

INVITATION TO *Christ*

There's a story in the Bible about a young man named Jacob. He came from a troubled home and was sent away by his father to live with his uncle. As he traveled through the wilderness he stopped at dusk and set up camp for the night, laying his head on a stone to sleep. And as he slept he had a dream. He dreamed that the heavens opened, and a stairway appeared, connecting heaven and earth. And on that stairway angels ascended and descended. As Jacob watched this sight in his dream he heard the voice of God speaking to him, promising to watch over him and protect him, to give him land and a future. Jacob woke from his dream absolutely stunned. He said, "I had no idea God was in this place." And he named the place "Bethel", which means "house of God".

Hold onto that story and see how it connects to another story.

The Gospel writer, John, begins his Gospel with a magnificent poem. The opening line of the poem goes like this, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." John is telling his readers that what they are about hear is a story of a new creation. As the poem continues John tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, referring to the birth of Jesus. It's a stunning thing that John proclaims – that God came in the flesh to live among us! But here's the line of the poem I want you to focus on, "God came into the very world that he had created, but the world didn't recognize him." Think about that. God came, the Creator of all things, the One that the Israelites had worshiped for a thousand years. But they didn't recognize him.

Do you catch the connection between Jacob's story and John's poem? They are both telling us something about God and about us. God is present, right here and right now, but we often miss it. Let me say that again. God is present, right here and right now, but we often miss it.

Funny how often we miss what's right in front of us. About five years ago I was on the annual bike ride across Iowa, and each evening that week there's a concert. One evening one of my favorite bands from the 70's & 80's was scheduled to play a concert, The Little River Band. I was pumped. My

cycling team and I went out to dinner that night before the concert. At the end of the meal our server dropped off the check and asked if we were part of the bike ride. We told her that we were, and that we were really excited about seeing The Little River Band that evening.

"Oh", she said, "Did you get a chance to talk with them?"

"What do you mean," I asked, puzzled.

"The three guys sitting next to you through most of the meal? That was The Little River Band."

Suddenly my meal didn't sit so well in my belly! For nearly an hour one of my favorite bands had been sitting less than six feet from me, but I'd missed it.

Funny how often we miss what's right in front of us. But that's why this season of Advent is such a gift. Advent is an invitation to awaken to the reality of God-with-us. It reminds us that in Jesus God has come to dwell among us.

Ever notice how, if you buy a new car, you suddenly notice how many people are driving that same car? Or if you buy a new pair of shoes you suddenly become aware of how many other people are wearing the same shoes? It's not that you've started a trend. It's that now your eyes are open. You've become aware, and suddenly you see what has always been.

And that's how it is with Advent. Advent reminds us what has always been but we have not always had eyes to see. If someone had walked out of that restaurant just as I was walking in and had said, "Hey, The Little River Band is eating in there", trust me – I wouldn't have missed them. Advent says, "Hey, God isn't far away in some place called heaven; God is with you" so that we won't miss the amazing and often surprising ways in which God is present.

One of our disciples, Barb Peterson, had one of those moments of coming awake to God's surprising presence. Let's hear her story [show video].

Even in the darkest moments of life, God is present if we'll have eyes to see and faith to believe. What an awesome God we have!

Advent is an invitation to open our eyes and see by faith what has always been – God-with-us. Advent is an invitation to Christ, the One in whom the promise was made flesh.

This Advent season, awaken to the promise. This Advent season, awaken to the presence of God-with-us, and know the comfort and joy he brings.

Maybe you've already "seen" God woven into your day. Perhaps you've sensed God's faithful presence already in worship today. Or perhaps you don't have the foggiest idea what it means to "see" God in daily life. And that's OK. That just makes the invitation of Advent even more important.

On the back of your bulletin you're going to find another invitation, and invitation to use the spiritual practice of journaling to help awaken you to God's presence in daily life. I want us all, together, to lean into this practice and see how it opens our eyes to the One who has always been near us.