

# “AMONG US”

*VALLEY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH – SEPTEMBER 5, 2021*

ISAIAH 35:1-7A

JOHN 1:1-14

REV. JOHN WAHL

It seemed like an eerie coincidence when, last weekend, Hurricane Ida stormed into Louisiana exactly sixteen years after Katrina, on August 29, 2005. Two years later, in 2007, I was in New Orleans for Katrina’s second anniversary, doing recovery work with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance – like many people past and present from this congregation: Rich Cozzone, Jeanne Delaney, Bill and Jane Nemeth, Jewel Paynter, just to name a few. While, similar to stories I have heard from them, being part of the rebuild in Louisiana was a rewarding experience, it was also shocking to see that – 24 months after the storm hit – stores were still shuttered, people were living in FEMA trailers parked in their yards, and there were mountains of garbage and debris piled on the curb, waiting to be collected.

On that night of the second anniversary – August 29, 2007 – some members from the church where I was staying fixed dinner for the volunteers. We gathered in the once-flooded but since rehabilitated Fellowship Hall to eat jambalaya, listen to zydeco, and share stories. I heard them tell of their experiences during Katrina – how some of them evacuated and others stayed to ride it out. They talked of the destruction, how some members never moved back as others struggled to rebuild. And they talked about hope: how, despite all that had been lost, because of neighbors helping neighbors and the folks who came from all over the country to help with the recovery, giving their time, their effort, and their care; they could see how God had been – and still was – among them; right alongside them, in the midst of their hardship and loss. That somehow, out of the chaos, they had discovered hope.

These verses from John, chapter one – often called the Prologue to the gospel – describe a God who, no matter the chaos or destruction or loss, is right here among us. With eloquent simplicity, the gospel writer reveals how the divine Word “became flesh and dwelt among us,” “made his home among us,” or, to use a modern translation, “moved into the neighborhood.”

This term Word – *logos* in Greek – draws us back to the first chapter of Genesis where God speaks each created thing into being. In Greek thought, the Word is the divine reason that gives life to all that is; the very existence of all creation depends on the *logos*, without whom nothing could be seen or heard.

This Word came to be with us and of us. The gospel writer stresses that God chose to live a human life in a human body: incarnate, in the flesh – and full of grace and truth. God is able to speak to us in Jesus as in no other way: not as by listening to inner voices, not as in nature, not through human reason or accomplishment. In Jesus, the Word, we hear that God heals and forgives, seeks the lost, embraces the outcast, and prays even for those who would hurt him. In Jesus, we see that God understands denial, betrayal, and suffering; humiliation and death. Jesus tells us that – as individuals and as a world – we need salvation. In Jesus, we hear that God brings victory over despair; and that God wills and wants to share that victory with us; with humanity, with creation.<sup>1</sup>

This year, we will again be using the narrative lectionary of weekly scripture readings. The focus will be on John's gospel: this story of the divine Word who became flesh and made his home among us; revealing God's love for us in a way like no other way. But before we come to John's gospel, we will look back to the Old Testament – starting next week with the creation story in Genesis 1 – and how God has spoken to the people of Israel and provided what they needed throughout the generations leading up to Christ's incarnation. Out of many stories and events that appear to describe a world of chaos, what we will be revealed is not a divinely imposed order, but an embodiment of hope: a God who provides what we need – if not always what want – and is right here beside us.

I have been asked quite a few times over the past several days, since my six-week Sabbatical officially came to its end, how was it? As I said earlier, I think of this time as an incredible gift: an opportunity to explore with my body and mind, to research and write, to rest and be renewed. I have been able to take hours-long silent hikes in some of the most beautiful places I have ever seen; I've had a chance to spend time with family and friends literally across the country. I am grateful to have been able to receive this gift.

But, I have also witnessed – and maybe have grown even more keenly aware – of how precarious and chaotic the world in which we live can be and seems to be growing. It is difficult to be at complete rest when the pandemic – which appeared to be coming under control at the start of the summer – is now again raging; as

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Satterlee from *WorkingPreacher.com*

some people are choosing to take cattle medicine instead of a COVID vaccine; when school board meetings are besieged by angry, unreasonable parents; and as people are dying of fires in the American west and in floods from New Orleans to New York City. Yes, I was able to experience rest and renewal during my Sabbatical; it was an experience for which I am truly thankful; but that which Paul claims about the body is true: when any one part or member suffers, the whole body is unable to experience peace.

Still, as much as we might want to order or make sense of this chaos, God chose to offer us something different, something even more important: hope. The Word became flesh and made his home among us. The light has come into the world, and the darkness will not overcome it.

And because God has been revealed to us through Jesus – through his life, his teachings, and his selfless sacrifice – we have been provided with a pattern for life to follow. As Christ’s followers, we are called to live embodied lives, to be present in and through the chaos, to show up when and where we are needed, to be right there. God does not want us to suffer; God instead loves us and wills salvation for us, but – often – this cannot be accomplished simply by making sense or order out of the chaos around us. That solution is too simple; too narrow.

No, we are to be seekers and proclaimers of hope. Like the folks in New Orleans with whom I shared dinner on the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina in 2007, folks still living amid destruction and disruption; they needed to know that someone cared enough to show up; to be right there. Hope was found among us in the stories, the sweat, and the swinging hammers.

Today, we gather at the Lord’s Table to remember how the Word became flesh and has offered his own body and blood for us. As the one who spoke the world into being, he gives us the fruits of creation to nourish, empower, and encourage us. Christ becomes present to us that we may show up for others; we are fed in order to feed others; we come to be sent out: to our loved one and strangers alike, in our own neighborhoods and beyond.

In the midst of the chaos, God is right here: incarnate, embodied, among us. Thanks be to God. Amen.