

FINDING GOD IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

by Randy Keener

KEY VERSE:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

FAITH STORY:

John 1:1-18

FAITH FOCUS:

These verses serve as a foundation and introduction into the gospel of John, a hymn celebration of Jesus (the Word) coming into the world. Jesus is described as both fully human, and fully God. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness that could not overcome Him. Like God, who dwelled among the people in the wilderness, Jesus came to dwell among people as human, also showing us God's glory. Jesus revealed Shekinah, the presence of God, to the people 2000 years ago.

SESSION GOAL:

To challenge students to look at how God is being revealed and dwelling among them in their lives.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Hear how the first 18 verses lay the foundation and contain the essential message of the entire gospel.
- Look up and discuss what the words Dabar, tabernacle, incarnation, and Shekinah means.
- Write down ways in which they are experiencing God being revealed in their lives.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Pens and Paper
- 2 2 or 3 "Jenga" games
- 3 Light snacks
- 4 Bible Dictionaries—enough for each group of 3-4 students
- 5 Chalk board or dry erase board
- 6 Bibles for all students
- 7 The Message (New Testament) by Eugene Peterson
- 8 Be prepared to share a personal story of feeling God's presence in your life, and/or invite someone from your congregation to share with the class.

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (7–10 minutes)

Welcome students and invite them to form groups around the Jenga games and to begin playing. Share the snack during this time as well.

CONNECT: (5–7 minute)

Ask: *Who won the game? What is the key to doing well in this game?*

Say: *One of the keys to Jenga is keeping a strong foundation. We're going to look at a Bible passage that is a foundational passage for the book of John, but first, let's have some fun defining words. I'll say a word, and you think of a definition for it.*

Say the following words, one at a time, and go around the room so students can share their definitions.

Dabar

Tabernacle

Incarnation

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (10–15 minutes)

Divide the Bible passage to be read by different students as follows:

Verses 1-5

Verses 6-9

Verses 10-13

Verses 14-18

After the reading, share this mini-lecture:

We need to understand that the beginning of John is different in that it is not describing the beginning of a particular event like Jesus' birth. Nor is it the start of the ministry of Jesus. The beginning of John goes way back to when the world wasn't even created, and when the "Word" was with God before time as we know it existed. We are seeing the very character of God, and how God makes himself known to the world through the life and death of Jesus.

Split into groups of 3-4 students and give each group a Bible Dictionary. Have each group look up the three words they attempted to define earlier and prepare a brief explanation for the group.

Note to teacher: *Not all Bible dictionaries will include the word Dabar. Use the explanation below.*

When students are ready, bring them together to share their definitions. List what they found on the chalk board or dry erase board. Then share this mini-lecture:

The first word, Dabar, is God's spoken Word to creation and all God's people. It's what God commands, and desires. When God created the earth, it was with the spoken word—Dabar.

Another way to look at it is as if God is showing what he desires, and then that person has a choice to either reject or accept it.

The word tabernacle means to dwell among, as God was with his people as they wandered in the wilderness. Deuteronomy 26:5-10 is one of many verses that show God's presence with His people. (Look up these verses as a class.)

To bring the two words together—Incarnation and Dabar, is God's spoken word becoming flesh, and actually dwelling among the people. Jesus was revealing the full glory of God in himself, while at the same time experiencing human nature.

Now here's one more word we want to learn: Shekinah. Shekinah is a Hebrew word that means "the presence of God." Jesus represented God's presence among humanity when he came to earth. "The Word became flesh and lived among us." (John 1:14a)

APPLY: (10 minutes)

Say "God is still dwelling among us today through the Holy Spirit. How does the "Word" dwell among you today?"

Allow students to ponder this question and then share their thoughts.

Read John 1:1-18 from The Message.

Say: *Jesus moved into the neighborhood. He came and lived among the people, and experienced the every day things of life. Where is Jesus in your neighborhood? Are your eyes open to seeing him right now in your own life? Is it possible that there are too many other things controlling your life for you to see how God is dwelling among you?*

Share your personal story and invite the person(s) from your congregation to share as well about feeling the presence of God in their lives.

Say: *The awesome thing is that God can show up in the most unexpected places, and times in our lives. The most important thing is that we are open to God's presence in our life*

RESPOND: (7–10 minutes)

Plan a "Dwell In" with the students. Explain that a "Dwell In" is a retreat where they can spend some time in personal reflection, away from the demands of school, family, friends; and without the invasion of cell phones, television, IPODs, etc. Ask for their ideas of where they would like to have this retreat, when, and what elements they would like to involve. Are there some spiritual practices they would like at the retreat? (You may want to do some research on spiritual practices so you can make suggestions.) If there are enough students willing to commit to attending this retreat, make plans for it to happen.

Close with a prayer, thanking God for dwelling among us, and for God's grace and mercy in our lives. Ask God to continue to reveal his presence among us as we are growing and leaning from day to day.

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE:

Dabar is a Hebrew word meaning: "Spoken utterance," or "to speak or say." It is pronounced daw BAW. This word occurs over 1,400 times in the Old Testament. It is most often associated

with God speaking either directly and audibly, or through a person, place, or thing. In any case, the word Dabar means God initiating a dialogue. The real issue becomes how God's creation responds. Anything God chooses to breathe upon and anything God speaks to, changes. It either obeys or resists. If it obeys by receiving God's Word, it will manifest God's word. If it resists the Word, it dies. God's Voice is all powerful!

The Tabernacle is known in Hebrew as the Mishkan "Place of Divine dwelling." It was to be a portable central place of worship for the Hebrews from the time they left ancient Egypt, following the Exodus. It was also used through the time of the Book of Judges when they were engaged in conquering the land of Canaan, up to the time its elements were made part of the final Temple in Jerusalem around the 10th century BC. The Hebrew word points to an important meaning. Mishkan is related to the Hebrew word to "dwell", "rest", or "to live in", referring to the Presence of God. The Hebrew word for a "neighbor" is shakhen from the same root as mishkan. The commandments for its construction are taken from the words in the Book of Exodus when God says to Moses: "They shall make me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them. You must make the tabernacle and all its furnishings following the plan that I am showing you." Thus the idea is that God wants this structure built so that it may be a "dwelling", so to speak, for his presence within the Children of Israel following the Exodus.

The word incarnation is derived from the Latin, and means in the flesh. Jesus—the second person in the Trinity—took on two natures: completely God, and completely human. His two natures are separate and distinct yet without fusion or mixture. In considering the Incarnation, we must remember that Jesus existed before his conception. In fact, we believe "through him all things were made." Through Jesus, God freely chose to share in the human experience, shrinking back from nothing and participating in our world as one of us. He bore the limits of human communication, and struggled to reveal the kingdom of God in human words and actions. He endured the same politics among his followers that we suffer today, and he paid his taxes. Being both God and man, inseparably joined, Jesus carried this intimacy in his own body. He showed a perfect union between the divine and the human in every moment of his life.

Some scholars challenge the credibility of the word Shekinah in the Bible, believing that the word came from post-biblical scholars. However, the concept of a physical manifestation of God's localized dwelling is nonetheless scriptural, and the idea of simply "God's presence with us" is what many take from the word today.

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