



When Love Comes to Town

The radical notion of the Word made flesh

STEVE NORMAN

We bought a new house this year. We really loved our last house, but since we moved there seven years ago our family has grown from four people to six. With only one child left in diapers, five of us were sharing a single bathroom, which was its own exercise in patience.

When we put our old house on the market we were excited about the prospect of moving, but the challenge of finding the “right house” was overwhelming. I remember sitting down with my wife, Kelly, and our realtor, Roger. Roger opened up the

Steve Norman is pastor of Kensington Church in Troy, Michigan.

local real estate listing database and began his litany of questions. What neighborhoods or zip codes are you looking for? What kind of schools do you want for your kids? How many bedrooms? Baths? How old or new would you like the house to be? What style of home? What size lot? What's your price range?

Many of these were questions I had not even considered yet. But gradually we narrowed down the list of options from thousands to hundreds to a few dozen. The exciting part was actually walking through the homes to get a feel for what they were really like. The truth is some homes looked spectacular on paper, but as soon as we parked in front of them something didn't feel right. Why? Because it's not until you're standing in front of the house that you can see its context, that you get a feel for the neighborhood itself.

At the end of the day, when you move into a new place, you're not simply buying a residence—you're buying a stake in a neighborhood. Later I found out that as we were checking out our potential communities, our potential neighbors were screening us from their kitchen windows and back porches as well. Most people know both the joy of having great neighbors and the challenge of others who are, well, not so neighborly.

What does any of this have to do with Christmas? John 1:14 tells us, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (NIV). Eugene Peterson frames it this way: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (*The Message*). The band U2 performed a song with blues legend B. B. King on their 1988 album *Rattle and Hum* entitled "When Love Comes to Town." According to the gospel writer, the incarnation, the miracle of Christmas, is the moment when love moves into the neighborhood.

Many religions have a myth of a deity or deities who took field trips to the human realm. Not long ago I came across the film *Clash of the Titans* while flipping channels and recalled brief snippets of my high-school English teacher's overview of Greek mythology. The company of Greek gods resided on Mount Olympus and would only occasionally come down to engage the mortal world. They were, in a word, commuters. They preferred the option of being able to come and go as they pleased and had no desire to set up shop or "dwell among" the humans.

The incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, is a radical concept in light of the ancient Greeks' view of

the world. For God to move into the neighborhood says something about the Creator's capacity and desire to connect with the creation. It also tells us something about the neighborhood. The neighborhood, not some ethereal realm, is where God does tangible and immediate work.

The writer of Hebrews declares that Jesus identifies with every dimension of the human experience. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:15-16, NIV).

Why is the fact that God comes near good news? And how should the reality of the incarnation shape our lives? Maybe it's simply a new (or renewed) awareness of Christ's presence in all our daily challenges, both small and large.

I made a poor decision this year. In January I registered for a marathon and encouraged others from my church to join me in running for a charity team. The goal was to raise money for clean water initiatives operated by our ministry partners in northern Kenya. Then April came and I trained some. May brought a slight uptick in my workouts, but not nearly enough to stay on schedule. Life happened, I got lazy, and by the time race day came in late October, I was officially ill-equipped to run a full marathon. I had, however, raised some money for our cause and also roped a good number of people from our church into joining me. At that point, I kind of had to do it.

Two of my sisters graciously made the trip to Detroit from Chicago to help me through the first 13.1 miles. They were a true gift and an amazing help. It wasn't until about mile seventeen that the wheels started to come off. My body was aching and my mind started to unravel.

About that time three women from my church who were wearing shirts for our charity came running by. One said, "Hey Steve. We've brought a verse to read for every mile of the marathon. Want to hear it?"

I was already in a rough spot, and now I was embarrassed that my race strategy was not nearly as spiritual as theirs. Wincing, I nodded. With clarity and confidence she quoted Isaiah 41:10: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

My eyes welled up. I had forgotten how true the

words she quoted really are. Granted, it was my own dumb fault I was in this mess, but even so I needed to hear God say, “I will strengthen you and help you.”

In the Greek model, the gods only visited the human world for significant events or on random whimsical escapades. The gods were both too important and too preoccupied to be concerned with the daily grind of mere mortals: traffic jams, dirty diapers, long-distance races. But the miracle of Christmas, the beauty of the incarnation, says otherwise. We don’t have a Messiah who telegraphs encouragement from on high but rather the Word made flesh who runs alongside us when we are dismayed. A God who lives in my neighborhood doesn’t have to fly in or come down when I’m discouraged—he is already here.

As a kid, I remember helping my dad light luminaries on Christmas Eve. We would go out into the garage and fill several small paper lunch bags with a trowel full of mostly frozen sand. Then we’d place a candle in each bag of sand, load them all up in our little wagon, and line both sides of our long sidewalk with them. Once they were all in place, we lit the candles. Many of our neighbors did the same, and by the time I went to bed on Christmas Eve it felt like the whole street was ablaze with light. I wasn’t sure whether we were lighting the landing strip for Santa’s sleigh or welcoming the Christ-child to our brick colonial home, but I vividly remember the light cutting the darkness like a razor.

It’s easy to forget on the days that aren’t Christmas that Christ offers to do the same for us every day. The other evening was a bad one for me. I was more stressed than I wanted to be, short with my children, and impatient with my ever loyal and incredible wife. Depressed and disappointed with myself, I retreated to our basement guest bedroom to be alone and decompress. There in the dark, my four-year-old son crawled onto the bed next to me. After a few moments of shared silence, he quietly began to sing one single line: “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.” There was more silence before, “Don’t let Satan blow it out, I’m going to let it shine.” Then quiet again. And ever so gently, “Hide it under a bushel, no! I’m going to let it shine.” In the voice of my son, the light of this Word made flesh was breaking through.

I’m not one to spend a lot of time focusing on the nature or presence of evil. That said, Jesus would not have commanded us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” if there were not, in fact, evil from which we need to be deliv-

ered. Whether we’re struggling with literal demons or simply our personal ones, the darkness can be very real indeed. Jesus’s desire to live in our neighborhood and step into the shadows we often stumble into is yet another evidence of transcendent grace.

When Jesus moved into the ancient town of Capernaum, on the edge of the Sea of Galilee, his neighbors felt a spiritual sunrise emerge from the chaos. “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond

For God to move into the neighborhood says something about the Creator’s capacity and desire to connect with the creation. It also tells us something about the neighborhood.

the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in the darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned’” (Matthew 4:12-16, NIV).

And if Jesus has relocated into the house next door, and I have eyes to perceive it, I should see light breaking through as well—light bringing hope in the midst of difficult circumstances, mercy in the face of my failures, and grace to break the cycle of self-destructive patterns.

If Christmas is the celebration of the Word moving into the neighborhood, then maybe our mental image of the baby in the manger needs to expand. Yes, the nature of Jesus’s arrival as an infant in Bethlehem made him perfectly accessible to the shepherds he came to proclaim his kingdom to. But because most of us don’t shepherd and have never seen an actual manger and may never get to Bethlehem, that image, while nostalgic, becomes too abstract.

In order to grasp the power of the incarnation, where would we place the precious baby in our world? Does the Word come to a historic brownstone? A wood and vinyl duplex? A bungalow near the tracks? An estate in a gated community? A shanty town in Durban, South Africa? Or a farmhouse in Iowa? A Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon? A high rise in Shanghai?

Yes, yes, and yes. There is no neighborhood the Christ-child does not inhabit. So this year, when we sing it, let’s sing it like we mean it: “Joy to the world. The Lord is come.” ■