

*Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 1:1-18*

*Subject: Word Made Flesh*

*Theme: Love Came to Live*

Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 19, 2021; *Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

How are you feeling? Anxious? Exhausted? Overwhelmed? Welcomed? Excited? Full of hope, peace, joy and love? I hope so. This time of year can bring so many feelings. Maybe as we approach the new year we begin to imagine anything is possible, that this new year will bring new adventures and experiences, a fresh perspective, and the potential for *unlimited* growth. I so often feel my limits - just waking up in the morning, my back is tight, my ankles hurt - it comes with aging, I guess - I'm learning. But more than that, I feel the limits of time - there's never enough - I get stressed out and think about all that has to get done. I'm limited - I cannot do everything I'd like to do, or give everything the attention I'd like to give. I am often pulled in so many directions with church, with family - they feel my limits too, I know. I try not to feel guilty about that but it comes with the territory. I'm only human. We humans get stuck in patterns that are unhelpful or unhealthy and begin to create our own barriers for growth and our expectations become too small.

It was twenty years ago that I moved from Jacksonville, FL to Los Angeles - one freeway all the way across the country, traded one ocean for another, for a new beginning, and a new life. It turned out not to be what I had hoped and imagined, but it was different. I was at times afraid, lonely, depressed, worried, and lost. It was eleven years ago Ivy and I left our jobs and sold our home and moved from Las Vegas to Dubuque, Iowa, to begin a new path. Again, the experience was more than we ever

could have expected, and it brought us back to Las Vegas, back home. In those years, love grew and new lives were brought into our world. We all long for new beginnings in our lives, and when the Google calendar flips to the next year we start to think about what new life this year will bring. But God is always doing new things.

During this season of advent we have heard the promises of God from the mouths of prophets and the hope for a future that is good and holy and full of peace and celebration. But with the events of the past year or two, *or more*, maybe it's harder for us to believe in the good things to come. We have all known too much darkness. Maybe we cling to our past experience and think *this is the only way it can be*. Maybe we fear what is to come, and worry about the troubles that lie ahead. We are longing for light.

As we hear the opening verses of the Gospel of John, we hear echoes of the first part of the Bible itself. the story of creation in Genesis. In the beginning...God was bringing new life to the world, and making all things new. We might notice how different the language is from the other Gospel writers, few distinct details, no parables, or sermon on the mount - not even a baby in a manger, but a poetic glimpse into the heart of our God whose *love came to live* with us. The language is cosmic, ethereal, and often confusing. But like a Christmas Carol, the Word finds a way into our hearts, and the truth of God's love begins to grow there.

*Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love's pure light*

Today we move from the Old Testament, the law and the prophets, who shared the promises of God that persisted even when the people failed to follow - into the New Testament - the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the light and life of the world. We'll be reading the book of John in our worship from now until Easter Sunday, and I encourage

you to read along. John's good news will bring us signs and symbols - that point us to God in the flesh, the one who came into the world.

As we get closer to Christmas, we see signs and symbols all around us, right? The evergreen tree, which reminds us of immortality, of birth and resurrection. Greeks and Romans adorned trees with decorations and offerings to their gods, and Martin Luther in Germany is said to have helped to popularize bringing the tree indoors and adding candles to it, to remind us of the light of the world, Jesus. The circle wreath evokes the sense of lasting love in the world, that comes from God to us in Jesus. The silver bells ring and remind us of Joy, the celebration of God's blessings and the gift of forgiveness and grace.

John presents Jesus as the light coming into a world of darkness. Light is such a powerful symbol. Tuesday evening this week we find the longest night of the year, the winter solstice, and can imagine a time when light was scarce. We notice now when there's a power outage, when some street lamps fail to come on, we wonder if something is wrong. Did you ever notice a car driving without its lights on? It's disturbing right? We all need a little light in our lives.

Darkness can be a limiting for us - a boundary between what we see and know. You wouldn't like to go walking down a dark alley downtown at night. You probably shouldn't. We don't know what we might find. Danger exists, and the fear of the unknown can just creep us out. So we can hear the power in the promise of light coming into the world. We hear it 7 times in this reading. Repeated for a reason. This light of the world meant freedom from fear, possibility of new life, and love unlimited.

Love lives in the light.

John tells us that there was a Word, in the beginning, even before the beginning, that was with God and that *was God*. We remember the story of creation - the first word that speaks creation into being - the word that says, "Let there be - *light*." This Word brought about everything - and not one thing came into being without this Word sent from God. John is sent to testify to the Word - to point to that light and life of the world - that did not know, that could not perceive in the darkness.

*The Word became flesh and lived among us.*

When I moved across the country, I moved into an apartment building far from anyone I had ever known. It was not the part of town I wanted to be in, it was a place I could afford at the time. It was a tall building on the corner of Sepulveda and Valerio. There was a pool but it was always cold, as the building blocked out most of the sunlight. I remember when the LAPD shut down the street because of two warring gangs, and a car crashed into the fire hydrant and the water shot higher than my balcony. Around the corner, there were children playing soccer in a mostly dirt lot, and the ever present *elote* vendor nearby ringing his bell. I got to know a few of my neighbors, an older man who walked his two Dobermans down from the third floor to take them outside each day, a family who made wonderful smelling Indian food on the weekend. A couple of young aspiring actors trying to make their dreams come true. All of us knew what it was like to struggle and try to find a new way in this city.

The gospel writer says the Word put on flesh. Eugene Petersen in his Bible paraphrase *the Message*, writes that *the Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood*. Like a neighbor, the Word of God, moved in.

As a human being, I have limits. We all do. I may not be able to be everywhere at once, or do everything I'd like to do, but there is a part of me that is less limited: my love. The love I get to share in my family, in my community, with all of you, lasts and lasts. Over time it doesn't dissipate, it gets deeper, in fact, it becomes all the more meaningful as we navigate struggles and conflicts together. As I get to share life and experiences with my partner and my children. Love only grows and is multiplied when we get to share time together, learn more about one another, and share our lives in community. We will still struggle together, we will have conflicts and pain and we will make mistakes. But that's life. We're human.

In the beginning - *unlimited* light and love took on the *limits* of human life, that the world would be renewed, enlightened, and awakened again to the glory of God.

And now, in these dark times, when the world longs for light but does not know it, when the darkness of disease still haunts us, when fear and hatred and racism and injustice seem to rule, we can hear these promises again. Though the power of the Spirit of God in us, we might be ones who point to the true light, not lifting ourselves up, but pointing to the light of Christ in our world, which so often shows up as what it is - *love* - in the hearts and actions of others - we can see again, we can welcome Christ again, we can live in love again. We have been given this power to become children of God, and freed from our anxiety and exhaustion, and selfishness, and sin, and welcomed into hope and peace and joy and love through the cross. The Word came into the world and moved into the neighborhood! Jesus is alive and living here and with us! The light of the world, love unlimited, the Word of God, Jesus Christ is the one who is has come and is coming. For you, for me, for us. This love knows no barriers, no

darkness, no fear, but only love and grace and glory and truth. This God is love, and love came to live with us, for us, for always. Amen.