

# Moving Into the Neighborhood

John 1:9-14

Farmville Baptist Church

January 2, 2022

Living with children is always...interesting. I won't say it is always happy, or easy, or exciting, or difficult, or frustrating – although it is, at times, all of these things. But what I have found, almost 7 years into the experience, is that living with children is always interesting. There's always something going on, some snack to get, some question to answer, some situation to monitor, some laughter to join, some sobbing to console. There is never a dull moment! And, while at times I may wish for a moment of peace, the vast majority of the time – 99.9999% or so – I wouldn't want it any other way.

One of the most enjoyable things about sharing life with a child – whether your own or someone else’s – is the way you see them experience things for the first time. Maybe it’s seeing them walk, or hearing their garbled attempts at saying names, or applauding and smiling when they successfully accomplish a task they’ve never done before. But what I find especially enjoyable, at least at the stage of life my son Jonathan is in, is when he learns a new word. We’ll be talking, and I’ll use a word, and he asks what it means. Then, almost invariably, he begins to use it, too! Or we’ll be reading a book, and some unusual term is mentioned, and he wants to know all about it. I love his curiosity!

Learning new words is not something that ends when we finish primary school, of course – or even middle or high school or college. One reason is that new words, or new uses of words, appear all the time. How many of us knew the

word “coronavirus” in December 2019, or, if we did, how many of us really had a true understanding of it? Probably not a ton of us, unless we happened to have been trained as a scientist or healthcare worker. Words have to be encountered and learned before we can understand them and use them. And to those who haven’t encountered the word before, or don’t know its meaning, the word – no matter how important – can come across as gibberish.

This is true in church, too, of course. We, like any group of people who have been in community for a long time together, have our own vocabulary, an “insider language,” as it were. I’ve heard preachers wax eloquently on terms like justification and righteousness, I’ve heard brothers and sisters in Christ speak passionately about sin and redemption, and I use words myself like “eschatology” and “sanctification.” Even when I referred to fellow followers of

Jesus as “brothers and sisters” a moment ago, that’s insider language – a term you really only “get” if you’ve had it explained to you. After all, you aren’t my literal brothers and sisters – and yet, in my perspective on life and faith, you are. We have to learn words and what they mean in a context to get the full picture, in this case, of our common Christian faith.

This time of year, a word connected to faith that we may hear a lot, especially in regards to our passage of Scripture today, is “incarnation.” An English development of an Old French term derived from ecclesial Latin<sup>1</sup>, the word describes someone, usually a deity or god, spending a period of time, or even an entire lifetime, in the form of another creature, like a human being. In Christian thought, ~~the~~ the Incarnation, usually written with a capital “I,” refers to the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/incarnation>

arrival of Jesus, the Son of God, in human form. The Latin roots are pretty specific – this is an embodied experience, literally meaning “in flesh,” – and we can see why John 1, especially John 1:14, is often used to talk about this turning point in divine and human history. It says, “The Word (his philosophical term here for Jesus) became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” That’s a textbook definition of incarnation.

But what does it mean? Beyond the definition, what does Jesus’ incarnation actually mean?

Sometimes, when I have a question like that, when I want a clearer picture or a fuller answer, I dive deep into the library of books that fill the shelves in my office or my home. Other times, I have a conversation with pastor friends. Once in a while, I reach out to my seminary professors. But for this question, what does Jesus’ incarnation actually mean, I

<sup>am</sup>  
I helped most by looking up the passage in another translation of the Scripture – or, actually, a paraphrase.

Here is how verse 14 of John 1 reads in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Scripture, *The Message*: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."

Maybe it's because "he made his dwelling among us" sounds a little archaic, maybe it's because the Greek word related to putting up tents doesn't carry the same cultural meaning for us in an era of campouts and Boy Scouts, maybe it's because my family and I are looking for homes in neighborhoods near here, but there is something in Peterson's paraphrase that resonates with me a bit more than the traditional translations. "Neighborhood" is such an important concept for human beings, and thinking of Jesus as "moving into the neighborhood" carries certain connotations – connotations that we understand. *fairly well,*

It begins with the person in question – “neighbor.” A neighbor is someone who is close to you – you probably aren’t related, but you interact with that person on a regular basis, often in the non-exceptional moments of life. It might be as you walk your dog on the street. It might be when you banter over your divergent sports affiliations. It might be when you rake their yard or they clear your driveway after a snowstorm. They are in your life, and you are in theirs. Maybe you really do live in physical proximity – they live next door or across the street – but neighbors in this day and age don’t have to be physically close. They are people whose lives you are in, and who are in your life.

Jesus, of course, spoke of neighbors most famously in his parable of the Good Samaritan, and that story invites deep consideration for another day. But when we think of a neighborhood – an area we live in, whether geographic or

ideological – we think of a place, a community, a collection of people whose lives are interconnected and who have some claim on one another, even if it is no more than a nod when you pass on the street. Neighborhoods are the groups of people among whom we live.

We like our neighborhoods, at least most of the time, and we like being good neighbors. Maybe you do have good connections with the people who live around you. If not, maybe for you a neighborhood is the group of relationships in your community, or maybe even online in your digital neighborhood, of people who make your life better, who bring joy, who bring connection and care. We humans are neighboring people – we like the social connections of human relationships, and we build neighborhoods around those connections.

You can tell a lot about someone by the neighborhood they are in, and who they allow into their neighborhood. We tend to choose neighborhoods, or be forced into neighborhoods, only with people like us, people we will get along with, people we understand and who won't rock our boats. Those who don't fit in aren't allowed in, or at least are discouraged from coming into our neighborhoods. It wasn't that long ago, after all, that color lines existed in our neighborhoods – where certain people were not allowed to buy a home because of the color of their skin. Those redlines are no longer legally allowed, of course, but the legacy of them endures. And there are economically-driven divisions in our neighborhoods; one neighborhood might consist of only million-dollar homes, while another consists only of low-income housing.

