

When God Moved into the Neighbourhood

2020 – the year of social distancing and keeping away from one another. For about 6 months we couldn't gather for worship. Today we all needed to sign in or register via the Covid App – and make sure we keep our distance.

Now when catching up in person, we don't quite know what to do. It's awkward. Do we bump elbows or knuckles – or not? Do we just wait to see what the other person does?

Under what circumstances is it OK to greet people with a handshake or a hug?

A handshake or a hug can be frowned upon. It can make people feel uncomfortable, unsafe or put them at risk.

People wonder: "Where God is in our world of pain? Does God care? Does God have any idea about the hurt and despair we humans experience?"

To paraphrase Bette Midler's song, is God just watching us from a distance?

In the Bible, we see how our Creator's love for us moves him to keep getting involved with people here on earth. God has always wanted to do life with us and share in his good plans for his world.

In the Garden of Eden, God talks with Adam and Eve. They are in a perfect trusting relationship - doing life together.

But one day as the Lord is walking in the garden in the cool of the day, they run and hide. They had turned their backs on God to do their own thing. Their former delight in God's company turned to fear. Feeling guilt and shame, they want to socially isolate from God.

Yet the Good News is that God did not turn away from them. He seeks them out. His first words are not: "What have you done?", but words of disappointment and longing for their company: "Where are you?"

Parents – we all long to be in relationship with our children yes?
And even when they mess up, you never stop loving them – do you?

It's the same with our heavenly Father. Even when we reject God, his unfailing and relentless love keeps reaching out to us.

The Lord called his people of Israel to be his light to the nations. Yet, like Adam and Eve, they kept turning their backs on him. In spite of their defiance, the LORD kept promising them a Messiah King: who would live in obedience to the LORD – and be his agent of restoration for his world.

In God's good time, the promised Messiah was born to Mary and grew into a man. John writes of the disciples' experience of Jesus: **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.** (John 1:14 NIV)

The Greek word for **made his dwelling** is "tented" or "tabernacled". In the days of Moses, Israel entered into a covenant relationship with the LORD at Mt Sinai. Like a marriage, the Lord and his people would do life together. Like a marriage, there was a ceremony. Like a wedding certificate, the terms were written down and kept in the tabernacle.

When the tabernacle was dedicated to the Lord, the cloud of God's glorious presence moved into it.¹ From then on, wherever Israel went through the wilderness, the LORD dwelt among his people... but his glory was hidden and guarded in a sacred place.

¹ The ark of the covenant was considered the throne or footstool of the LORD.

In Jesus, something amazing happened for everyone to see. Let me read from *The Message*: **The Word became 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 start to finish.** (John 1:14 MSG)

Friends, the heart of Christmas is the relentless love of God that does not remain at a distance, or hidden from us, but comes up close and personal.

In Jesus we can know God ‘up close and personal’

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (John 1:18 NIV)

Alister McGrath: Rather than asking us to climb up a cosmic ladder in order to touch the face of God, God descends to us, to make his face known to us.²

Timothy Keller: ‘Christmas means that God is not content to be a concept or just someone you know afar off. He went to infinite lengths to get close to you.’

Martin Luther: ‘It must be a serious situation and God must love human nature very deeply... when God not only loves me but comes so close to me that he becomes a person with me.’³

- In Jesus, God learns how to walk and talk as a toddler, how to wash and get dressed as a child, and what it’s like growing up with brothers and sisters in a small village.
- Jesus knows what it’s like learn a trade and work with his hands for a living.
- Jesus knows it’s like to be misunderstood by parents and siblings; and to be rejected by his own people.
- Jesus knows hunger and thirst, trials and temptation, frustration and disappointment, grief and loss, anger and humiliation.

He even knows suffering and death. In order to rescue us, Jesus must fully identify and enter our human brokenness. Last week I came across these verses in Hebrews: **Because God’s children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death over us.** (Hebrews 2:14-15 NLT)

When God moved into the neighbourhood, he knew from past experience that we would reject him... And true to form, that’s exactly what happened at the cross.

Yet this was no accident! Moved by his perfect love, Jesus gave up his perfect life – once... and for ALL – to break the curse of death and defeat the power of devil.

In his resurrection, Jesus conquers death **for us** – so we can live with a hope and a future. Since God moved into the neighbourhood, we get to do life as his dear children – knowing we are treasured and loved forever. This is exactly what God always wanted... and what we have always needed.

How does God move into our neighbourhood today?

Through his disciples, his children, the people of God, the holy Christian Church. Through the Good News of Jesus, the Holy Spirit opens our hearts to receive him as Saviour and Lord. As Jesus lives in our hearts by faith, the WORD becomes flesh in you – and in me. That’s how God moves into our neighbourhood today!

When Jesus lives in your hearts by faith, you want to bless and serve others. When you are filled with the Holy Spirit, you want to bring the grace and truth of Jesus to every person you encounter. That’s how God moves into our neighbourhood today! (c.1200)

² Alister McGrath, *Glimpsing the Face of God*, (Lion Publishing, 2002), 65. Bishop David Altus, *Pastor to Pastor*, Dec 2020: ‘Christmas celebrates the presence of God on his own earth in the flesh, in 3-D, in real life, in real time... God comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ, to be present with and for us in all of life, the good and the bad.’

³ Harding Meyer, *To You Is Born This Day A Saviour*, (Adelaide: LHP, 1983), 37.