



*In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow
in the bleak midwinter long ago.
(ELW 294 by Christina Georgina Rosetti)*

No one actually has any idea what time of year Jesus was born. It wasn't until some 350 years after the fact that Pope Julius I set the official date of December 25. I know that there were a lot of factors involved – including other cultural and religious celebrations around the winter equinox. Instead of trying to force pagans to stop celebrating the equinox, the church gave them a Christian reason to celebrate. Presto chango!

That said, having a birthday party for God Incarnate when the weather is cold and dreary, *does* make life better. Winter can be lonely and depressing for a lot of people. It is extremely important to take that time to connect with both God and people. Unfortunately, at the same that fewer and fewer people are engaging in faith communities, our society is growing more and more lonely. In May of 2023, the Surgeon General of the USA issued a public statement claiming loneliness and isolation as an actual health crisis in our country. The statement opens with:

“Today, United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new Surgeon General Advisory calling attention to the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in our country. Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. Disconnection fundamentally affects our mental, physical, and societal health. In fact, loneliness and isolation increase the risk for individuals to develop mental health challenges in their lives, and lacking connection can increase the risk for premature death to levels comparable to smoking daily.”¹

Many of the conversations I have with people *of all ages* in this congregation are about challenges of connecting to people and God in their daily lives. It isn't just homebound people that are suffering. Teens, parents, and active seniors are also experiencing loneliness even when surrounded by other people. At the same time, we are all busier than ever. It turns out that busy-ness and loneliness often go hand in hand, because work, school, and even fun activities do not, necessarily, equate to authenticity or vulnerability in relationships.

Dr. Lisa Miller of Columbia University is addressing the mental health ramifications of this pandemic of loneliness in her research. In her most recent book, “The Awakened Brain,” she gives scientific evidence (MRI scans) that parts of our brains are wired for spirituality. *It is the same part of the brain where people experience depression.* Statistics scientifically show that for people experiencing depression, a healthy spirituality significantly assists in treatment. For a surprisingly large number of people, focusing on connecting with others prevented depressive episodes.

You are all doing a great job by being active in this faith community. Attending worship, bible studies, fellowship activities. All of that is great for your health. For people too busy to engage in this community on a weekly basis, doing things like spending a few minutes in prayer each day, reading a few verses of scripture, or picking up the phone to talk with someone else that you know practices their faith can make a big difference.

This year, 2024, St. Timothy is going to work very hard to provide opportunities for people of all ages to connect to one another and to God. A big part of that is allowing people to be their own authentic and unique selves. I want everyone to know deep down inside that the One that created you sees you and loves you – just as you are. It is our job as a faith community to act on that love for one another.

As always, if you have suggestions of ways that we can better engage the community, please share them with me. Our work here in Wayne really is important – biblically and scientifically speaking.

¹ Full statement found here: <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>