

God Has Moved into the Neighborhood

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, January 4, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [John 1:1-18](#)

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Yesterday morning, like all of us, I awoke to the news that the United States had invaded Venezuela. I spent most of yesterday trying to sift through my emotional and intellectual reactions to this news – and reconstructing today’s sermon. Actually, needing to rework this sermon has helped me do that sifting.

People I know and respect were quick to write publicly about how the attack and kidnapping of Maduro and his wife are violations of international law. I suspect they’re right, though I’m not an expert on international law. Assuming they are right, the evidence suggests that international law does not make any difference to Donald Trump and the people in his administration.

In the year since his inauguration (actually a little less than a year), “Trump has bombed Venezuela, Nigeria, Iran, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, and civilian boats in international waters.”¹ I’ve read that most (if not all) of those bombings were in violation of international law. That didn’t make any difference to Trump.

Trump not caring doesn’t change the fact that, even if none of those bombings violated international law, they are violations of the United Nations Charter. In its founding, the United Nations tried very hard to limit the use of force by nations. One of the first ten paragraphs of the UN charter says, “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.”² But the UN Charter doesn’t seem to make any difference to Trump or the members of his administration either.

When I was in college, one of the more interesting classes I took (that had nothing to do with my majors) was a survey class on Latin American history. While I don’t remember much from the class, I do remember this: When the United States intervened, invaded, or otherwise exerted its power in a Latin American country, things never went well for the people of that country. This exertion of US power in Venezuela is no different. As my colleague, the Rev. Ben Daniel put it, “It will make a few fabulously rich Americans even richer, and a few Venezuelan oligarchs will send more of the nation’s resources to bank accounts in Switzerland, but the result will not be democracy. [And the result] will not be good for regular folks.”³

¹ Steve Benen on Blue Sky, <https://bsky.app/profile/stevebenen.com/post/3mbjle2d74s2d> (posted and accessed 3 January 2026).

² Chapter 1, Article 2, number 4 of the *Charter of the United Nations*, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/CTC/uncharter.pdf> (accessed 3 December 2026).

³ Ben Daniel in a Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/revbennyd/posts/pfbid0jsKGomkLNFgkGGPeaty9JaMmxw3WQCJFQyDeo2E7ciyinxPL2AVw68AHi8pC7KWnl> (posted and accessed 3 December 2026).

I'm not an expert on international law. Neither am I an expert on Latin American history nor an expert in geopolitics. I am a theologian, and what I can talk about with authority is the morality and immorality of the President's actions.

Let me be clear: the attack on Venezuela was immoral.

Trump's justification for the attack is a claim that Venezuela is supporting "narcoterrorism"⁴ and that there is a warrant for Maduro on drug charges in the United States.⁵ These claims are particularly ludicrous, "given that Venezuela is not a meaningful producer of fentanyl or the other drugs that have dominated the recent epidemic of overdoses in the United States, and the cocaine that it does produce flows mostly to Europe."⁶

Meanwhile, the hypocrisy of these claims almost leaves me speechless. If Trump cared about drug trafficking by Latin American presidents, Trump never would have pardoned Juan Orlando Hernández, "who ran a sprawling drug operation when he was president of Honduras from 2014 to 2022"⁷ and was in American prison on federal drug charged.

But more than the hypocrisy, the attack on Venezuela was immoral because war is immoral. Here are six (of many) reasons why war is immoral:

1. War legitimizes violence as a way to force ones will upon another, and that goes against the teachings of Jesus.
2. War cannot create the environment of a just peace, which means that war interferes with the establishment of the kin-dom of God.
3. War is wasteful – wasteful of lives, wasteful of money, wasteful of resources. In other words, war is bad stewardship.
4. Using force to achieve your aims, however noble those aims may be, is immoral. The use of force denies freedom. If I force you to do something, you are no longer free to choose. Similarly, the use of force denies our equality.
5. Innocents always die in war. As soon as your military kills civilians, your military is acting immorally. I would argue that as soon as your military kills anyone, your military is acting immorally. Though you may not agree with me on that point, I hope you can agree that the killing of children and other innocents is immoral. And in modern wars, innocents always die.
6. Jesus teaches that the lives of other people are as important and valuable as your own – and war denies this truth.

