

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
John 1:1-14, Christmas Day

December 25, 2005  
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<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was with God in the beginning.

<sup>3</sup>Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup>In him was life, and that life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

<sup>6</sup>There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

<sup>11</sup>He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup>Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup>children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

<sup>14</sup>The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

I think I've seen the 1995 Oscar winning release of the movie *Sense and Sensibility* at least twenty-five times. (Okay, so it won the Oscar for best costumes, not best movie, but still, an Oscar's an Oscar.) I own a copy of it and when life as mother, wife, pastor, daughter, sister, neighbor, friend, and citizen gets to be too much for me, I pop my old, worn, purchased as a pre-viewed movie from the video store during seminary tape into the VCR and enter the world of the Dashwood sisters. Every time I watch I admire Elinor's resourcefulness, I balk at Marianne's immaturity, and I eagerly anticipate the scenes with Edward Ferrars, played by Hugh Grant who I think is just the most dreamy guy in Hollywood. Whatever it is about my own life that's been getting to me fades into the recesses of my mind as lovely images of the English countryside fill the screen and I am taken back to a time and place that feels comfortable and strangely familiar.

In the beginning of the movie Mr. Dashwood dies and his wife and daughters are forced to a small cottage owned by a distant cousin. In one scene, the Dashwood women are together in a carriage on their way home from dinner with their new landlord and his dowager mother-in-law Mrs. Jennings. All through dinner the Dashwood women are annoyed with the spunky, snooty, and assuming Mrs. Jennings; all except Margaret, the youngest sister, age eleven. As her sisters and mother complain, Margaret declares of Mrs. Jennings, "I like her. She talks about things."

This line spoken with the wisdom and authenticity of a child often runs through my mind when I encounter someone who's really willing to be authentic and real. Though we may laugh at the formal customs and tight-lipped manner of our Victorian ancestors, we are mistaken if we begin to think that we are so different than were they. How often do we beat around the bush or ignore an issue because we don't want to "get into it"? How many times do we refrain from speaking our minds because we're afraid of being questioned or rejected? How often do we pass up the opportunity to ask a clarifying question at a meeting, at work, or in a casual conversation because we're afraid of appearing silly? What details about our lives do we keep secret because we're ashamed or embarrassed?

Folks often find themselves in these circumstances. And why? Because we're afraid that we might not be meeting up to people's standards or because we're afraid to admit that we don't meet up to our own. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Jennings cared little what others thought of her and because of that, she lived with a sense of freedom. That's why she was willing "to talk about things," she had nothing to lose. She was a well-established woman in society who had oodles of money and nearly everything she needed in life served to her on a silver platter.

The same is not true of most of us—we have jobs we need to keep and so we don't speak up at work when something is amiss. We have families we want to be in tact and so we keep some comments to ourselves. Some of you are students and you need to get decent grades and so you don't always speak up to disagree with a teacher or professor. There are times when keeping our mouths shut—when not “talking about things” is the better part of wisdom.

However, it seems that most every place we go has become a place where really talking about things isn't welcome. This is unfortunate. There are places in our lives where we should and need to be able to “talk about things.” There are places where we need to feel secure enough to question, disagree, and discuss. We need places where we can, as they say, “let our hair down.” There are places where we need to just be able to come as we are, places besides our homes where it's okay to wear our pajamas on Christmas morning. And that's what this church, indeed any church, should be, can be, and sometimes is—a place where you can come as you are. A place where you can be you, in all the glory and complexity with which God created you.

But, the irony is that church is sometimes the last place where we feel like we can be ourselves. There's this strange image of the “Happy, Shiny Sunday Morning People.” Where does it come from? Is it from the televangelists and their poofey hair and well-made up faces? Is it from tradition dictating that we get dressed up for church? Whatever the source, there are definitely forces at work telling us that church is where you come if you've got it all together and you want to show it off—or at least if you want to pretend that you've got it all together and are trying to show it off in a last ditch effort to convince yourself and everyone else that it's all together.

