

God Makes a Home

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a four-part series

November 26 & 27, 2016

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Genesis 3:8–10 (NRSV)

⁸They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” ¹⁰He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

Isaiah 11:10 (NRSV)

¹⁰On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

John 1:1–14 (NRSV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

John 15:1–5 (NRSV)

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Christmas is different. The incarnation is different.

God would now dwell with his people as he never had before.

It is Advent . . . already! Thus, we begin a new year in the Christian calendar and consider again the meaning of God’s incarnation¹. What does it mean for the world and for us that God took on human form, completely and fully, with all the pluses and minuses that characterize our physical bodies? Yes, it is amazing and astounding but that is the claim we make; it is our Christmas claim. As John wrote, “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (NIV – compare it to the NRSV translation above). God made himself present with us in a way he never had before and has not since.

Presence

As I’ve written before, presence is truly delicious.² Telephones, e-mail, Facebook, letters, text messages and all the other ways we have to communicate with one another are useful, but nothing is like actually being with someone. The ancient Israelites understood this. They knew that there was only one God, Yahweh, who had saved them from their oppressors and who had led them to a promised land. But God hadn’t

¹ “Incarnation” speaks to God taking on human flesh in the person of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity.

² I borrowed this wonderful phrase from Gordon Fee, a highly regarded New Testament scholar.

just told them what to do or where to go; God had actually and truly dwelt with them. When they were desert nomads, God had given them instructions for building a moveable home for him, a tabernacle. When they had settled into the land they called Israel, God had given them instructions for building his permanent home with them, the temple.

Now . . . they weren't so foolish as to believe that God lived with them and nowhere else. They knew that God could not be confined to any one place, but they also knew that God was present with them in a very special and unique way. He lived among them. He guided them and taught them. He was Wisdom and Spirit. He was their God and they were his people.

Yet, there was a remoteness to this presence. God's proper dwelling was the Holy of Holies, behind a curtain in the tabernacle/temple. Once a year the High Priest of Israel would step behind the curtain to utter God's name and seek atonement for the sins of the people. No one else could step behind the curtain. No one else could experience God's presence in the same way as the High Priest. But still, God dwelt with his people and what a privilege and blessing it was.

Sadly, God's people didn't live up to the privilege and blessing they had been given. They failed to love God and others; indeed, at times they seem to have forgotten God entirely. And, more than six centuries before Jesus, Ezekiel had a powerful vision of God's presence rising from the Temple and heading for Babylon, where so many Jews would soon be exiled. After the exile ended and Jews began to return to Jerusalem, rebuilding the walls and the temple, the question was whether the Spirit of God returned with them. Would God be with them again, as he had been before?

The answer is "yes," but not as the Jews imagined it would be. God would not dwell in the marble temple in Jerusalem but would, instead, "become flesh and dwell among us." God had been present with his people before but now, in Jesus, in the flesh, presence would be something it never had been before. First, Jesus would live life in the flesh with his disciples. They would eat together and drink together. They would hug and dance. Jesus would be present in every moment in ways I'm sure none of us could really imagine.

But more, there would be a permanence to Jesus' enduring relationship with his disciples, he would "abide" in them and they would "abide" in Jesus. Thus, this week we begin a new Advent series, *God Abides*. The immediate challenge for me is that I find the word "abide" pretty difficult to grasp, especially as it is often used in the Bible. It can mean "to dwell" or "to remain" or "to continue" or "to endure" but none of those by themselves quite do it for me.

In the NRSV translation of the New Testament, "abide" is used forty times, and all but one use is in John's gospel and letters. Rather than trying to define "abide," we'll get further by seeing how Jesus uses the idea.

Abide in me

A good place to see "abide" at work is in the famous passage from John about the vineyard and vine. The above passage from John 15 is part of Jesus' farewell discourse (John 14-16) with his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. Jesus' hour has finally arrived and he tries to help his disciples understand what is about to happen. Here, Jesus draws upon the much-used metaphor of the vineyard.

Israel is a land of vineyards, thus we shouldn't be surprised that it is a common biblical metaphor (see Isaiah 5:1-2, Psalm 80:8-9; Genesis 49:11-12,22 for example). The metaphor usually works like this. God plucked the people out of Egypt and planted them in Canaan. There, they, the vineyard, were to be fruitful and grow, but the vineyard turned bad instead (Isaiah 5:5-7), prompting God's promise to judge and

destroy the vineyard. But, as always, there were images of restoration and blessing alongside the images of judgment and destruction. In these images, the fertile vineyard is the blessed and restored Israel (Jeremiah 31:5; Amos 9:14).

In his last meal and talk with his disciples, Jesus reshapes this vineyard imagery around himself. He is the true vine.³ He is the true Israel, the fruitful vine that Israel had failed to be. Moreover, Jesus, as the true vine, exists in enduring relationship with the Father, who is the vinegrower, and with his disciples, who are the vine's branches.

Step back from the words for a moment and picture a grapevine, all twisted and turning upon itself. It is hard to tell vine from branch or branch from branch. It is a whole, a unity, a community of sorts. It takes all three – the vinegrower, the vine, and the branches – to produce abundant fruit. The vinegrower continually prunes and shapes the vine, getting rid of dead branches and shaping the branches so they can bear more fruit. Grapevines will tend to grow lots of leaves and shoots that dissipate the vine's energy and suppress the production of fruit. Thus, the vinegrower is always busy making sure that the vine is producing fruit and not just a pretty show of green leaves.⁴

Jesus' meaning seems clear. When the branches remain part of the vine, the branches can grow and thrive. If the branches are cut off from the vine, the branches wither and die. Likewise, we are to abide in Christ, just as he abides in us. It is only in Christ that we can find the life that we seek. As the vine gives life to the branches, Jesus is the giver of life. And our life-giving relationship with Jesus endures for all time. It abides

It is important for us to realize that abiding in Jesus means much more than just believing or even trusting Christ. It is about remaining in union with Christ, in a deep and enduring relationship.⁵ This is how we are to *be*. Our very *being* is to be grounded in this oneness with Jesus. In Peterson's paraphrase of John, Jesus says, "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." First *being*, then *doing*. We must *be* disciples before we can *do* what disciples do.

Producing fruit

Jesus' disciples are to bear fruit, but they can do so only by abiding/remaining in Christ. It is this deep union with our Lord that enables us to do what God would have us do. Without this deep and enduring relationship, we can do none of what God desires from us.

But what is this fruit that Jesus has in mind? Gail O'Day writes, "When John 15:2 is read in the light of 14:1-31, 'bearing fruit' emerges as another way to speak about the works of love that are required of Jesus followers (14:12, 15, 21, 23). The unproductive branches of which v. 2 speaks are those people within the Christian faith community who do not bear fruit in love."⁶

Further, O'Day writes, "The intermingling of the branches in the vine and the gardener's attentive care to the fruitfulness of the branches create the quintessential

³ When Jesus says, "I am the true vine," it is one of seven "I am" statements in John's Gospel. "I am" is a way to translate the name of God (YHWH) revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). Thus, each of the "I am" statements in John are taken to be a claim to Jesus' divinity. For example, earlier during his farewell discourse, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6). For any Jew, it would be God who is the way, the truth, and the life. There are seven "I am" statements because seven is the number of wholeness and completion; God created the cosmos in seven days. Like the other gospels, John's is carefully constructed. He uses many means to convey his main theme – that Jesus is God. "In the beginning the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1).

⁴ John uses a wordplay here that the English translations can't really capture. In the Greek, prune (v. 2) and cleanse (v. 3) are the same Greek root. The point is not vine growth, but fruit production. A big showy vine that produces no fruit is not God's intention. Metaphors can be very thought-provoking.

⁵ I am reminded of Jonathan and David. "The soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:1). Perhaps this helps us to understand the sort of relationship that we are to have with Jesus.

⁶ from O'Day's commentary on John in *The New Interpreter's Bible*. A copy of this 12-volume commentary is in the St. Andrew library.

visual image of the life of the Christian community that is shaped by love and grounded in God's presence." It is this life to which we are called as a community of disciples. Jesus' metaphor of the vine teaches us yet again that there can be no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his church.

Practicing God's presence

Want to know what God is like? His character? His caring? Look to Jesus. Jesus is the full and complete revelation of God in a way that written or spoken words could never be. To repeat, there is nothing like face-to-face presence. This is the miracle of Christmas. It is God-with-us . . . in the flesh.

But for all that, many of us sometimes feel like God is far away, anywhere but present with us. Brother Lawrence was a 17th-century Carmelite lay-brother. We might think that feeling God's presence would be easy for those leading the monastic life, but it was not so for brother Lawrence. He had to learn the essential ingredient in the Christian life, living always in the presence of God. When he did, brother Lawrence found that his faith was living and active, that he was filled with hope and confidence, and that his heart was on fire with love for God.

But how? How can we too live each day in the presence of God? Brother Lawrence urged that we try to converse with God in little, unscripted ways while we work. Sadly we can go days and hardly ever think of God much less talk with him. Brother Lawrence urges us to stop often, if even for just a few moments, to praise God. Finally, brother Lawrence stressed living a virtuous life, confessing our own sins. As Paul put it, we need to focus on whatever in our lives is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable (Phil. 4:8), for such are the things of God. Much of the world seeks to coarsen our souls and pull us away from God. Nonetheless, following brother Lawrence's simple suggestions will help us to gratefully accept and enjoy the Christmas gift of presence offered us by the God-Who-Abides.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. This business of the incarnation calls for us to think big. We need to let it blow our minds. Jesus was and is God . . . even as a squirming, burping, messy, very human baby. Jesus is not all of God, but he is still fully and completely God. That is about as good as our language can come at describing Jesus' divinity and the mystery of the Trinity. What is the biggest challenge for you in this Christmas claim?
2. You might make two lists. On the first, list some thoughts about what it means to you that Jesus is God. Why do Christians cling so firmly to this claim? Why does Jesus' divinity really matter? Would it be enough for him to have been a wise teacher or prophet? On the second list, outline some thoughts on what it means to you that Jesus is fully human. Why does this matter? Christians have always defended our belief in the virgin birth, not because it is about Jesus' divinity but because his birth affirms his humanity. What would we lose if we were to deny Jesus' humanity?
3. In your own words, explain what you think it means to abide in Christ? What might be meant by the phrase, the "being of discipleship?" How is this different from the doing of discipleship? How does our abiding in Christ and him in us lead to the production of abundant fruit? For many people, John is the most challenging of the Gospels. Often, we have an idea what Jesus means but it still seems elusive or ambiguous, like this business of abiding. It is a bit like Jesus is drawing us into a world that we are scarcely equipped to grasp. Perhaps it takes a little more imagination and a little less analysis, knowing that in the effort, we can be transformed.

Weekly Prayer List

During the week, jot down the names of people who need your prayers.
Such prayers bind you to them in the presence of God.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, 1 Kings 6 Solomon builds God a home in Jerusalem	Tuesday, Isaiah 11:1-10 “A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse.” Jesse is the father of David, but Isaiah lived centuries after David. Here, the prophet looks to one from the line of David: Jesus.
Wednesday, Isaiah 63:7-14 God’s presence, his Spirit, saves.	Thursday, Romans 1:18-23 God’s creation communicates a great deal to us about God if we would only see it.
Friday, Colossians 1:15-20 Jesus is the “image of the invisible.” Like the writer of Hebrews, Paul is trying to find words that say, “When we see Jesus, we see God – fully and completely and exactly.”	Saturday, Hebrews 1:1-4 God speaks to us now in the person of Jesus, who is the “exact representation” of God’s being.