In the shadow of war, it can feel as if darkness is upon the face of world, as if there is no light. Yet in the midst of that darkness, John tells us that the Word of God has taken on flesh and lives among us. In the midst of that darkness, John tells us that God's light has

⁴ The Editorial Board, "Trump's Attack on Venezuela Is Illegal and Unwise," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/03/opinion/venezuela-attack-trump-us.html> (posted and accessed 3 December 2026).

⁵ Shaun Tandon, "Bombs away for Trump, self-proclaimed peace president," *AFP*, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/bombs-away-trump-self-proclaimed-111724185.html> (posted and accessed 3 December 2026).

⁶ The Editorial Board, *op. cit.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

come and the darkness has not and cannot overcome it. God has moved into the neighborhood.

It is so easy to lose track of that reality. That's why last Tuesday I started looking for signs of the Word taking on flesh this past year. And I found that there is light shining. Here's a little of what I found:

You might remember that the day after the presidential inauguration, Bishop Mariann Budde preached a sermon at the Episcopal National Cathedral. Trump was in attendance and, in that sermon, she spoke directly to him. She said what many of us were thinking when she asked him to have mercy on LGBTQ+ folks, migrants, and refugees. God's Word taking on flesh.

During this past year, there were myriad ways the policies of a new administration wreaked harm on international aid, federal workers, migrants, and so many others. There were also countless ways people of faith joined in supporting those who were directly harmed. Direct aid programs started to help federal workers who lost their jobs because of DOGE. People of faith led vigils that offered comfort, and filed lawsuits that challenged illegal actions taken by the administration. And people of faith have worked hard to dial down polarization and to build bridges of understanding and respect. Light shining in the darkness.

As immigrant communities have faced increased government-sanctioned violence, advocates and organizers have helped congregations plan what they would do if ICE came to their church. They have called clergy to join in protests and direct actions to support those wrongfully detained. And churches have partnered with other groups to create and staff rapid response networks, offering impacted migrant communities everything from presence to groceries. The Word becoming flesh.

Pastors have put their bodies on the line to protest ICE's treatment of those in detention centers. And people have brought singing, visual arts, and humor to protests. Light shining in the darkness.

In October, United Church of Christ Conference Ministers gathered in the nation's capital for a week of advocacy training, public witness, and meetings with elected members of Congress. The Word becoming flesh.

In a recent newsletter,⁸ Dr. Katharine Hayhoe shared six stories from around the globe of developments that are addressing – through innovation, adaptation, and education – the climate crisis:

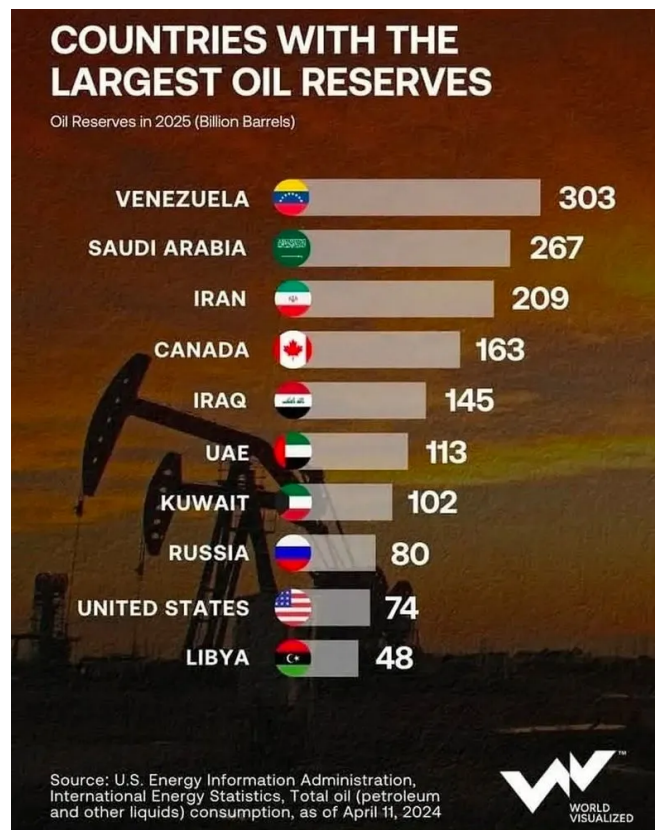
- In South Africa, SeaH4 is producing sustainable biofuel from algae that can be used in conventional combustion engines to help decarbonize shipping and aviation.
- In India, faculty and students at Azim Premji University are turning climate data into an embodied experience by performing the story of India's heat waves in dance.
- In Albania, after 12 years of tireless advocacy, two activists succeeded in protecting the entire Vjosa River, creating Europe's first Wild River National Park.

