

## **“The God Who Sleeps Over”**

### **Matthew 1:18-25**

I was intrigued with this quote from a recent book review I was reading.

Ten years ago, in a suburb of Rochester, New York, Peter Lovenheim was out walking his dog. He was surprised to see a T.V. news truck parked down the block. What was going on?

As it turned out, a horrible tragedy. A neighbor three doors down had shot and killed his wife and then himself. Their two young children had escaped, running, screaming into the night.

Lovenheim was shocked – not only by these violent deaths but by how little true community existed in his suburban neighborhood. He knew the family only slightly, not nearly well enough to sense that trouble was brewing. Soon a “For Sale” sign appeared in front of the house where the killings had occurred, but everything else remained the same. “A family had vanished, yet the impact on our neighborhood was slight,” writes Lovenheim in a new book called “In the Neighborhood.”

He asked himself, “How could that be? Did I live in a community or just in a house on a street surrounded by people whose lives were entirely separate?”

Good question. Do we live in communities or in collections of isolated houses? To find an answer, Lovenheim did what any normal American suburb dweller would do. He asked his neighbors if he could sleep at their houses.

Yes, that's right. He requested that he be able to spend the night with them, to get to know them better. Although his daughter yelled, "Dad, you're crazy," a surprising number of neighbors agreed to his request. And the result is the book "In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time."

I decided to share this book review with you because it reminds me of a similar situation about 2010 years ago, when God surveyed the scene on earth and saw violence and isolation in every nation and culture. The human neighborhood was fractured then – just as it is now – with people separated from God and alienated from each other.

God decided to do something no one expected him to do. God decides to come to us and sleep over.

As the story in the gospel of Matthew begins, God comes to a sleeping man named Joseph and speaks to him in a dream. Joseph is engaged to a girl named Mary, and she has just discovered she is pregnant. Because they haven't yet begun to live together, this pregnancy is potentially scandalous. "So Joseph – being a righteous man, unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace – plans to dismiss her quietly" (Matthew 1:18-19).

Into the neighborhood comes a messenger from God – an angel. He says to the sleeping man, "Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived

in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:20-21).

The Word of God comes through the voice of an angel, letting Joseph know that Mary’s child is a gift of God. This baby to be named Jesus will save his people from their sins. Jesus will rescue us from everything that can destroy or divide us – especially the sins that shatter our relationships with God and our neighbors.

But that’s not all. Matthew goes on to tell us that all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” (verses 22-23).

Matthew realizes that God isn’t coming for one isolated sleepover, in a visit from an angel to a sleeping man. No, God is permanently moving in with us. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, now and forever! Although some of us will try to make up a bed in the guest room for Christmas Eve and our annual visit to church, that’s not God’s purpose. He wants to live with us everyday, all year long.

God knows we have trouble with our neighbors. Whether it be our neighbors in the church who expect to be served for baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals without doing anything to give back to our ministry or our neighbors on our street who throw parties that run loud and late, out of control, flower trampling children, no respect for neighborhood speed limits. Their lawns are neglected all summer and their sidewalks are treacherous all winter. They either ignore us or gossip about us. Neighbors can be a pain.

But bad as these relationships between people can be, our relationship with God can be equally a problem. We indulge our selfish desires, trample the Lord's commandments, and I'm as guilty as any of you of driving fast through life without always considering the consequences. We neglect Jesus' teachings and don't put much effort into building a truly Christian community. We either ignore God or take his name in vain. From the Lord's perspective, each of us can be a pain.

Despite this, God wants to move in with us, get to know us better and repair the broken relationships that continue to plague us. God breaks through the divine-human barrier in Jesus, and he challenges us to break through human to human barriers as well. God comes to us as Emmanuel, God with us, because God wants to be with us in the neighborhood.

So what does God discover? Some of the same things Lovenheim uncovers when he packs up his bag and walks over to his neighbor's house for a sleepover.

First, a great number of people today are terribly lonely and don't know how to make connections. Lou, the first neighbor Lovenheim spends the night with, is a widower with a big belly who enjoys his afternoon cocktail, his dog, and his local YMCA support group. Yet he often feels alone.

Lou tries to reach out by taking dinners to new arrivals in the community. But his kind gestures are rarely reciprocated. Lovenheim writes that "we've lost the skills and abilities to create neighborly bonds." Lou says to Lovenheim, "there are no neighbors here."

Lou is lonely and feels separated. Theologian Paul Tillich wrote 50 years ago that sin and separation are the same thing. “To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation,” he wrote, “separation from other people, separation from self, and separation from God.”

The good news of Christmas is that God enters human life in Jesus to overcome this separation. God comes to earth as the Christ child to break down barriers and reconnect us to our Creator.

St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

As ambassadors of Christ, we are to do whatever we can to reach out to one another, make connections, and work to overcome the separation that’s such a sinful condition in our world today.

The second discovery a “sleepover God” makes today is that most of us are overscheduled and very busy, but still we feel our lives are empty. Working hard to make a living, raising children, going back to school, participating in sports, dance, church, and a myriad of other activities can end up in a frantic and disconnected life.

Into the middle of this frenzy, God sends a baby. And babies can slow us down and redirect us. Just as the coming of Jesus forced Joseph and Mary to slow down and refocus, Christ’s arrival at Christmas should at least nudge us to slow down our pace.

“When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him,” says Matthew. Joseph stopped his plan to dismiss Mary and instead, “he took her as his wife, but

had no marital relations with her until she had born a son; and he named him Jesus.” (Matthew 1:24-25).

When a baby comes into our lives, everything changes. Suddenly, we’re forced to pay attention to feedings, diaper changes, and naps. With the coming of Christ, everything changes when we allow our lives to be changed and refocused. The great challenge of Christmas is to let ourselves slow down and see the “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” And the opportunity of Christmas is to become refocused on the fullness of life that comes from following this child by “loving the Lord our God, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and going out to make disciples of all nations.”

Jesus’ great commandment is to love and his great commission is to make disciples, baptize, and teach. A sense of peace and purpose can come from following Jesus this way – which is something we’ll never find anywhere else in our life.

As we refocus on Jesus during this Christmas time, as we practice his love and discipleship, as we become reconnected to the Christ-child – let us welcome our God who sleeps over.

May the peace of God . . .

#278 – Away in a Manger