



*Christmas Eve (3, 4:30)
December 24, 2012
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Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church*

God in Your Backyard

John 1:1-5; 14

I heard a story about a little boy who went Christmas shopping at the mall with his mom and got to see Santa. The boy sat down on his lap and he heard that familiar question: "What do you want for Christmas." So the boy told him. The next weekend, grandma took him shopping and when they got to the mall, there was Santa again. Once more, the boy climbed up on his lap and Santa asked, "What do you want for Christmas?" The little guy paused for a moment and said, "You know, you really should write these things down."

So, what do you want for Christmas? Dads, how about you? How many of you Dads are hoping Santa brings a big screen TV? Your crummy 60-inch TV is just inadequate! Kids, want to see what my TV looked like when I was your age? [Picture] This was a Packard Bell console TV. It was a big box with a little screen! It didn't hang on a wall. It sat on the ground! And the picture was... ready for this... black and white. Kids, how do you change channels today? A remote. Do you know how we changed channels back then? Got up... walked across the room... click, click, click... go sit back down. I know. Barbaric! There was no such thing as channel surfing... because we didn't have many channels. Kids, how many channels do you think we had when I was a kid? Three! Guess where you plugged in Playstation? You didn't! We didn't have Playstation or X Box.

I know what you kids are thinking. What an awful life! What did you do for fun? Do you know what we did? We played outside in our backyard... with other kids! Face to face! No texting! I know... crazy, huh? We had a big backyard with lots of bushes... toys all over the place. And the Salatinos and the Davidsons would come over and play cowboys and Indians and army and cops and robbers and hide and seek... and we had a ball!

But you know one of my favorite things to do in the backyard? Camp out! We'd put up our tent and camp out in the back yard. Anyone ever do that? [Put up tent]

Now, let me ask this. If guests came over in the summer, did you put them in the tent? What if the Queen of England came to visit, would you put her in a tent? No!!!! Where? Nicest bedroom. Would you leave your dirty clothes out? Dirty dishes? No! Clean house... everything put away. Best china!

Now...here's another question. What if God came to visit? Where would you want him to stay? Sound silly? Well, do you realize that God did come to visit? He had to put on human skin, because we couldn't see him otherwise. What was God's name when he came to visit? Yes, Jesus. And that's what Christmas is about. God put on human skin and came to visit us. Why? He loved us and wanted to be with us. God wanted to be our friend even though we didn't want to be friends with him. So God put on skin and came to visit us on earth.

Now when God came to visit, do you know where he stayed? One man named John wrote a book about it. Here's what he said: "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." That's not very easy to understand. Do you know what the old words really mean? "...God put on human skin and he pitched his tent in our neighborhood."

Why would God stay in a tent? Can't He afford a hotel? Why? To Be with us... to hang out with us! So, if Jesus wanted to camp out in your neighborhood where could he pitch his tent? Would you like him to put his tent in your yard? Would your parents like Jesus camped out in your yard? How about it, mom and dad: if your kids came to you and said, "Hey, guess what! Jesus wants to camp out in our yard. Is it okay?" What would you say?

Maybe some of you would put him right in your front yard, on display. After all, when we buy a new car, we park it out front so that everybody will notice. Imagine how the neighbors would buzz if you had God hanging out in your front yard. Maybe even put up a few lights to really draw attention to it. Maybe something like this? [Video show]

Of course, your neighbors might not like having that in your front yard! Okay, how about the back yard? Backyards are where you play; where you leave your stuff out; where you hang out with your closest friends and enjoy some barbeque. And backyards are where you put up tents and camp out. Back yards are messier; back yards are friendlier. They are more real, aren't they? You don't have as many curtains on your back windows. People can look right inside the house and see what is really going on in your family. Some folks don't even lock their back door.

We have front yard friends and back yard friends, don't we? Front yard friends come to the front door, admire your flower beds, ring the bell, and you invite them to sit in the formal living room or eat in the formal dining room. But front yard friends don't make it around back. And they certainly don't see the messes in rooms with doors closed. They don't rummage through your kitchen looking for something to eat. You don't know them that well. You don't trust them that much. And you aren't really willing to reveal that much of your life to them. They are front yard friends.

