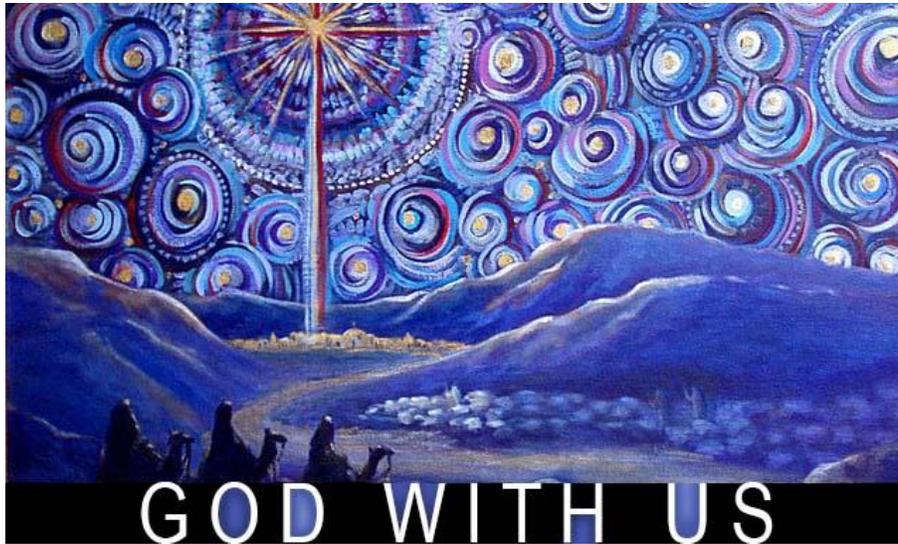


CHOOSING WELCOME

A Sermon by Rev. John Weems
December 24, 2015



John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All 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. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

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

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

And 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.*

I WAS SPEAKING WITH MY FRIEND PETER ABOUT A SCARY TOPIC--IDENTITY THEFT.

We had each had our credit cards hacked within the last month. In my case, the bold thief tried to buy a \$3,000 Apple Computer and then apparently stopped at Starbucks for a latte. After all, if you're going to steal a fancy computer, you want to make sure you're caffeinated enough to stay awake and enjoy it.

Because Peter is also a pastor and we are rather nerdy, the conversation eventually extended to church matters. Peter talked about how it feels like people are stealing the Christian identity. In 2015, we have seen people wearing the Christian faith on their sleeve fixate on who should be married, who may enter the country, and even try to fight wars over whether Starbucks coffee cups were Christmassy enough.

Sometimes church people scare me.

Though we have a faith centered on a baby who grew up to be radically inclusive and battle hypocrisy, sometimes well-intentioned people of faith such as myself operate as a club with more judgment than love.

There was once a little boy named Richard, or Dickie, as his friends and family called him. His great grandfather had migrated from the Basque Country in Spain and they had very little. As a young boy, Dickie and

his family lived in a tent along the rim of the Snake River Canyon in Southern Idaho. Other kids called him racist names and disrespected him for being poor. Let's just say his childhood was not filled with an abundance of joy and presents under the tree . . .

That little boy grew up to be my grandfather.

My mom tells me that from a very early age, he consistently stressed that she and her brothers and sisters weren't any better than anyone else. He insisted that they treat others as they wanted to be treated. He welcomed everyone.

That little boy who was called names and treated as an outsider grew up to be radically inclusive. His favorite day of the year was Christmas Eve. In their tiny little home, my grandparents seemed to host the entire free world to celebrate Christmas. It was like the Island of Misfit Toys in there. From Uncle Julio with a hook for hand (he lost his in a farming accident) to my Aunt Wilma who threw a tantrum when she lost a board game, everyone was welcome. The laundry room was converted into a space offering drinks I wasn't allowed to have, though Southern Comfort sounded delicious. As we gathered around to enjoy my Grandma Thelma's homemade butter rolls that made the house smell like a heavenly bakery, all that separated us melted away.

My grandfather chose welcome, even with people who hadn't treated him well.

In the Gospel of John 1:11, the Bible says, "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

Jesus knew firsthand what it meant to choose radical welcome, even when one wasn't welcomed. From the story of his birth, to the attempts to take his life that required his family to become refugees, to one of his own disciples being the one to betray him, Jesus kept loving and shining light no matter how dark the world became. Even in his final hours on the cross, he was forgiving the criminals alongside him and even those who had tortured him.

Jesus chose welcome.

Jesus commanded us to love God with all of our heart, and mind, and soul, and strength, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Yes, even *those* neighbors.

May the radically inclusive spirit of the Christ child fill your heart, and carry forth beyond these walls.
Merry Christmas.