⁸ Katharine Hayhoe, "Climate inspiration around the world," *Talking Climate*, <https://www.talkingclimate.ca/p/climate-inspiration-around-the-world> (posted and accessed 31 December 2025).

- In Australia a humorous new series, *The New Joneses*, follows the hosts as they travel around the country by EV, exploring climate solutions.
- In Canada nineteen-year-old Fatih Amin, shaped by the climate impacts he witnessed growing up in Bangladesh, is catalyzing youth-led climate action.
- In Lima, Peru – one of the world’s driest cities – an engineer is using fog-catching nets to pull clean water from the air for communities that need it most.

Light is shining all around the world.

I am convinced the attack on Venezuela is really about oil. As a nation, Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world. I’d point out that Nigeria, a country Trump bombed on Christmas Day,⁹ also has significant oil reserves. And Greenland, a nation that Trump has repeatedly suggested he wants to conquer and force into the United States, has significant oil reserves – reserves they put off limits in 2021, banning oil exploration on climate change grounds.¹⁰



In an essay he wrote yesterday, Bill McKibben says, “I do know how to dramatically reduce the *motivation* for this kind of grab, and that’s to convert the planet off oil as fast as possible. Oil is unique in being extremely valuable, extremely dense and hence relatively easy to hoard and control, and [it is] extremely concentrated in a few places around the world. It is a curse to those places – look again at the list ..., and with the exception of Canada ask yourself how well they’ve been governed. (And Canada’s oil wealth may yet be its undoing, as Alberta threatens over and over to disrupt the nation unless it gets its oily way). And it is a curse to the planet – because of the climate crisis, obviously, but also because anything worth this much money will inevitably destabilize international relations. ...

“But what if the business wasn’t there any more? What if we could, simply by supporting an environmentally and economically sound transition to clean energy, remove the reason for the fighting? *I don’t know how to stop the bully from beating people up for their lunch money – but what if lunch was free, and no one was carrying lunch money?* Not for the first time, and not for the last,

⁹ Brett Wilkins, “US Bombs Nigeria on Christmas Day in Trump’s Latest Military Escalation,” *Truthout*, <https://truthout.org/articles/us-bombs-nigeria-on-christmas-day-in-trumps-latest-military-escalation/> (posted 26 December 2025; accessed 3 January 2026).

¹⁰ Morten Buttler, “Greenland Bans All Future Oil Exploration Citing Climate Concerns,” *Time*, <https://time.com/6080933/greenland-bans-oil-exploration/> (posted 16 July 2021; accessed 3 January 2026).

I'm going to make the observation that it's **going to be hard to figure out how to fight wars over sunshine.**

"What I'm trying to say is, if you're for peace and democracy, then a solar panel is a valuable tool (and a valuable symbol, a peace sign for our age). Every one that goes up incrementally reduces the attractiveness of the oil that underlies so much conflict and tyranny. Right at the moment treaties and charters and constitutions offer limited protection at best; we should work to restore the national and global consensus that makes them valuable, but we should also work to push out the kind of energy that can't be hoarded or controlled."¹¹

I love it: Solar panels as a peace sign for our age. And solar panels as a sign of light coming into the darkness.

The bottom line of what I'm trying to say in this sermon is this: We have very real reasons to feel grief and fear and hopeless. And at the same time, the Word of God has become flesh and dwells among us. Light shines in the darkness and darkness does not overcome it. God has moved into the neighborhood. We have very real reasons to celebrate, and to feel joy and hope and love.

Amen.

¹¹ Bill McKibben, "Just possibly it's the oil?" *The Crucial Years*, <https://billmckibben.substack.com/p/just-possibly-its-the-oil> (posted and accessed 3 January 2026). Emphasis in the original.