

## Dwelling

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, December 26, 2021, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Colossians 3:12-17](#)

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“Making the House Ready,” by Mary Oliver<sup>1</sup>

Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but  
still nothing is as shining as it should be  
for you. Under the sink, for example, is an  
uproar of mice – it is the season of their  
many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves  
and through the walls the squirrels  
have gnawed their ragged entrances – but it is the season  
when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And  
the raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard  
while the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow;  
what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling  
in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly  
up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will  
come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox,  
the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know  
that really I am speaking to you whenever I say,  
as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.

Through Advent and Christmas Eve, we’ve been looking at the theme of “Housing the Holy.” Inspired by that throw-away line about there being no room in the inn for Mary and Joseph and letting our imaginations run, we’ve thought about how we can creatively make room for Jesus in our lives, about how we can house the holy in our lives.

I preached about how we live in the middle Advent,<sup>2</sup> a time when we look for Jesus, as Mother Teresa once said, “in the distressing disguise of the poor.”<sup>3</sup> I preached about the necessary spiritual tension we must embrace if we believe with John the Baptist’s father that God *has* saved us *and* that God *is* saving us. Pastor Brenda reminded us that when we have more than enough, sharing from that abundance brings us joy. I encouraged us to view the world as God does: with the eyes of love.

On Christmas Eve, I told a story that reminds us that of all the paths we might take in our lifetimes, the Christmas Path, the path that leads to Jesus is the most important one

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Oliver, “Making the House Ready,” *SALT Project*, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/making-the-house-ready-for-the-lord> (accessed 22 December 2021).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, this summary of Bernard of Clairvaux’s idea of the “Three Comings of the Lord,” <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/three-comings-of-the-lord-st-bernard/>.

<sup>3</sup> Mother Teresa, *In the Heart of the World: Thoughts, Stories and Prayers*, quoted on the *Good Reads* website, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/252963-seeking-the-face-of-god-in-everything-everyone-all-the> (accessed 25 December 2021).

we can take. And Pastor Brenda reminded us that we've put all kinds of medieval European imagery and understanding on that little throw-away line about there being no room in the inn, and that, in fact, the image of Jesus laid in a manger puts Jesus at the center of the household.

Today, this worship series concludes, and our scripture isn't a word from one of the biblical prophets. It isn't a narrative from one of the gospels. It is a half-dozen verses from the letter to the Colossians. Now, I've got problems with some of the stuff that's in the letter to the Colossians. In fact, the verses right before these 6 verses and the verses right after these 6 verses are very troubling. But these 6 verses – these I like.

Today's sermon title comes from the first part of verse 16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly." *Dwell* is not a word I use very often. In fact, as I sat thinking about the word this past week, the I found myself singing in my head the opening of "How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place" from Brahms' "Requiem." Of course, Brahms was quoting the Bible (Psalm 84, to be specific), so the word *dwell* brought me back to scripture.

According to theologian Jon Berquist, the word in the Hebrew scriptures that gets translated *dwell* is "a synonym for *live* or *be alive*."<sup>4</sup> And, he says it has connotations of where we put our identity, or who's we are (or to whom we think we belong). A similar word in the Greek, especially in John's gospel, often is translated as *abide*.

The word *dwell* invites us to consider where we sense we belong, where we sense we are at home. And, looking back at the prophets we heard from during Advent, I think it's safe to say that God is inviting us to dwell with the vulnerable, rather than in the places of power or safety. The places of power, safety, and of privilege are much cushier than the places of the vulnerable. It's memory foam mattresses versus beds of straw, and we know what sort of mattress the baby Jesus had, at least according to Luke's story of Jesus' birth.

The passage we heard from Colossians invites us to consider not just where we live, but what we'll wear there. The letter-writer (it's probably not Paul; it's probably someone writing in Paul's name<sup>5</sup>) encourages us to welcome the word of Christ taking up residency in our lives, to feel at home in our lives. And the letter-writer does so by encouraging us to consider what we wear. The letter-writer suggests we clothe ourselves with "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (v. 12) and most importantly love (v. 14).

And I think it is worth remembering that for people who are unhoused, clothing might be their only shelter. There's a story in Mark's gospel<sup>6</sup> about a man named Bartimaeus who was blind. When he is told that Jesus is inviting him to come from where he was begging, sitting at the side of the road, to where Jesus was, a little further down the road, Bartimaeus jumps up, tossing off his coat, and runs to Jesus. By tossing his coat aside, Bartimaeus left his dwelling place, left his shelter. It is a bold, courageous act to shed the old clothing, the old place of dwelling in an effort to come to Jesus.

I don't know what the etymological relationship is between the verb *to inhabit* (to dwell), the archaic verb *to habit* (to dress, to clothe), the noun *habit* (the clothing a nun

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Jon Berquist in an interview with Dr. Marcia McFee on the *Worship Design Studio* website.

<sup>5</sup> See Marcus Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 203-205.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 10:46-52.

wears), the contemporary noun *habit* (a customary practice), and the noun *habitat*, but I'm sure one exists. By inviting us to put on new clothing, by inviting us to inhabit (or perhaps to in-habit) a clothing of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love the letter-writer is inviting us to dwell in this alternative lifestyle, to make ourselves at home and to find shelter in these values that the prophets pointed toward and that Jesus embodied.

I think it was five years ago that Diana Butler Bass wrote this about Christmas: "This is the day for Christians through which all other days find meaning – that God is not far off but near, indeed with and within. That God, since before the beginning of all things, chose to dwell with us. That God, since the Garden, longed to walk with us here, on Earth. The same God whose power burst forth creation 14 billion years ago was born in a body made of the dust that God created on that most ancient of days. Creator of stardust takes the form of that dust.

"Christmas is not a single day. But it is the eternal reality of the greatest mystery of the cosmos: That the One in whom all things began has been begotten here – in this tiny inconsequential dust speck of the universe simply because of love.

"... This happened because God chose freely, out of joy and beauty, to dwell with creation. This is the longing of all that was and is and is to come.

"And this is the foundation of the way of life we call Christianity, that God is with all of us. Here. Now."<sup>7</sup>

God with us. Here. Now. This is what enables me to clothe myself with compassion, kindness, and love. This is what makes me want to let the word of Christ to dwell in me. This is what gives all other days of the year their meaning.

Decades ago, the African American theologian, pastor, and mystic Howard Thurman wrote a poem called "The Work of Christmas"<sup>8</sup>

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 flock,  
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.

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted by me in a Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/RevJSS/posts/10209113593571548>, on 25 December 2016. I'm unable to find the original source of the quote.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Thurman, "The Work of Christmas," *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*, quoted on many websites including <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/now-the-work-of-christmas-begins/> (accessed 25 December 2021).

Good Christian friends, rejoice, for we have a dwelling place, a shelter that changes the world and from which the work of Christmas continues. Amen.