

"When God Moved Into the Neighborhood:
Rev. Matt Landry
September 17, 2017

"Celebrate Butler" Sunday at Meridian Street United Methodist Church

Scripture: John 1: 1-14

It is a great joy to welcome you on this Celebrate Butler weekend at Meridian Street. We worship in a special place and I'm not referring just to Meridian Street, I'm talking about the crossroads of the Butler Tarkington, Meridian Kessler, and Rocky Ripple neighborhoods. This is a great place to live, work, and worship in, this neighborhood is our home for our faith community.

Earlier this year, my family and I were taking a walk on Butler's campus on one of those unusually warm late winter afternoons. My son Zechariah, who was around 14 months old at the time, was mastering the skill of walking and running. Butler is a great place to use your new skills at all age levels. As Zechariah was running nearly out of our sight, I saw him suddenly stop, and start to wave, and then run toward an unknown person in the distance. The man, who was wearing a suit, appeared to be walking toward a meeting, but he stopped, waved, and said hello to Zechariah. That person just happened to be President Danko. I'm pretty sure Zechariah was working on a scholarship, which he will be in need of in around 16 years, yes, he's an overachiever. But what was really special, was the way this person on campus, who happened to be the President, took the time to stop, acknowledge, and wave to the cutest kid ever.

To live in a neighborhood is to learn how to live out the commandment that tells us to love God and love neighbor. It is to get to know others and reach out to those who live near you. It is a collective call to make the neighborhood a better place. That's true for all of us, wherever it is we live and work.

As followers of Christ, we are challenged not that we just get to know our neighbors, but that we love our neighbors. Why? Why is that absolutely clear in Scripture? That's where we find God. It's where God lives.

The story from John's Gospel is the unique narrative of Jesus' birth. It doesn't mention the manger, the shepherds, or even Mary, but it does remind us of the light that was born. The life-light, as Eugene Peterson calls it in The Message Bible. "The Life-Light was the real thing: Every person entering Life he brings into the light. He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world didn't even notice."

The story of Jesus' birth in any of the Gospels, and especially in John, reminds us that the light was born in a neighborhood, among the people, not in the Temple or a place of power, but in the humility of a manger among animals. The Message Bible puts it like this: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." It's important for us to pay attention to that neighborhood Jesus was born into and the people God chose to use in the incarnation, where God put on flesh in Jesus. This holy family was poor, unfamiliar, and lived under a situation of oppression being Jews in a Roman occupied land.

It's important to note that God moved into the neighborhood, but a neighborhood largely unknown with no power or strength. It wasn't a place of royalty, privilege, or the religious elite. The light was born in a neighborhood with everyday people with everyday struggles. This incarnation of God, this taking on flesh of God, revealed the true nature of the God who dwells with God's people. The light shines every day, everywhere, just like it does today. The light shines in every person, every day, just like it shines in you. Another way to look at this Scripture reading is to remember that God often shows up in the unexpected places in our world. Whether it's in a surprising person or an unexpected neighborhood,

God is a God of the unexpected variety. God shows up in places of darkness bringing light. God shows up in a neighborhood among ordinary people. God shows up in us, as we follow Christ, as we become people of the light.

When we become people of the light of Jesus, we join Jesus and the work he is already doing in our neighborhood. It is embodying the love of God for the world in the places where we live, work, and worship. Over the last few years Meridian Street has discerned that our vision is to make this neighborhood a better place, where we see the fruit of the Spirit thriving and growing among its people, families, students, and children. That vision doesn't stop in Butler Tarkington, Meridian Kessler, or Rocky Ripple; it is an extension of the light of Christ into all the places we live and work in Indianapolis, Carmel, Zionsville, Brownsburg, and beyond, with an intentional emphasis on making a difference in the neighborhood of our worship home.

While it was great to cheer on Butler yesterday, it was even better for me to take my son to my alma mater last Saturday, the University of Saint Francis in Fort Wayne. It's good to have school pride. It means you love the school and the community and desire to make it better and better. And I know a thing or two about school pride. My wife Candace says if this preacher thing



doesn't work out I could be an admissions rep for Saint Francis. Being back last week made me think about my time in college when I, now only a few of you know this, when I was on the cheer team. It's true! (I am waiting for the gasps.) I was the mascot of Saint Francis. I was the Saint Francis Cougar. I used to tell the football players that there would not be the Saint Francis Cougars without me, the Cougar.

I would cheer at the football games, and when I say cheer, I mean throw popcorn at people, clap, wave to people, the usual. I could go on and on about stories of being the mascot, like the time I hit a dancer on the head with a tambourine, or the time I was on the ice at a hockey game, or the time I slid in the snow and ended up in the news camera nearly knocking over the news guy. I'm sure I will share those stories sometime, but today I want to highlight one thing about Johnny Cougar, that was his name. It was fun to cheer at the games, but I

wanted to do something more with this mascot, so for three years I took that mascot costume in a giant body bag to the Lutheran Children's Hospital in Fort Wayne. You should have seen the look on people's faces in the parking lot. There's was nothing better than making a sick child smile, make their parents laugh out loud and forget their child's illness even for a moment, and scare doctors doing really important work, but making them laugh out loud. It may seem like something small or even insignificant, but it brightened the day of people suffering and in darkness. Yes, even with a mascot costume you can let the light of Jesus shine through you.

What we can do as people of faith, is take whatever gifts we have, bring them to the neighborhood, offer them to God, and we'll meet the God who came to be born in the neighborhood, not just in the church, not just on campus, not just in our homes, but the God who dwells among us, all around us. In fact, the Gospel of John reminds us that "We have seen God's glory." In order to see and recognize the light, we have to see in a certain way, looking for the light as we meet people, as we spend time in the neighborhood, as we hear stories, and build relationships. It's really quite simple, offer your gifts to God, put them to use in the neighborhood, and the light of Christ will shine through us.

Let's ask a question, though. What did God do when he moved into the neighborhood? God through the person named Jesus sat at the dinner table and ate with people. He talked with and taught people. He listened to them. He accepted. He recognized them and knew who they were as children of God. And in all of those things, he could see the light shining in each person.

God shows up in this neighborhood. How about you? How do you show up in this neighborhood? What will you do to follow the light and be the light? Follow Jesus. Think about where you eat and who you eat with. Invite someone new to coffee or a meal. Consider how you offer a welcome to those you meet on the street. It could begin with noticing, stopping, acknowledging, and a greeting. You don't have to overthink this one. Let's make it simple. Let's take our ordinary, everyday things, and offer them to God. As we read in Romans 12, "Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it."

Take what you have, your gifts, your passions, your mascot costume, your time, your joy; and you go out into the neighborhood, you offer them to God, and you'll be the light, you'll meet the God who has moved into the neighborhood. You will meet

God in this outward movement of love, of grace, of kindness, of hope, of light. You'll walk as a child of the light. It's just that simple. Sometimes all you have to do is stop in the neighborhood, smile, wave, and acknowledge the light of God shining in each of God's children. That's where it begins. That's where we find God in the neighborhood.

Let us pray:

Lord, your light calls us forth to follow and serve you. Encourage us to take our gifts into the streets of our neighborhood to make a Kingdom difference for you.

Your light still shines for all to see in this neighborhood, our city, our nation, and our world. May

we continue to reflect your light in our lives, in our service, in our words and in our deeds. We pray this in the name of Jesus the Christ our Lord. Amen.