

“Christmas in the Parking Lot”  
John 1:1-14  
Christmas Day

December 25, 2022  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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It was just before Christmas a number of years ago that David Storch, a music teacher, borrowed a copy of the score of Handel’s *Messiah* from the Brooklyn Public Library.

Unbeknownst to both Storch AND to the librarian who checked out the score, an error occurred during the transaction—and the music was NEVER RECORDED as being borrowed from the library.

This meant that when others came to request the score, the library staff thought it was still in the library. So they spent hours upon hours searching for it through the stacks—

frustration mounted,  
time was wasted—  
all to no avail.

After Christmas, David Storch returned the score. As he placed it on the circulation desk, Storch was startled to hear the librarian joyfully shout at the top of her lungs:

**“The *Messiah* is here! The *Messiah* is here!”**

Of course, every head in the room turned toward the voice in disbelief...but after a few moments,

people realized what had happened,  
and everything in the library returned to normal.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This story is found in an old sermon by Tom Long, and originated in a New York Times article from December 25, 1985, [METROPOLITAN DIARY - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/25/metro/25diary.html).



***“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”***

Moved into the neighborhood—doesn’t sound temporary to me!

Think about that for a second.

What is it like when someone new moves into the neighborhood?

For starters, it’s not your decision.

New neighbors arrive—you don’t get a say in who they are or how long they’ll stay.

Whether they’ll think like you, or vote like you, take care of their yard like you.

When someone moves into your neighborhood, what do you do?

Do you welcome that person?

Invite them over for dinner?

Do you bring them a cake?

Do you say, “I should go introduce myself,” ....and then you never get around to introducing yourself?

The Gospel of John tells us this morning that God has moved into the neighborhood. Maybe that’s an invitation to pay closer attention to our neighbors, near and far.

The pastor Lillian Daniel once wrote the following about her neighborhood:

“In my suburb, we rarely see our neighbors during the winter. We pull our cars straight into the garage, which in some cases leads us straight into the house without ever having to feel the cold or see the sky.

“Last fall, our neighbors directly across the street moved and sold their house...[some time thereafter],

I would see [a member of our church named] Tracy running or walking her dog and I would think,

**“Huh—that’s funny, I guess her route takes her by my block these days.”**

One day Lillian Daniel saw Tracy enter the house across the street—the one that had just been sold—and Daniel thought to herself:

**“Gosh, does Tracy know the new neighbors?  
I should ask her about them since I’ve not met them yet.”**

One day Daniel saw Tracy emerging from the house *with* her dog—and her first thought was, “Why is Tracy’s dog inside my neighbor’s house?”

“Finally, it dawned on me.”

“It took me three months to figure out that Tracy and her family had moved into the house across the street.”<sup>2</sup>

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Daniel is not alone—not just when it comes to noticing neighbors. Do you think the same thing could happen with God?

***Do you think it’s possible for God to move in—  
for God to take up residence in our lives—  
to live in our neighborhood,  
to walk by us on the street—  
and most days, we don’t know God is there?***

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<sup>2</sup> Lillian Daniel, “Suburban Search for Meaning,” in *The Christian Century*, July 26, 2011, found at [Suburban search for meaning | The Christian Century](#).

Well...maybe that's possible for some folks.  
 But not for this group, right?  
 This is a DEDICATED group!  
 It's Christmas Sunday!  
 Many of you were in church last night, and you're right here again today!

If anyone knows where to find God, it's you!

So let me try a little experiment with you right now.

How many of you here today have ever felt God's presence in this church?

Good.

Now...I want to locate the EXACT PLACES in this church where we can find God. Places where you expect that you might experience the love and grace of God in this church.

We'll call them holy places.

Places where we've seen God at Westminster.

No need to raise your hands, just nod your head if your answer is yes...

How many of you have ever had the feeling that God was present with you in this sanctuary?

Has anyone here ever learned something about God, experienced God, in a classroom in this church?

How many of you have ever known God's presence when you shared a meal in the Fellowship Hall of the church?

Or at It's Elementary?

Or when you were in the Youth Suite?  
Or coaching a basketball team in the gym?

Lots of holy places in this church.  
Lots of places where the Word has become flesh among us...

Now...how many of you have had an experience of God  
**in our church parking lot?**

I don't see heads nodding.

I'm not surprised.

I can't speak for you, but I don't come here on Sunday mornings expecting to find God in the parking lot.

In fact, I must confess that my FIRST reaction to parking lots in general is a NEGATIVE reaction.

Think for a moment about what happens in the parking lot.

UNOFFICIAL CHURCH MEETINGS can sometimes take place in the parking lot!

What else happens in the parking lot?

Accidents happen!

Like when we bought a new car—a minivan, actually—and someone ran right into it. It was a church member, no harm done...

But I also remember when another church member came zipping into the church parking lot, running late, and there were kids there, walking into church, and he got out of his car, and said something about how he needed to be more careful, who cares if he's two minutes late.

See, I'm not too big on parking lots...

A number of years ago, I pulled in the parking lot of my doctor's office and the only space I could find was a very narrow space—this big ol' SUV had done a poor job of parking, and they were parked over the yellow line, which encroached into the space I needed to fit my car.

