truth I want you to claim for yourself. That's the truth spoken by the voice that says, 'You are my Beloved'" (Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992; 30).

Friends, what if you fill the space left from your letting go with the truth of your belovedness?

What if you fill the space left from your letting go with a commitment to live in ways that help others see their own belovedness?

What if you fill the space left from your letting go with the intention to meet every friend and stranger, every neighbor as if they are Jesus?

The presence of God-with-us isn't only a promise that points us toward a future reward in another time and space, but it is an invitation to live differently, to live more fully, to live more lovingly in the here and now, in the places where we live and work and play.

So the question that follows, "What have you carried with you in the past will now give up?" is, "How does God's presence with us make us live differently into the time we are given? How does the truth of our belovedness and the presence of Jesus right in the midst of our wonderful, messy lives change how we live in the year ahead?"

Friends, just as you were invited to consider what you leave behind, so you are invited to consider how you move forward, who you will be and become as a child of God, how you will help share the presence of a God of love and life not just today, but each day to come.

Whatever commitments we make, may they result in the light of Jesus shining a little more brightly and the love of Jesus being shared more freely. May it be so.