

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Dwell: For and With”

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1 John 1:3

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Today we continue our slow walk through the prologue to the First Letter of John in this Advent series “Dwell.” We’re focusing on the mystery and miracle of the Incarnation, of the Word made flesh, of Jesus the Eternal Son of God being born a baby. We’re just looking at one verse each week, with the invitation that we slow down a minute, dwell in the Word, so to speak, as the Lord dwells with us. And this prologue is all about the testimony to what has been seen, what has been heard, what has been directly witnessed, tangibly felt, not an abstract set of principles or lofty theological truths, but right there in front of them, the Incarnation, and why that matters so much.

So as we go onto the third verse this third Sunday in Advent, we consider what the Lord’s dwelling with us has to say about how we dwell with each other. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage, 1 John 1:3 .] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Loving God, by your Spirit, you dwell within us and are at work among and through us. We pray for your presence anew as we approach your Word, and we pray that you would open your Word to us in a new way this morning. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

The claim in just this seemingly simple verse is another theological bombshell. That’s part of the reason we’re going through it so slowly: if you just read the whole thing, even just a few verses, all at once, we can read over something that seemingly sounds nice but then when you think about it is a staggering claim about God, about the world, about God’s relationship with the world.

The big claim here is in the “so that.” If you ever read the New Testament letters closely, whether it’s Paul, John, Peter, that phrase “so that,” is a big deal. It’s often the letter’s way of saying, “So all of that I was just talking about? Here’s why it matters.” “So that.”

And here in 1 John 1 verse 3, “We declare to you what we have seen and heard,” which is a bit of repetition of what the previous two verses were going over, this testimony of the Word of life, the eternal Word of God, made flesh, Incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, being seen, heard, felt, all of that is *so that*...what? “So that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

And as you read that, I’m sure the same question comes to your mind as came to mine: how long does it take for a lion to grow up?

No? No one else was wondering that? Well, I remember wondering that years ago.

The reason I had wondered it was because of “Hakuna Matata.” Many will know “Hakuna Matata.” It’s the song in the middle of the Disney movie *The Lion King*. There’s the lion cub Simba, and he’s the heir to the

lion throne, but he goes into exile after the death of his father and his uncle usurps the throne. So he has a bit of an existential crisis. (It's basically *Hamlet* with animals.)

Once he goes into exile, he befriends Timon the meerkat and Pumbaa the warthog, and they teach him their carefree lifestyle. And I suppose there's a sermon somewhere in there, just in how they pitch their wonderful carefree lifestyle, but really it just consists of them eating bugs, all while they run away from their responsibilities and tell themselves "This is the life." But that's another sermon.

The mantra they embrace for this bug-eating lifestyle is captured in the happy tune of "Hakuna Matata," which as they tell Simba means "No worries." So they sing and dance through the jungle, and the young cub Simba is embracing this new lifestyle, this credo "No worries," "Hakuna Matata."

Then at one point as the music's still going, Timon the meerkat, Pumbaa the warthog, and the lion cub Simba are walking across a log. Then before our eyes, Simba the cub transforms into Simba the full-blown lion, then they wrap up the song. And of course it's showing there's been a passage of time. Simba's not a cub anymore, he's an adult lion, an adult lion still in this Hakuna Matata world.

And years ago, I remember wondering, wait so how much time just passed right there? Because shortly after that, Simba reunites with someone from his past who then stirs him to go back, retake the throne, and set things right, and that's the end of the movie. But how much time passed?

Turns out, best guess would be about five years. Just based on size, lion cub Simba would probably be about 4-5 months old, then based on grown up Simba not just being bigger but having a filled-out mane, he'd be between 5-6 years old. So about five years pass while Simba, Timon, and Pumbaa are walking across the log singing "Hakuna Matata."

I couldn't say why that question popped up for me years ago, but it strikes me now only in thinking about the timespan of the rest of the movie. There are these intense bursts of action early in Simba's life, and then later when he comes back to reclaim the throne, but that doesn't take much time. Months, maybe. The vast, vast majority of the plot of *The Lion King*, just from the perspective of a timeline, happens while they're walking across that log.

Samuel Wells is a priest in the Church of England, serving now in central London, but before that a professor and dean at Duke Divinity School. One book he wrote is called *The Nazareth Manifesto*, and as the name would suggest, it deals a lot with what we might glean from Jesus' time in Nazareth, his hometown. And for our Bible scholars out there, you might be thinking, "Well wait a minute. Sure all well and good, but Jesus doesn't spend much time in Nazareth."

And in the span of the biblical narrative, just in terms of where the action happens, no not much happens in Nazareth. It's referenced often enough, but the biggest things that actually take place there involve how Jesus gets run out of town because of what he's saying publicly. But that's not what Wells is getting at.

Instead, Wells makes the point that as far as a timeline goes, in the biblical narrative of the person of Jesus, the vast, vast majority of Jesus' time happens in Nazareth. In the Gospel of Luke, two different parts read as follows. In v. 39, this is after Christ is presented at the temple as a baby, "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him." Then a little bit later, after twelve years had passed and after Jesus as a boy went to the temple with his parents and amazed the teachers there, in v. 51 it

says, “Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them, and his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.”

