

“The Inn – Dwelling”

December 26, 2021

The Inn: Housing the Holy series

Every year, when we come to Christmas, I have to remind myself that Christmas is a season of time - not simply one day, but a season. Christmas is this season between the waiting of Advent and the full glory of Epiphany when we celebrate that Christ comes for all the world. Christmas is that focus on the Incarnation - that God comes in Jesus - in the flesh. And we're called to open our hearts widely to embrace him.

But it's more than just an embrace - more than hanging on to him. How do we let Christ dwell in us all the time? Maybe you caught the Grinch's story again when it was on this year - the Grinch who doesn't like anyone or anything and doesn't want anyone else to experience anything good. He and his dog are alone, and he plans to steal Christmas from the Whos in Whoville until one little girl's sweet spirit prompts a heart change.

SHOW VIDEO: Grinch - heart grew three sizes

Perhaps we don't have the Grinch's attitude problem, but there's a lesson about the transformation that needs to happen in us, too. How do we let Christ dwell in us? How do we enter this next year with a reality check - knowing that following Jesus is not easy, but that that hope, peace, joy, and love that God offers us is a powerful gift that we claim long after the season is over?

Christmas isn't simply a “feel good” time, but a call to embrace who Jesus is and why he came. It's a call to grow our capacity to house the Holy - to let Christ dwell in us. **SHOW QUOTE:** The transformation of the heart is a wondrous thing, no matter how you land there.

Paul's words to the early church are a help. He starts with the foundational truth that we are loved by God and called by God. And then he uses the image of clothing ourselves. Eugene Peterson puts it this way in *The Message*: “dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline.” Do we struggle with any of those? These are characteristics that are good for others - not just for ourselves. This wardrobe doesn't make us look good, but it makes God look good through us. Compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline.

Jon Berquist says, “I'm reminded of my grandmother's dress that had more pockets than imaginable and often had a sweater with even more pockets. And in every pocket, there was something that was good for someone else.” Do you have a similar memory? My grandma had a big purse with lots of things in it - especially tissues and mints. She had what I needed when I needed it.

Paul talks about the importance of forgiving each other, remembering that we've been forgiven. And then as Peterson paraphrases it: *And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.* Paul says it's the peace of Christ that will hold us together as a community, and community is vital to living our faith. Be thankful, too. And then there's the call to "let the message of Christ dwell among you richly..." as you worship, spend time together, and help each other grow in faith.

So, what's the message of Christ? What exactly is supposed to dwell in us - abide in us - stay with us and in us far past Christmas Day and even after the Twelve Days of Christmas are long gone? I wonder if Paul's words send us back to the Gospel story - starting with the promise that Jesus is Messiah, Son of God, Savior, Emmanuel - God with us. And beyond just knowing who Jesus is, we have to remember what he did. So, we move beyond the birth story. The message of Christ is the One who came for the salvation of the world.

From the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he was clear about his mission - to bring the Kingdom of God in its fullness and to reach beyond the boundaries that had been created to keep people out and instead bringing them in. He was clear that he knew the Law, and he was there to fulfill the Law with a total focus on Love. It wasn't simply about religion or following rules, but a relationship that God wants with each of us. So that's what he proclaims when he begins his public ministry.

Today we get the only story told between Jesus' early life and his public ministry. Luke tells us this interesting story of how Jesus got lost (or at least his parents thought he was lost) after their annual visit to Jerusalem for Passover. I'll confess that every time I read this, I feel for Mary, and I'm with her asking what in the world Jesus is doing and how much he scared them!

It's important to note that Luke tells us they went every year. Not every family went every year; some may have only gone once in a lifetime. They had made this trip before, but perhaps Mary and Joseph didn't plan on a return trip when they couldn't find Jesus who had stayed behind.

If you've ever been the parent or the child in this situation, you know that awful feeling in your gut - the fear and panic. This has happened to me once, and it was awful. But know that Mary and Joseph probably traveled within a larger group. That's the other question: how did this happen? They were separated even as they made the journey. Joseph might have been at the front and Mary at the back - and Jesus wandering between other families with other kids.

There's something here about Jesus - fully human and fully divine - even in his formative years. I hear the banter between a teen and his parents - the "growing up"

conversations that we've all had (or maybe wanted to have) whether as a parent or guardian and child.

And maybe there's a note about Jesus' ability to listen and learn - and to understand and respond. We can't discount the presence and contributions of young people because they have important things to share. But yes, this is Jesus, and it's clear that something special dwells in him, and he's drawn to the place where God's presence is thought to dwell - to the Temple. He's going about his Father's work.

We've been preparing to house the Holy. We've been focused on prophecy told and the birth stories, but what about this moment? We're coming down from celebration; we're coming back into the everyday stuff of life. Some of it's good, and a lot of it might be hard. It's almost time to change the calendar to another year, and our hope may be for a better 2022. Many of our conversations start with, "Did you have a good Christmas?" But it's not over.

If we want to follow Jesus, we're in it for the long haul - not just claiming the joy of God with us in the birth story, but all of it - all the way to the cross and the promise of resurrection and new life. But it's important to remember that we're in it together. And just as Jesus came into the world as it was, Jesus continues to be in the world with us - just as we are - calling us to let him into our lives and do his work in order to transform the world - to be more like the Kingdom of God.

I was thinking about how this journey of housing the Holy has challenged us to think about who we are personally and as a community - called to show hospitality - to house the holy and provide a safe place, the offering of care, and the shelter from all that life throws at us. It's easy to make some connections.

We're in the middle of hosting two families - nine people - for Family Promise. This ministry keeps families together, which is so important for logistics like childcare and overall health. We couldn't do this ministry without the leadership of our coordinators and the commitment of our congregation. It was powerful to sit in our Ad Council meeting and hear the affirmation from around the table that we would say "yes" to this ministry. I saw that commitment clearly in calm and adaptable spirits, people who took time to serve in ways they haven't served before, and people who are experiencing personal grief who found joy in helping others.

I also want you to share that the Holy Spirit spoke clearly to me as we welcomed our guests in worship. It wasn't lost on me as I read the story with the message: *"There's always room for a little one here..."* And one of the adults came to the outdoor service and spoke to me afterwards.

GriefShare is another ministry that invites us to offer hospitality to those who are grieving. We've hosted sessions twice a year since 2015. Many of those who participate

do not attend worship here, but are helped by the opportunity to spend intentional time doing grief work, building community, and knowing that they're not alone. We know that it makes a difference, and we've heard stories of how important it is. Our Blue Christmas is a powerful reminder that God walks with us in grief. Every year, I'm grateful that we offer it - this time to acknowledge that life is hard, and God is with us.

Worship reaches more people than we know because they join online. Spiritual formation in Bible study and Youth Group is open. Opportunities to serve can be a connecting point for people. The blessing of funds given to be used for mission and ministry open up possibilities to reach out that we haven't imagined before.

And maybe there's a new ministry on your heart that speaks to a need in our community as we keep ourselves open to God's leading and let the word of Christ dwell in us richly. How will Christ's message dwell in us richly? What is God calling us to do as a community of faith? Where is God leading us to keep thinking about how house the Holy, offering hospitality, and welcome all in the name of Christ?

Every year, at Christmastime, I go back to the words of theologian Howard Thurman who challenges us to do "the work of Christmas." We talk about the hope, joy, peace, and love of Christmas, but there's also the work of Christmas.

SHOW POEM:

Howard Thurman - "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.*

May God help us do the work of Christmas we're dressed in the Love that came down at Christmas.

Thanks be to God. Let us pray...