

“Family Resemblance”

John 1: 1-4, 10-12, 14, 18

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Christmas Eve

Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

For the past month together we have listened to how the other gospel writers tell us of the coming of God among us. Mark says nothing of the birth. Matthew mentions Jesus' background, his birth, three kings. Luke gives the most detail: another genealogy, the annunciation, shepherds, angels in the heavens. John, on the other hand, gives us poetry.

If you turn to John looking for a definitive statement that will answer all your questions, you are in the wrong book. All month we have been preparing for this evening, this dawning of light that comes at exactly the right time in our darkness. All month we've been considering what the witnesses had to say about Christ among us. Even so, we may feel we are left with more questions than answers. So many of us are here tonight wondering just what is out there beyond our darkness.

The gospel of John takes us back to the beginning, to creation. We are told of the Word--- that's Word with a capital "W". The Word, which means "Jesus", was there from the very beginning. In fact, not one thing came into being without Jesus. Then John the Baptist is introduced. The Baptist came to show everyone where to look for the light, which lives in Jesus. The light was in the world, but the world did not understand it. The world did not recognize Jesus (still doesn't). The world did not realize Jesus is the way we know God. In Jesus, the curtain is drawn back, if only for thirty years, revealing God's nature. Like father, like son. Jesus is God with skin on.

Have you seen the family resemblance?

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood¹. Only the neighborhood didn't recognize who was moving in.

The neighborhood didn't know who the Word was. The Neighborhood didn't pay attention. The Neighborhood didn't bring him cookies and casseroles to help him get settled. Except. Except for some vagrants who gave him toothless grins while he was unloading his truck. Except for that pesky Simpson boy who, fascinated, kept getting in his way. Except for the widow who lives with about fifteen cats. She brought him a steaming cup of coffee. Except for Mrs. Hampton's older brother. He may be a little off, but he's strong. He helped do some lifting. Somehow they---the vagrants, the boy, the widow, Mrs. Hampton's brother---they saw something in him that the rest of the neighborhood missed. They noticed the family resemblance.

There were even some in the Neighborhood already planning to get him evicted. They didn't like the looks of what was moving in next door. Already scheming, and the moving boxes still out on the curb.

Oh yes, the Neighborhood watched him come in. They wondered a bit about what was being unpacked. They stood in their darkened houses, hiding behind their window shades. They peered out to observe what was *going inside* the house before they even greeted him. They watched what was being unloaded. They thought it odd there was so little furniture. They thought it strange there were so few possessions. The truck was practically empty even when he began. The Word, you see, had emptied himself of all superfluous possessions. He had given up everything he'd known before. He'd abandoned all his former connections. He had come poorly equipped for the Neighborhood.

There was a low table, no chairs, only cushions. There were pottery mugs, and large casks of what might have been homemade wine. A rolled up mat to sleep on, an extra pair of clothes. But then! Look at that! Cords of firewood, scores of candles and lamps. The neighborhood had never seen so many different kinds of lights. Lamps on lampstands, oil lamps, kerosene lamps, torches and candles and tapers of every size and shape. And there were some woodworking tools. A rough workbench. Simple tools, antiques maybe? A collector? An eccentric?

Put in today's terms, it does sound rather fantastic. Couched in today's sensibilities, it sounds highly unlikely. Why would God do such a thing? Why would God ever come into our neighborhood? Nearly every one of us wonders, at least from time to time. There are plenty who claim it's simply impossible. There are plenty who claim there is no light---no light within us and certainly not one beyond us.

Jim Starnes was one of those. Jim didn't believe in Jesus, and he wasn't so sure about God. Jim was a good guy, though; everyone knew it. A family man, a good neighbor, a

hardworking man. Jim staunchly refused to go to church. He wouldn't have any part of it. "It's ridiculous!" "Why would God stoop to become a man? Preposterous!" Every year he waited alone on Christmas Eve. The rest of his family went to candlelight services, hoping to catch a glimpse of the light. One Christmas eve, about five years ago, Jim was home alone out in the country in North Carolina. A blizzard blew in that night. Totally unexpected. He began to worry about his family making it back, the visibility was so poor. He paced the floor, fretting over the howling wind, when something hit the picture window. It made a loud thump. He turned on the outdoor floodlights, but he couldn't see a thing. Another thump.

When the wind let up, Jim pulled on his boots and his woolen cap. He ventured outside to see what could have caused the noise. In the field out back he could just make out what looked like a flock of wild geese. They had been caught in the snowstorm. They were stranded on his property.

Now Jim may have been a skeptic, but he had a soft heart. "They can stay in my barn. It's out of the wind; they can spend the night and wait out the storm." He opened the barn doors wide, and turned on every single light. He watched and waited, hoping they would notice the lighted barn and go inside. But the geese just fluttered around. It was as though they were blind! Jim tried to shoo them toward the barn, but this only made things worse! They scattered in every direction. He tried luring them in with grain. "Why don't they follow me?!" he exclaimed. "Can't they see this is the only place where they can survive the storm?" Suddenly it came to him--- they just wouldn't follow a human. "If only I were a goose, I could save them."

Then Jim Starnes had an idea. He went into barn, got one of his own geese. He carried it in his arms as he circled around behind the flock of wild geese. He then released it. His goose flew through the flock and straight into the barn. One by one the other geese followed it there, to the warmth and the heat and the light. To the shelter from the storm.¹

Jim Starnes got the message that night. It was a message once been heard by a young girl, by vagrant shepherders, by a prescient old woman. It was a message which continues to stir us this very Christmas Eve. It is a message that each one of us---from the most devout believer to the most cautious skeptic---needs to hear over and over again. Jim heard from the One who had moved into his neighborhood. He'd been there all along. Jim finally recognized him. Jim finally saw the family resemblance.

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

And the Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood.

¹ Story circulating around the internet, author unknown.