I still managed to park MOSTLY in that space...but I was also a bit over into the space next to mine.

I went to my appointment, and when I returned, two new cars were parked next to me. Then I noticed a piece of paper on my windshield.

It was a note.

It read:

“Please learn how to park!

You really made it hard for me to get out of my car!!

Please learn how to be considerate of others!!!”

Well...by the third exclamation point, I was a little upset.

It wasn't my fault.

That SUV had forced me over—I got blamed for something I didn't mean to do.

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Do you see what I'm talking about?

My first reaction may not be a positive reaction to parking lots, but the truth is, I don't spend a lot of time thinking about parking lots.

After all, a parking lot is a transitional space.

A temporary place.

Parking lot means you're not staying—you're on your way to the next place.

But after hearing today's Gospel reading, maybe I should change my tune.

You see, I remember the summer of 2020, when the pandemic was in full swing, and we were about to reopen the Weekday School that fall. Only we had to figure out how the kids would get dropped off and picked up.

Our former way of doing it, pre-pandemic, wasn't going to work.

We needed a NEW system that would keep the kids in the different pods, so that they were only coming in contact with other kids in their pod, in their class...and that totally upended the way we asked parents to enter and exit.

I have a vivid memory of the Friday afternoon when a member of this congregation graciously offered to help. She was a genius. She and our Weekday School Director came up with a design, and it worked for the parents and it worked for the kids...I never could have figured it out.

And I was grateful to know someone who understood a place on our church facility that I never paid attention to...someone who knew parking lots.

You see, we're not just talking about parking lots this morning.

We're talking about that place in your life that you don't pay much attention to most days.

The marginal place.

The overlooked place.

The place you never expect God to show up.

Do you remember last night's story?



Joseph and Mary, looking for a place for Mary to have her child.

She didn't give birth in a hospital.

She didn't give birth at home.

And there was no room for them in the inn.

They were off to the side.

On the margin.

In a temporary place.

They were...can I put it like this?

They were in the parking lot.

Do you have any parking lots in your life?

Any places where you never planned on meeting God,  
 could not imagine God showing up there...and then,  
 the Word became flesh—and startled you, surprised you,  
 in a place you never expected God to be?

Years ago, in the city of Chicago, there was a man in his mid-thirties.

He did not have a home.

He lived on the streets.

But he came in contact with Fourth Presbyterian Church.

Big church, they have a social service program at that church.

As the director there described it, the Social Service staff would often find this gentleman in the morning lying in the cloisters, or on the sanctuary steps.

He spoke about aliens chasing after him.

He lived in the street, eating out of garbage cans.  
Fear seemed to be his constant companion.

But slowly he began to trust the staff.  
Slowly, there was friendship and food and fresh clothing—  
a connection with people who could help.

After some time, this man accepted the offer to see a doctor.  
He received a diagnosis for a serious, but treatable mental illness.

After several more weeks, the man suddenly remembered that he had a sister who lived in New York City. He thought he remembered her phone number, so he tried the number...and miraculously, the call connected.

His sister had not seen him for five years.  
She thought he was dead.  
She called his parents in Kansas City.  
And that weekend, the family was reunited with their lost brother and son.<sup>3</sup>

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And the Word became flesh...and moved into the neighborhood.

Of course, you don't have to be experiencing homelessness to know that story.

All of us have that kind of story.  
A time in each of our lives when, perhaps, you found yourself in a neighborhood you never expected to be.

A neighborhood called...

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<sup>3</sup> This story was told in a sermon by the Rev. Dr. John Buchanan at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago many years ago.

Illness. Debt. Desperation. Scared.

And someone paid attention to you.

Someone reached out to you.

Someone moved into that neighborhood of your life to be with you and get you where you needed to go.

Again, I remember two years ago. When we were planning to hold Christmas Eve services in the Green Lot, and the services got rained out.

Do you remember that day?

Ugh...I don't like remembering that day.

I recall looking at the parking lot that afternoon, wondering if it would have been better to try to have worship in the parking lot on Christmas Eve. But Mark Kemp, he was standing there next to me, he said no way—the electrical cords, the microphones, none of that would have worked with all that rain, whether we were in the Green Lot or the parking lot. And I agreed.

But that doesn't mean you and I can't celebrate Christmas in the parking lot this year...

I don't mean right outside our sanctuary.

I mean in that marginal place, that overlooked place,  
 the place where there are neighbors of yours,  
 neighbors of mine,  
 that you and I don't think much about...

What if this Christmas, you did not overlook that place?

What if sometime during the next 12 days, or the next month, or the upcoming year, you and I found some place that we always ignore, and we didn't ignore it and we paid attention to it and we found a way to live in that place?

I have no idea where that place may be for you in your life.  
But I got to wondering...

If we spend some time on the margins this year, in a neighborhood that we don't typically spend much time in, do you think it's going to feel like oh, ho hum, just another year, back to normal?

Or do you think perhaps,  
we might discover that God  
has moved into our neighborhood?

(Amen.)