In relational communities, even when separated from geography, we tend to put up walls: Democrats here, Republicans there; rich here, poor there; extroverts here, introverts there; boomers here, millennials there. We don't cross the boundaries that often. We don't go outside the lines of our neighborhoods. We are inward-focused, where it's safe. Neighborhoods are defined, much of the time, as much by who they keep out as who they include, and we choose our neighbors very, very carefully.

But then, we read that Jesus put on flesh-and-blood and moved into the neighborhood.

What are we to do with that?

Perhaps, we need to think about what it means that Jesus, the Son of God, the Divine Word that John tells us was there at the moment of creation, *that* Jesus chose to move into *our* neighborhood. He is the Prince of Heaven,

and he chose to be born into poverty. He is the Wisdom of the ages, and he chose to live a life among limited, at times ignorant, human beings. He is the Lord of life and light, and he chose to take the form of a servant, caring for those who didn't understand him and meeting the needs of those who could not reciprocate. In other words, he set aside the comfortable, known, safe reality that he had inhabited for ages upon ages and entered into our messy, chaotic, utterly unstable, often sinful world. He moved into the neighborhood and dove headfirst into the lives he met, the homes he entered, the relationships he nurtured, the systems he encountered. And in each and every case, he sought to be the presence of God with us, challenging the powers of sin and evil and death and comforting those who suffered from oppression, neglect, abuse, and rejection of every stripe. The Word of God – the creative, powerful, loving force behind all

of creation – put on flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.

I don't know about you, but that sounds like good news to me! You see, I do have problems sometimes that are on the higher existential plane of transcendental truth and philosophical exploration – but most of the time, I need a God who knows how to be my neighbor. A Holy One who hears my anxieties and hurts, offering comfort and guiding me into right paths. A Lord who isn't far-removed and cold, but intimately acquainted with my hopes and dreams, fears and concerns, and who offers reproof and praise alike with a deep understanding of who I am and who I am called to be. A Savior who understands not just the struggles I face and the trials I need to be saved from, but also the choices I've made and the factors that shaped who I am that affected how I got to that point. I need a Jesus who moved into the

neighborhood, because being neighbors is how we truly come to know one another, care for one another, and share life together. Jesus calls me, and calls you, to be with him, just as he came to be with us, <sup>He invites us in.</sup> And, for me at least, that's good news.

That also means, though, that being in the neighborhood with Jesus involves being in neighborhoods we may not be totally comfortable with, or may not have chosen for ourselves. Jesus moved into our neighborhood, yes – but he also moved into the neighborhood of people who look different than us, who talk differently than we do, who look at the world differently than we do. Jesus moved into the neighborhoods of the rich and the poor, the Black and the white and the Latino and the Asian, the Democrat and the Republican and the politically fed-up, the old and the young, and so many other neighborhoods, too. If we are going to be

neighbors to Jesus, we are going to have to learn how to be neighbors to these other folks, too.

This means seeing people with our preconceived notions set aside or stripped away, because Jesus sees them that way.

This means getting out from comfortable spaces – like our sanctuary – and getting out into the community, because Jesus left the synagogue and the Temple and went among the people, his neighbors.

This means opening our minds and our hearts to people who are different than us, and who might even make us nervous at first because of those differences, so that we can maybe get to know them and become their neighbor, because Jesus was willing to spend time with Pharisees and tax collectors, religious teachers and prostitutes alike.

This means moving into the neighborhood – because Jesus moved into the neighborhood.

Fred Rogers was trained and ordained as a Presbyterian minister, but he never pastored a church. Instead, he fulfilled his calling as a Christian minister by creating and sustaining a children’s educational program, *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. For 895 episodes, the show would start with Fred entering his house, slipping into a comfortable cardigan, and changing to tennis shoes, all while singing, “It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor, would you be mine? Could you be mine?” A bit later in the tune, he crooned, “I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you, I’ve always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.”<sup>2</sup> And so Fred created that neighborhood. Author Amy Hollingsworth comments, “At the center of Fred’s theology of loving your neighbor was this: Every person is made in the image of God, and for that reason alone, he or she is to be valued –

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Rogers, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor”

‘appreciated,’ he liked to say. He believed there is sacredness in all creation – including fallen man – because of one Man, ‘the true light, which enlightens everyone.’”<sup>3</sup> You’ll note that verse is found in our Scripture reading today. Hollingsworth goes on to share that Fred had told her, “Evil would like nothing better than to have us feel awful about who we are. And that would be back in here [in our minds], and we’d look through those eyes at our neighbor, and see only what’s awful – in fact, *look* for what’s awful in our neighbor.” He went on to say, “But Jesus would want us to feel as good as possible about God’s creation within us, and here [in our minds], we would look through those eyes, and see what’s wonderful about our neighbor. I often think about that.”<sup>4</sup> Where had Fred Rogers learned that way of looking at people, of choosing the way of the neighbor? From his

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers*, 102

<sup>4</sup> Hollingsworth, 103-4

Savior, Jesus, who himself had moved into the neighborhood – and who taught Fred how to be a neighbor.

As we enter a new year here at Farmville Baptist Church, as we enter 2022 in our own lives as followers of Jesus, what does it look like for us to follow in the steps of our Lord?

What does it look like to move into the neighborhood? We'll be thinking about that, together, in the days and weeks and months ahead – but let's start our year looking to be good neighbors, not just to one another, but to everyone we meet.

Let's look to see where God is calling us to move into the neighborhood – and where we find Jesus already there.