

Being Present with Love
2 Samuel 7:1-11, Luke 1: 26-38

Decorating House

It's Christmas Eve and I believe that you have completed your tasks of decorating your houses and Christmas trees. Regardless of their faith, many people decorate their homes when Christmas approaches. It's quite interesting to see how differently people decorate their houses. As we all know, Warren always decorates big trees in his yard with lights to share the joy of Christmas with his neighbors. It's beautiful and free so if you haven't seen it, you should go by after dark. One house near the parsonage has decorated their yard with inflatable dragons wearing Santa hats which make my dog, Joy, bark when we walk that way. Maybe he wants to be a dragonslayer. Some people put candles or stars in every widow or a nativity in their yard. The sight of twinkling lights and colorful decorations can transform a neighborhood into a winter wonderland.

As a person who is not a big fan of decorating anything, I wonder why people decorate their houses at this time. I didn't google it but I asked ChatGPT. Unlike google, it offered 8 common reasons behind the tradition of decorating for Christmas. I will not go over them all, but one reason is to create a cheerful and celebratory atmosphere. By decorating our house, we want to create a festive and visually appealing environment. One other reason is that "Many people have fond memories of decorating for Christmas during their childhood. As adults, they may continue these traditions to recreate the magical and nostalgic feelings associated with the Christmas season." Not bad answers. We decorate for Christmas to create or recreate something for us and others. That's not a bad thing to do, but we need to remember that essentially Christmas is not about what we do but what God does for us.

David wanted to build the house of God but...

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent. The assigned lectionary reading from the Old Testaments is 2 Samuel 7. In this story, David wants to build God a house, and Nathan at first says, "sure. go ahead!" But then God shows up and tells Nathan to tell David to hold off. In short, God says, "I am going to take charge of making a home when it is time." The traditional understanding of this text is that the task of building the temple is not David's but Solomon's. However when we lay these words alongside the story of Luke, we discover something completely different. We hear about God making a house among us.

We all know the story of the Annunciation in Luke. The angel Gabriel visits Mary and tells that she is going to have Jesus and "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David." (v. 32) Mary does not fully understand how this can be, but she accepts the role she is given. She says, "I am the servant of God. Let it be done to me as you say" and divine Love grows inside of her. While David wanted to build a house for God in his time, God chose Mary and Mary's womb to become a house of the Holy. God takes up residence a little more intimately than in a grand temple on a hill in Jerusalem. Yes. God wants to move a little closer than that and thus, God came into the world through the most humble of families and resides with us. Immanuel, God with us!

When Christmas approaches, out of our piety or old habit, we often try to create or build a joyful and celebratory atmosphere for God and our neighbors by decorating houses and trees. In this exciting and busy time, we sometimes forget what Christmas is really about. Christmas is

about God who chose to be present with us in the most intimate way. Maybe what we need in this season is to pause and be present with God who is right here, right now. It's time to be present with love. God is with us right here, right now. The divine love of God is in us. Amen? We don't go to God but God first comes to us. Our God intimately takes a place in us and among us. That's the good news of Christmas.

Say, "Yes" and Being Present with Love

However, it is also true that God came into the world through Mary as she offered herself to be the house of divine love. As we all know, when Mary heard from the angel, she said, "Let it be done to me as you say." In other words, she said, "Yes." Have you ever wondered how many living rooms into which Gabriel had to make an appearance before he found one who would say "yes?" Never thought about it? We often assume that God knew who was going to say "yes." God had it in the bag before Gabriel ever set out. But Dr. Lisa Hancock says, "if that's true, then Mary's response is somewhat diminished... If there wasn't at least the possibility that she would say "no," then her "yes" doesn't count for much. And, for centuries, the church has celebrated Mary's "yes."¹ "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."(John 1:14) It was possible because Mary said, "Yes" although it wasn't an easy "Yes."

Just as the Word became flesh through Mary's yes, we can experience the presence of God through ordinary people who say 'yes' to be the house of divine love. Like Mary, Asbury UMC and each one of us is a house of divine love. In fact, I believe that Asbury UMC has been a gift of love to our neighbors. Last week, Kristen and Luke visited us. We have prayed for Kristen for a year and Asbury members have sent her cards and a prayer bear. You have been a gift of love for her! I am pretty sure that whenever you struggle with something, you have received or will receive unwavering support, prayers and love from Asbury. Asbury bag of Care, food for soul, mitten collection, Elves for elders, food drive, a winter celebration... whenever we say, 'yes' to God's calling to love our neighbors, the divine love of God becomes flesh through each one of you in the world. That's the best gift we can share with our neighbors. My beloved Asbury family, during this blessed season of Advent, say 'yes' to God's love and be present with love. Make room for Christ in and among us. Be present with love. Amen.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/our-spirit-waits/fourth-sunday-of-advent-christmas-eve-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes>