

# SEQUOYAH HILLS

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Dwell: Scentsicles”

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**1 John 1:1**

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Today as we begin this season of Advent, we'll explore what is known as the central miracle of the Christian faith, the Incarnation, the claim the proclamation that the Eternal, Infinite God became human, fully, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We hear it perhaps most succinctly in a verse in the opening verses of the Gospel of John that some may be familiar with: “The Word [that is, the eternal action or revelation of God] became flesh and dwelled among us.”

What does it mean for God to dwell among us, fully? What good news does that hold for us as we prepare for and celebrate this season of anticipation? How can we even hope to begin to understand something that by its very nature defies category or comprehension?

As we consider these questions about some of the core claims of Christmas and the Christmas faith, we'll be looking at the opening verses of another of John's works in Scripture, the Letter of 1 John, taking a pretty slow walk, just one verse each week of Advent. Today, we read v. 1. Let's go to God's Word together.

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

Incarnate God, by grace you revealed yourself to us fully in the person and work of Jesus Christ, your Son. Make yourself known, we pray, by your Spirit, in the Word you offer us today. And for the Word spoken and heard this morning, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

In Germany in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a byproduct of increasing industrialization and manufacturing and its demands for raw materials and fuel, concerns over deforestation became a hot button issue. When it came time for the holidays, Germany being the birthplace of the tradition of Christmas trees to begin with, that environmental concern then became focused on the widespread growth and harvesting of small evergreen trees.

So, to decrease the number the trees being cut down every Christmas, thus was born what is thought to be the first largescale usage of artificial Christmas trees.

The way they made them was taking a simple dowel or broom handle, attached a bunch of wire branches around the sides of it, then gluing, of all things, a bunch of goose feathers to all the wire branches and painting them all green.

Over the decades and centuries, artificial trees have waxed and waned in popularity. The materials used for them have developed from goose feathers to aluminum to plastic and even to fiber optic cable, believe it or not.

And some of you may have an artificial tree at home. Maybe you've already dragged it down out of the attic and fluffed it up. Or maybe you are passionately against such monstrosities, saying you can't have a

Christmas tree unless you make the yearly pilgrimage to the Mayo's or the boy scout's tree stand around the corner, tie the thing to the roof of your car, get tree sap all over you as you drag into the house, awkwardly center it in the stand, tinker with it for 45 minutes trying to get it to stand up a bit more perfectly vertical, a little this way, a little that way, until finally saying, "Okay, that's good enough."

For the environmentally minded, the same debate from 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany continues. Is it actually better to get the artificial tree once, or the real trees over and over again? That's not the point of the sermon. But regardless of how you might feel about the real vs artificial tree debate, one factor that remains true, if you go the artificial route, is that no matter whether it's goose feathers or aluminum or fiber optic cable, it's not going to smell like the real thing.

There's a smell to a room that has a real Christmas tree in it.

You might have noticed, as we read just that opening verse to the First Letter of John, this emphasis on the senses. "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life." What we have heard—our hearing. What we have seen—our sight. What we have touched—our feeling. No, smell isn't one of the senses here, but you get the picture.

John opens this letter with the unmistakable notes of what we experience directly in the senses. The point of it isn't John declaring to the early church how nice it is to see things and hear things and touch things. It's that the substance of the declaration of the church. And it kind of defies logic. It's speaking on two different planes.

On one hand, it's on an eternal scale. "We declare to you what was from the beginning." For our Bible scholars out there, you might echo the first verses of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," or with even more connection to this Letter of John, the first verse of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What John is invoking here is the scale of eternity, the foundations of creation, obviously things beyond our comprehension, much more beyond our observation.

So what one would expect to follow, given that these declarations about the beginnings, the foundations, the eternal scope of things are beyond what we could have observed or experienced, is more an abstract reflection, shall we say. We weren't there at the beginning of things, so let's try to think more philosophically about it. Maybe consider the true mysteries of time and space. You know, good theological rumination. Nothing necessarily wrong with doing that. There can be a good, faithful place for some pretty lofty theological thought, and the church has been well-served by faithful, intelligent Christians who have dedicated their lives and ministries to precisely that.

But that's not what John does.

Instead, he goes to the senses. "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands." And it doesn't really match up. How can John be claiming to declare these eternal truths based on what he and others have heard, and seen, and touched?

Those are some big questions, but clearly in this declaration of the "Word of Life," something would be missing if it wasn't something that could be heard, that could be seen, that could be touched.

As folks in various waves opted for artificial Christmas trees, as we've noted, that something that was missing was the smell. The artificial tree just didn't smell like a real one.

That created a market, a demand, for something that could fill in the gap, something that could make a room smell like a real Christmas tree without actually having one.

Some of you may have bought a product like that, Christmas tree smell spray. It's widely available now.

