

“The God Who Sleeps Over”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – December 18, 2022

Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25

What if God decided to stop by and have a sleepover?

A little over ten years ago, in a suburb of Rochester, New York, Peter Lovenheim was out walking his dog. He was surprised to see a TV news truck parked down the block.

What was going on?

As it turned out, a horrible tragedy. A neighbor three doors down had shot and killed his wife and then himself. Their two young children had escaped, running screaming into the night.

Lovenheim was shocked — not only by these violent deaths but by how little true community existed in his suburban neighborhood. He knew the family only slightly, not nearly well enough to sense that trouble was brewing. Soon a “For Sale” sign appeared in front of the house where the killings had occurred, but everything else remained the same. “A family had vanished, yet the impact on our neighborhood was slight,” writes Lovenheim in a new book called *In the Neighborhood*. He asked himself, “How could that be? Did I live in a community or just in a house on a street surrounded by people whose lives were entirely separate?”

Good question. Do we live in communities or in collections of isolated houses?

To find an answer, Lovenheim did what any normal American suburb-dweller would do: He asked his neighbors if he could sleep at their houses.

Yes, that’s right. He requested that he be able to spend the night with them, to get to know them better. Although his daughter yelled, “Dad, you’re crazy,” a surprising number of neighbors agreed to his request.

A similar situation existed about 2,000 years ago, when God surveyed the scene on earth and saw violence and isolation in every nation, race, and culture. The human neighborhood was fractured then — just as it is now — with people separated from God and alienated from each other.

God decided to do what no one ever expected a divine being to do: sleep over.

As the story in the gospel of Matthew begins, God comes to a sleeping man named Joseph and speaks to him in a dream. Joseph is engaged to a girl named Mary, and she has just discovered she is pregnant. Because they have not yet begun to live together, this pregnancy is potentially scandalous. So, *JOSEPH — BEING A RIGHTEOUS MAN, UNWILLING TO EXPOSE MARY TO PUBLIC DISGRACE — PLANS TO DISMISS HER QUIETLY.* (Matthew 1:18-19)

Into the neighborhood comes a messenger from God, an angel. He says to the sleeping man, *“JOSEPH, SON OF DAVID, DO NOT BE AFRAID TO TAKE MARY AS YOUR WIFE, FOR THE CHILD CONCEIVED IN HER IS FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT. SHE WILL BEAR A SON, AND YOU ARE TO NAME HIM JESUS, FOR HE WILL SAVE HIS PEOPLE FROM THEIR SINS.”* (vv. 20-21)

The word of God comes through the voice of an angel, letting Joseph know that Mary’s child is a gift of God and that this baby, to be named Jesus, will save his people from their sins. Jesus will rescue us from everything that can destroy or divide us — in particular, the sins that shatter our relationships with God and neighbor.

But that’s not all. Matthew goes on to tell us that all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet Isaiah: *“LOOK, THE VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE AND BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL NAME HIM EMMANUEL, WHICH MEANS, GOD IS WITH US.”* (vv. 22-23) Matthew realizes that God is not simply coming for one isolated sleepover. No, God is moving in with us, permanently. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, now and forever!

Forget about making up a bed in the guest bedroom. It is time to build an addition!

God knows that we have trouble with our neighbors. Yes, you know the ones. Parties that run loud and late, out-of-control flower-trampling kids, no respect for neighborhood speed limits. Their lawns are neglected all summer, and their sidewalks are treacherous all winter. They either ignore us or gossip about us, never lifting a finger to help us.

Neighbors can be a pain.

But as bad as these relationships between people can be, our relationship with God is equally problematic. We indulge our selfish desires, trample the Lord’s commandments, and drive fast through life without thinking of the consequences. We neglect Jesus’ teachings and do not put effort into building

a truly Christian community. We either ignore God or take his name in vain, rarely lifting a finger to advance God's will in the world.

From the Lord's perspective, each of us can be a pain.

Despite this, God wants to move in with us, get to know us better and repair the broken relationships that continue to plague us. God breaks through the divine-human barrier in Jesus, and he challenges us to break through human-human barriers as well. God comes to us as Immanuel, God with us, because God wants to be In the Neighborhood.

So, what does God discover? Some of the same things that Lovenheim uncovers when he packs up his overnight bag and walks over to his neighbor's house for a sleepover.

First, a great number of people today are terribly lonely and do not know how to make connections. Lou Guzzetta, the first neighbor Lovenheim spends the night with, is a widower with a big belly who enjoys his afternoon cocktail, his dog, and his local YMCA support group. Yet he often feels alone.

Guzzetta tries to reach out by taking dinners to new arrivals in the community. But his kind gestures are rarely reciprocated. In so many communities today, we have lost the skills and abilities to create neighborly bonds. At one point, Guzzetta says to Lovenheim, "There are no neighbors here."

This is more than a sad and tragic state of affairs. It is a sin. Theologian Paul Tillich saw this coming, observing a half-century ago that separation is an aspect of everyone's experience, and that sin is separation. "To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation," he said — separation from other people, separation from self and separation from God.

The good news of Christmas is that God enters human life in Jesus to overcome this separation. God comes to earth as the Christ child to break down barriers and reconnect us to our Creator. As Paul says to the Corinthians, "*IN CHRIST GOD WAS RECONCILING THE WORLD TO HIMSELF, NOT COUNTING THEIR TRESPASSES AGAINST THEM, AND ENTRUSTING THE MESSAGE OF RECONCILIATION TO US.*" (2 Corinthians 5:19) As ambassadors of Christ, we are to do whatever we can to reach out to our neighbors, make connections and work to overcome the state of separation that is such a sinful condition in our world today.

The second discovery a "sleepover God" would make today is that most people are overscheduled and awfully busy, but still their lives are empty. Working hard to make a living, raising children, pursuing advanced degrees, participating in

sports leagues, putting time into hobbies — all these activities have value, but when you put them all together you end up with a frantic and disconnected life.

Into the middle of this frenzy, God sends a baby. And babies, we all know, can slow us down and redirect us. Just as the coming of Jesus forced Joseph and Mary to slow down and refocus, **Christ's arrival at Christmas nudges us to change our pace and our plans.** “*WHEN JOSEPH AWOKE FROM SLEEP, HE DID AS THE ANGEL OF THE LORD COMMANDED HIM,*” says the gospel of Matthew. Joseph stopped his plan to dismiss Mary and instead “*HE TOOK HER AS HIS WIFE, BUT HAD NO MARITAL RELATIONS WITH HER UNTIL SHE HAD BORNE A SON; AND HE NAMED HIM JESUS.*” (*Matthew 1:24-25*)

When a baby comes into our lives, everything changes. Suddenly, we are forced to pay attention to feedings, diaper changes and naps. The same is true with the coming of Christ, if we allow ourselves to be changed and refocused. The great challenge of Christmas is to let ourselves slow down and see that, yes, in fact, “*GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON.*” (*John 3:16*) And the opportunity of Christmas is to become refocused on the fullness of life that comes from following this child by loving the Lord our God, loving our neighbors as ourselves and going out to make disciples of all nations.

Jesus' great commandment is to love (*Matthew 22:34-40*). And his great commission is to make disciples, baptize and teach (*Matthew 28:16-20*). A sense of peace and purpose can come from following Jesus this way — something we will never find in jobs, degrees, athletics, or hobbies.

Notice also that we cannot avoid our neighbors when we focus on Jesus and walk in his way. After all, you cannot practice love or discipleship in isolation.

That is just another good reason to welcome the God who sleeps over.