Then there are backyard friends. They come in through the garage or through the gate or through the hedge. They don't need to ring or knock. They don't care

about your messy house or your messy yard, and more importantly, you don't care about them seeing your messy house or messy yard. Backyard friends know where your coffee pot is and pour their own cup. Backyard friends are the ones you know best, love deepest and trust most... trust enough to share with them the real things in your life.

So here's the Christmas Eve punch line: what kind of friend is Jesus to you? Is he a front yard friend? You don't mind being seen with him. Don't mind your neighbors noticing that you have some religion. You wouldn't mind him joining you for a meal and a cautious, polite chat... a chat that would not include politics or religion. You are familiar with him, you know some of his teachings, you realize he has some good things to say... that the world would be a better place if more people acted like Jesus. But Jesus is really a front yard friend. You know him, but you don't really want to be known by him... not really.

Or is Jesus your backyard friend? He's there where your life is messy and real. He is welcome to look in through your windows, walk right in without being asked, rummage through your mess, help make repairs that you can't handle on your own. Backyard Jesus is familiar to you. You are friends, not just acquaintances. You welcome conversations that are deep and real...and you are willing to let him see the truth about your life, both the good and the really bad...because you know that he loves you and can help you. Backyard Jesus.

Of course, there is a third person. The NIMBY. What does that stand for? Not in my back yard! You really don't want much to do with Jesus. Maybe the church burned you sometime in your past. Or maybe Christianity is for superstitious, ignorant types who really should catch up with modern times. Or maybe Jesus is for weak people. Whatever the reason, you are a NIMBY. You could not be less interested in having Jesus pitch his tent anywhere in your neighborhood...not your front yard, not your back yard...nowhere.

So if Jesus were to pitch his tent in your neighborhood, where would you stick him? This is a very important question. Because that's what Christmas is all about. God put on human skin and came to visit us... came to visit you. He loves you. He wants to hang out with you. He wants to know you and be known by you and give you a life of hope and peace and purpose. The question is will you let him in? Many here tonight are content to keep Jesus in the front yard. Friendly, formal, occasional, distant. And to those in this group I would say, if you only knew what it was like to welcome Jesus into your life, your whole life... the good, the bad, the messy and the neat, the successes and failures. If you only knew how good it was to discover a God who wants to live life with you, it would be the greatest Christmas gift you could ever receive.

So, to the front yard folks I would say, go deeper. There is so much more to know about Jesus than Christmas Eve services, weddings and funerals. Jesus told his disciples, "I came that you might have abundant life." I promise if you invite

Jesus to set up camp in your life—open up the windows and doors and the messes—he can change things for the good in very practical ways. How might you do this?

Maybe it means coming back to our sermon series in January on marriage and attending Couples Life and discovering what Jesus can do when you invite him into your marriage? Maybe it means attending Financial Peace University in January and discovering how you can be delivered from the burden of debt when you invite Jesus into your finances. Or maybe as you light your candle tonight you will pray like the man who came forward for Communion a few weeks ago. As he stood there, he said, "I want Jesus. I need Jesus." And I said, "You can have him!" And right there he prayed, "Jesus, come into my life!" If you are front yard folks, are you ready to go deeper?

And to the NIMBYS among us I would say, take a risk. Take the risk that you might be wrong. Take a risk that God might be real, that Christmas is not a children's story and that Jesus has come to find you, love you and forgive you. Take a risk to give the Church another shot. Maybe your first step would be to pray, as you light your candle tonight, "God, I don't even know if you are there" or "God, I am so mad at you for the way my life has turned out" "...but if you are real and if you really care, show yourself to me. I will look for you."

Or maybe you take the risk to find out more about the real story. Every usher has a New Testament that we'd love to give to you as our gift if you don't have one. What would happen if you went home and read slowly through the gospel of Mark? (Easy to remember; same as my name!) Maybe you've never given Jesus a chance because you don't really know much about him! If you would describe yourself as a NIMBY, are you willing to take a risk tonight?

I have a friend whose little girl was getting somewhat frustrated with the whole Christmas experience. As she left for school one day last week she said, "I wish we could go and sit on Jesus' lap and tell Him what we want for Christmas."

Well, he's listening. He's interested in the longings of your heart. Christmas is the true story of a great God who loved you so much that he came to find you, to set up camp in your life, to live in the midst of the grit and the goodness of it. Anything less than that and you are cheating yourself out of the very best that God can offer. "The Word became flesh and pitched his tent in our backyard..."