There's a company named Scentsicles. Now they didn't invent artificial Christmas tree spray, but they may have taken it to the next level. Their signature product is what looks like a scented icicle that you can hang on a tree. Hear how this company presents itself:

"As the team at Scentsicles carries the baton handed by the Sherwoods [the founding family of the company], everything we do is driven by a singular purpose – to foster connections through the power of authentic scent.

"We understand how scent can transport us back to happy memories shared with loved ones and transform our spaces to be more cozy, warm and inviting. Nothing does this like scent that is grounded in nature, rooted in the outdoor plants you smelled as a child or the spices your grandmother baked with during the holidays. That's why it's so important to us that all of our scents smell like the real thing, are made from the real thing – and take you back to the scents you fell in love with as a kid."

There's a lot in there obviously. You've probably heard before that the sense most connected to memory is scent. They're evoking that there. And you can probably relate. There are smells that connect you to the past, to a person, to a place. It's the reason why even in Scripture, like we read in Exodus, there's this emphasis on incense and the smell of the inner temple and the actual presence of God.

The good people at Scentsicles know this. They're evoking it there. And they've got the signature spray that you can spray into a room to make it smell like a Christmas tree. But that's not all. Wait, there's more, as they say. They've got the scented candles that you can light to make it smell like a real tree. They've got ornaments that you can hang on the tree itself to make it smell like a real tree. They even have this wonderful little product called Scentfetti, which are these paper pellets that you can simply pour into a decorative bowl, like the world's cheeriest cereal, and that'll make the room smell like a real tree, for upwards of a month.

And they've gotten so good at marketing that they've even managed to get product placement in Christmas season sermons. Advent at Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church, 2025, brought to you by Scentsicles. (That's a joke, just in case there was any confusion.)

Now this isn't to cast a verdict on anyone who buys a product like Scentsicles, or anyone who has an artificial tree, or has a real tree or no tree at all for that matter.

But oh, the lengths we will go to, to make things seem like the real thing.

We heard the declaration of the church in 1 John, with this connection both to eternity, to the foundations of the world, and to the senses, the tangible ways in which this good news would be perceived, in what we have seen, in what we have touched, in what we have heard, and, if we might allow a bit of extension, in what we have smelled.

So I ask this. How empty would the good news of Jesus be, the good news of his teaching, the good news of his healings, the good news of the kingdom of God, the good news of the cross, the good news of the empty tomb, how empty would all of it be if at its root was the declaration, “We declare to you what was from the beginning, that which seemed like the presence of God, but really it only smelled like it”? Emmanuel, God with Us? Eh, maybe, maybe not, but it smells like it. The Word of God, the eternal presence of God revealed among us, made flesh and dwelling among us? Eh, maybe, maybe not, but it smells like it.

That’s why this declaration, this miracle of the Incarnation is so central, so crucial to the hope we have in Christ, for it is a declaration about the kind of God we worship and serve, not a god content to remain up in the rafters, aloof and indifferent, but one that takes on our nature, our flesh, in all of its brokenness and faults, fully, miraculously, paradox-defyingly, and redeems it.

How empty would the gospel of Jesus be if underneath it was the declaration of, well, it seemed like God was with us, but really it only smelled like it?

We ask it like that, and we say, oh well of course that’d be empty, we wouldn’t want it that way.

But then for how many of us, if we’re really honest, would it be easier if it was just something we could simulate? If the dwelling in the presence of God was something we could simply buy tomorrow on Cyber Monday and have shipped to our home and check that off our list for the season. Because, like Scentsicles, what lengths will we go to simulate the presence of God?

Maybe we’ll try to carve out time to consider the good news of the season, the dwell with the Lord in things like prayer, reflection, Scripture, fellowship, but then in practice it’s just one of the many, seemingly multiplying claims upon our calendar in an already jam-packed December, and so doing so feels more like a burden or one more thing on a check list than the actual blessing of experiencing the good news of God with Us.

Maybe we’ll have every intention to slow down, to consider the radical, earth-shattering claims of the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, but to do so would mean giving up something that we think we have to do, or want to do, or feel obligated to do.

Maybe we’ll have every intention to stop and savor the season, the time of communion with the Lord and for that communion to draw us into closer fellowship with each other, slower, more intentional, but the pace of things overwhelms, and we feel we can no longer keep up or that the price would be too high and we would miss too much.

And so, maybe we find it easier to simulate the presence of God, easier to make the season smell like the real thing, but forsaking the life-giving good news that God dwells with us.

If any of this is resonating with you, or challenging you, or comforting you, I invite you this Advent season to prepare your hearts, to embrace a slower more tangible rhythm of faith, for you, for your households. Slow down. Sit. Stay a while. Resist the pressures that tell you, go faster, do more, you have to. Instead, hear this invitation to receive and declare the good news from the beginning: that the Word of Life dwells among us, and is with you even now.

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