And yet, if we were like Mrs. Jennings from *Sense and Sensibility* and really willing to “talk about things”, most of us here would admit that, despite our best efforts, we don't have it all together. Some of our children struggle in school where there can be a lot of competition, hard work, and even bullies. Some of our older adults struggle to remember things—searching in their minds for memories of where they put their keys, someone's name, or even their own home address. Some folks here have physical and mental chronic illnesses that make their bodies ache or minds depressed and just getting out of bed in the morning is an accomplishment. No matter the source of our imperfection or struggle, the reality is that we all have them, old, young, and in between. Sometimes there's just not a lot about us that is shiny and happy.

This is hard to admit, especially at Christmas. The Christmas Season is a magnification of the struggle to have it all together when inside we feel like we're falling apart. Everything around us is telling us to be merry and bright, that this is the most wonderful time of the year. And if it is for you, please treasure the experience. But for many, this is the most stressful time of the year. It is the time of unrealistic expectations. It is the time when it becomes most difficult to escape comparisons between what you're life is and what you're being told it should be. It is a difficult time for many because no one really expects you to be merry and bright on June sixth. But it is expected of everyone at Christmas and so if you're not merry and bright during this season then not only are you struggling with not being merry and bright, which is difficult in and of itself, but you're also dealing with other people's expectations that you will be merry and bright and so you're stressed about not being merry and bright for the people who you are thinking are counting on you being merry and bright. And if you're caught in this vicious cycle, let me say STOP. If there's something I want you to remember from this rather somber sermon on Christmas Morning, it's that it's just fine to not always be merry and bright, just as it is fine to

sometimes be merry and bright. Just because it's Sunday doesn't mean we have to put on our happy face and just because it's Christmas doesn't mean we have to either.

If the church were only for happy people, for those among us who are merry and bright, we wouldn't need a church. If we weren't people who had hurt feelings, regrets, fears, sicknesses, and anxieties, then we wouldn't be here celebrating Christmas this morning. If all's well, who needs a Savior? What would we need to be saved from if everything was fine? God didn't send God's only son into this world to entertain us or give us the warm fuzzies or to give us an excuse to get all gussied up once a week or to make us merry and bright. God sent us Jesus—the event we celebrated last night and here this morning—because we desperately needed him, and still do. And if this church, indeed if any church, isn't a place where we can come as we are and really talk about things, well then we're missing the point of this whole holiday all year long.

If this isn't a church where I can come and tell you my story of living with depression, then this church is not all that it can be. If this isn't a church where someone like Ed Havitz, Pam Fulton's husband, can come and, bless his heart for doing it, be absolutely honest that he lives with Alzheimer's, then this church is not all that it can be. If this isn't a church where Will can come and ask challenging questions during a children's message, then this church is not all that it can be. If this isn't a church where a new visitor feels welcome regardless of his or her skin color or clothing, then this church is not all that it can be. If this isn't a church where you begin to relax as you ascend the steps into the sanctuary, then this church is not all that it can be. If this isn't a church where we can come as we are and really talk about things—to admit things, to ask for help, to cry, to laugh, to question, to challenge, and to admit that we really don't have it all together and we're feeling anything but merry and bright, then this church is not all that it can be. And because this church is made up of human beings who often make mistakes or miss the mark, it, like every other church, is not always all that it could be. And that's why we need this gift we've received from God this weekend.

We still need Jesus and the Good News of the Gospel this morning is that God has come among us. The Word Made Flesh, it says. And it came to make us children of God. It didn't come to make us merry and bright. It didn't come to create a community of perfect folks. The Word Made Flesh—God among us—Emmanuel, came to give us a new life in which we don't have to worry about past mistakes and regrets—they're all forgiven. The Word Made Flesh didn't care what people were wearing, how much or how little they were educated, whether they were rich or poor, fat or thin, pretty or plain, sick or well. The Word Made Flesh came and loved everyone as only God can love and when he left and ascended into heaven, he sent an Advocate—the Holy Spirit, to bind us together in a community of faith where we would continue to show to each other the kind of love he had shown us. A love that accepts, trusts, encourages, holds up, listens, speaks, and allows us to “come as we are” however and whenever we are how we are.

My prayer for all of us on Christmas and in the New Year is that we will be a people who talk about things, a church where each person is accepted as God accepts us. I pray that, as we follow God's call on our lives, we might become a place where all people—shiny, happy, slouching, or sad can come and feel valued, come and feel important. That is our gift this Christmas—that we can come to God just as we, because Christ first came to us.