

Several years ago, in a suburb of Rochester, New York, a man named Peter Lovenheim decided to take his dog for a walk. After leashing up his canine companion as he was headed out the front door of his house, he was surprised to see a TV news truck parked at a couple of houses down the block. What was going on he thought to himself? As it turned out, a horrible tragedy. A neighbor three doors down had shot and killed his wife and then himself. Thankfully, their two young children had escaped, running screaming into the night.

Lovenheim was shocked — not only by their 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 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?”

That’s a good question, and it is one we should also ask ourselves. Do we live in communities, or do we exist in a collection 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 end result, of his idea, led him to write the book *In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time*.

Apparently Lovenheim is an author who likes to sleep over. But did you know that a similar situation existed about 2,022 years ago, when God surveyed

the scene on earth and saw violence and isolation in every nation, race 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 what no one ever expected a divine being to do: he decided to 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, as the story goes, is engaged to a girl named Mary, and she has just recently discovered that she's pregnant. Now, 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.

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 him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins!” The word of God comes through the voice of an angel, letting Joseph know that Mary's child is a gift of God and that her baby, to be named Jesus, will bring salvation to the people of this earth. Jesus will rescue us from everything that can destroy or divide us — in particular, the sins that shatter our relationships with God and our neighbor.

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.” Matthew realizes that God isn't simply coming for one isolated sleepover, in a visit from an angel to a sleeping man. No, God's moving in with us, permanently. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, now and forever! Forget about making up a bed in the guest bedroom. It's time to build an addition, especially one in our hearts!

God knows that we have trouble with our neighbors. Yes, you know the ones. Parties that run loud and late, out-of-control flower-trampling kids, people with no respect for neighborhood speed limits. Individuals with their lawns neglected all summer, and their sidewalks treacherous when we get the occasional snowfall in winter. They either ignore us, or gossip about us, never lifting a finger to help us. Yes, at times Neighbors can be a pain.

But as bad as these relationships between people can be, our relationship with God is equally problematic. We indulge our selfish desires, trample the Lord's commandments, and drive fast through life without thinking of the consequences. We neglect Jesus' teachings and don't always put much effort into having a personal spiritual relationship with God, let alone putting in the work it takes to build a truly Christian community. We either ignore God or take his name in vain, rarely lifting a finger to advance God's will in the world.

From the Lord's perspective, each of *us* can be a bit of pain a times. Despite this, however, 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-human barriers as well. God comes to us as Immanuel, God with us, because God wants to be *In the Neighborhood*. Ok, with that being said, what will God discover? Perhaps he will observe some of the same things that Lovenheim uncovered when he packed up his overnight bag and walked over to his neighbors' houses for a sleepover.

First, a great number of people today are terribly lonely and don't know how to make connections. Lou Guzzetta, the first neighbor Lovenheim spent the night with, was a widower with a big belly who enjoyed his afternoon cocktail, his dog, and his local YMCA support group. Yet, he often felt very alone. Guzzetta tried to reach out by taking dinners to new arrivals in the community. But his kind gestures

were rarely reciprocated. In so many communities today, we've lost the skills and abilities to create neighborly bonds. At one point, Guzzetta said to Lovenheim, "There are no neighbors here."

This is more than a sad and tragic state of affairs. It's a sin. Theologian Paul Tillich saw this coming, observing a half-century ago that separation is an aspect of everyone's experience, and that *sin is separation*. "To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation," he said — separation from other people, separation from self, and separation from God. The good news of Christmas is that God enters into our 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.

"In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself," says the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, "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 our neighbors. We are to make connections and work to overcome the state of separation that's such a sinful condition in our world today.

The second discovery a "sleepover God" would make today is that most people are overscheduled and awfully busy, but still their lives are empty. Working hard to make a living, raising children, pursuing advanced degrees, participating in sports leagues, putting time into hobbies — all these activities have value, but when you put them all together you end up with a frantic and disconnected life. Into the middle of this frenzy, God sends a baby. And babies, we all know, 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 nudges us to change our pace and our plans. "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him," says the gospel of 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 borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

When a baby comes into our lives, everything changes. Suddenly, we’re forced to pay attention to feedings, diaper changes, and naps. And recently my step-son Kenny and his wife are experiencing something similar with their new baby girl Amira, who was born on November 7th. The same is also true with the coming of Christ, if we allow ourselves to be changed and refocused. You see... the great challenge of Christmas is to let ourselves slow down and see that yes, in fact, “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 that child by loving the Lord our God, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and by going out to make disciples of all nations.

Jesus’ great commandment is to love! And his great commission is for us to make disciples, for us to baptize and to teach. A sense of peace and purpose can come from following Jesus this way — something we’ll never find in our jobs, degrees, athletics, or hobbies. Notice also, that we can’t avoid our neighbors when we focus on Jesus and walk in his way. After all, you can’t practice love or discipleship in isolation. And that’s just another good reason to welcome the God who sleeps over. Amen.