Then about 18 years pass, and when Jesus is thirty years old, he begins his public ministry. Blink and you’ll miss it, but just in those verses, the vast majority of Jesus’ life on earth has just passed. These are the Hakuna Matata verses. Now, take away the escapism and avoidance that Simba had, but imagine young Jesus walking across a log, just “increasing in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor,” until boom, there’s grown up Jesus on the other side of it.

Now some might think, “Hey, there’s a reason not much is told about that time in Nazareth: because it wasn’t important.” And yeah, some pretty important things happen in Jesus’ public ministry: his teaching, his miracles, his declaration of the kingdom of heaven and the Messiah’s purpose, not to mention his crucifixion and resurrection—those are kind of important. But Wells makes the point that we shouldn’t just dismiss those Nazareth years as unimportant, because maybe in their relative silence, they’re saying something powerful about why Jesus is here.

He makes a big distinction between “working” or “doing *for*” someone versus “being *with*” someone. He notes that for us we tend to gravitate toward “doing for” someone else, because it’s easier, cleaner. There’s an objective. *Being with* someone is a bit harder. It makes a bigger claim upon us. It doesn’t have so clear a measurable objective.

It’s not an either/or sort of thing, of course. Obviously Jesus does amazing things *for* us, for our sake, dying for our sins, rising into new life that we might share in that life. But Wells points out that there may be a lot more in those Nazareth years pointing to the reason Jesus did so much *for* us.

“So Jesus spent a week in Jerusalem *working for* us, doing what we can’t do, achieving our salvation.... He spent three years in Galilee *working with* us, calling us to follow him and work alongside him.... But before he ever got into working with and working for, he spent 30 years in Nazareth *being with* us....

“The joy of a child of God is more than anything else the joy of being with God—not just working for or with God but simply being with God because there is nowhere better to be.... If Jesus shows us not only what it means to be God but what it means to be human, we should take his example seriously.... There can be no true working for or working with God or humanity that is not deeply rooted in being with both.”

The point, the purpose, in other words, of all that Christ does is to restore a relationship, a fellowship between God and humanity that had been broken, and he models that in the reality that the vast majority of his life is just him being with humanity, in the flesh. If the grand purpose of Jesus’ life was just to die and rise again, why mess with waiting thirty years? Why not just let Herod do his monstrous thing when Jesus is a baby, when Herod slaughters the innocent? Why not just let infant Jesus be killed then, raise him from the dead, and then be done with it? Mission accomplished, right? Because that’s not the purpose. That was the means, but it wasn’t the reason. The reason is this good news of fleshed out, embodied God being with us, dwelling with us, like those Nazareth years, and much more of it.

That’s what I think 1 John is getting at, when it says, “We declare to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

Do you hear why that's so staggering a claim? It's saying that everything that was witnessed about Christ, about his ministry, about his death and resurrection, the testimony of the church, was *so that* you, the reader, the listener, may have fellowship with us, and not just "with us," but that same fellowship is none other than fellowship, *being with* the presence of God Almighty.

In other words, say you invite someone to come to church with you, maybe a family member, maybe a friend. And they ask you, "So what do you do at church on Sunday morning?" What would you say? Well, you might "We sing," or "We pray," or "We read the Bible," or "We begrudgingly listen to a sermon." All those are true. But would you say, "We commune with the Eternal, Living God"? Maybe you wouldn't say that, but that's the claim we're making when we come together. That's the claim this verse is making. That the fellowship of the church, by the grace of Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, is our *being with* God and *being with* each other.

Sounds easy to say, but it can be hard work *being with* someone else. Not because it's so taxing—maybe it can be sometimes—but more because maybe we're more interested in the easier way out.

A lot of times it's a lot easier, cleaner, just to do something for someone else, instead of being with them.

There's this story of a man going home for Christmas. His aging mother couldn't get around as well anymore but was still on her own, so the man brings his family, and his siblings do the same, and they all do Christmas, the presents, the tree, the stockings. It's nice.

Then during a quiet stretch later in the evening, after the grandkids have fallen asleep, it's just the son and his siblings and their mother there in the living room. The son's all antsy about it. He's looking around the house he grew up in, looking at all the things that bring back memories, all the things he cherishes from his childhood. But he's also recognizing how it isn't so easy for his mother to keep the house together, because he's seeing this thing that maybe could be fixed, or that thing that could be replaced.

So as they're sitting there, he asks his mother, "Mom, could I straighten up that picture frame for you?" "No, it's alright," she says.

Then a few minutes later, "Mom, could I put oil on that door hinge that's squeaky?" "No, it's alright," she says.

Then a few minutes later, he really can't sit still, "Mom, could I set up your new cell phone for you so you can use it to call us or call anyone else?" His mother then sits up a bit, takes her glasses off, and looks at her son. "No, son, it's alright. I just want you to sit here with me, and I want you to be with each other."

Maybe, through all those years in Nazareth, through all the testimony of what was seen and heard and touched, through all the good news of the Word made flesh, through all the power of the cross and the empty tomb, that's what God is saying to us too this Christmas, and in every season: "I just want you to be with me. I just want you to be with each other."

Can we do that?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.