FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Dwelling”*

Yes, yes, I know—Christmas was just yesterday. Just a scant 24 hours ago we were kneeling beside a manger in Bethlehem gazing at a newborn baby. But that was yesterday. As most of us are aware, the stories in the Bible move very quickly, and so today, Baby Jesus is no longer a baby, and no longer in the manger. He is a big boy, now.

Actually, in the story we just heard from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is a bit more than a boy—Luke says he is twelve years old. In his culture, and in that time and place, Jesus would have been on the verge of taking on the responsibilities of a man. He, and other boys his age, would have already begun to learn their father’s trade.

And so, at home in Nazareth, it was likely that Jesus spent most of his days with Joseph, learning to measure and cut wood. He would have been learning how to use Joseph’s tools, and how to keep the chisels, saws, and axes sharp and in good working order. He may even have had the beginnings of his own set of carpenter’s tools.

I have no doubt that, at home in Nazareth, Jesus was a good and steady worker under Joseph’s tutelage. And while I know that most of us like to think of Joseph teaching Jesus at home in a wood shop the reality would have been more along the lines of Joseph going out to some neighbor or a farmer outside of town to build a home or a barn, or some such thing.

Joseph would also have been hired for any number of building projects for the Romans—they were always building something. And I have no doubt that even as young as he was Jesus was a trusted partner to Joseph when they were on a job site.

But now, Jesus is older—as I just said, he is almost old enough to be considered an adult. And because he is older, because he is now almost a man, this year’s Passover trip to Jerusalem with Mary and Joseph is different. This year, something in his heart and his spirit have begun to stir, to awaken.

In earlier years, as he and the other children crowded into the outer courts of the Temple with their families, he had never failed to be struck by the grandeur and the sheer size of the place. Even though he had seen them every year, it was always awesome to see all of the mosaics and murals on the Temple walls and even beneath his feet in the courtyards. So much color and craftmanship. Being even a budding carpenter, he was always amazed by the opulence and complexity of the place.

It was also humbling and thrilling to pass by the many rabbis who had also come from many foreign places to celebrate Passover at the Temple. Being teachers, they could not help hold forth on all sorts of points of law—all of them surrounded by captivated listeners.

In fact, it is possible that there had been times when young Jesus had heard one or another of them say something that he would have liked to have responded to, but the adults he was with had other activities planned, other tasks for all of them to do, and so he obediently followed along.

This year was different. This year his obligation to obey Mary and Joseph was still strong, but there was another claim on his heart and mind…and he knew he must follow it.

There in the Temple, among so many learned men all dedicated to drawing closer to God, Jesus entered and made a place for himself among with them. He felt at home speaking and even teaching. He had knowledge and ideas that came to him naturally, instinctively. His extreme youth did not frustrate nor hinder him. He was respectful and it seemed natural to him that the adult men that surrounded him listened respectfully in return.

The only adults who seemed excited by his activities were Mary and Joseph when they had returned to look for him…some *five days after* Passover had ended. I imagine when they saw him sitting among his listeners, they did not stop to take-in the scene and quietly help him excuse himself. In my mind’s eye, I see them rushing in, breathless, distracted by worry, I can even hear a certain level of sharpness in Mary’s voice as she exclaims, *‘Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.’*[v.48]

The Gospel says Jesus was also mildly perplexed at their reaction. He was home. Yet when he looked at them, he also saw the place he belonged to and the people he belonged with.

For twelve years, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus had made their home together. Yes, there was a *physical* place in Nazareth with walls and a roof. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus knew this as the place they where they gathered for meals and to sleep at night. They called this house their home.

However, their real home had less to do with the place as it did with who resided within it, who opened the door and welcomed them into it. Their home—like our homes—was the place where they knew they could enter and be safe and comfortable, but (again) even more than the place was the notion that together they were safe and comfortable because they were a family. Today we say they were a *family unit*—or in other words: they were one body.

Throughout Advent, and now on this Sunday after Christmas, we have been thinking and talking about the door that God opened through Jesus. God opened the door so that we might enter in and be safe, comfortable and…yes, at home. God has opened a door that we may come in and be one body together—the body of Christ.

The word I would like us to think about is the title of this sermon: “dwelling.”

It is not a word we use very much anymore, and that is too bad because it coveys much more than simply “living” in a place. To dwell in a place is to also has to do with identity—it would tell us whose “house” we belonged with, who we claimed as family.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus was redefining for himself, and for us, the meaning of dwelling and being at home. He was asking himself, and Mary and Joseph, to consider where else their home might be. Obviously, for many more years, he would *reside* in a house with Mary and Joseph. However, his *dwelling place* was where people were gathering to hear the word of God proclaimed. It was that place where the center of life is God.

Today, we also heard a passage written by the Apostle Paul. It was from his letter to the church in Colossae. Paul’s words further describe for us what it means to walk through the door Jesus has opened to dwell with God.

Paul not only asks us: where are we going to dwell, where are we going to make our home, Paul takes it a step further and asks: what are we going to wear? He is reminding us that we are only going to be at home in this world when we are wearing things that are good for other people as well as for ourselves. When we are clothed and wrapped and at home in the midst of compassion and kindness, when we are bearing together with each other and other people’s needs—this is when our house will be a home, a true dwelling place for the holy.

One story I read this week about this passage was from a pastor who talked about visiting his grandmother and how she always wore dresses with lots of pockets. Apparently, she often added an apron and sometimes a sweater each of which had more pockets. And each pocket held something that her multitude of grandchildren might need—whether it was a tissue to blow a nose, a small toy, or a bit of candy to distract, or a stub of a pencil or crayon to amuse. She clothed herself in what was needed to sooth and comfort all the children around her.

Friends, during Advent, we talked about and thought about and prayed about how our church is a place that houses the holy—how it may be a place where there are many pockets of comfort and hospitality. What I want us to remember is that—as beautiful and as much as we love this church house—this is *not* where Christ came to live. The true dwelling for the holy—for Christ—is in our lives and how we live them. You and I—*we are the church*. We are the place where Christ has chosen to dwell, where Christ *is* dwelling even now.

We are not at home in our Sanctuary again for a little while. However, Christ is still at home within us so long as we hold fast to the hope he has given us.

Even as we watch this worship service in so many different places, we are still one in Christ. Christ is still building-up this house of his holiness that we may have a safer, more beautiful place for ourselves to dwell, but also that we may be a bright and welcoming place for others.

That is our good news, that Christ is—even now—building us into a dwelling place for his light that may shine out even in the darkness for others to find and follow that they, too, may dwell in hope, peace, love, and joy—that we may dwell together.

May God bless you wherever you are, and may the love of God dwell deeply and richly within your life. Amen.