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**“The Perfect House”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
1st Sunday after Christmas
January 1, 2012
Galatians 4:4–7; Psalm 148; Luke 2:22–40**

For sentimental reasons, my daughter and I wanted to surprise my husband for Christmas with an artist's rendering of the house where he grew up in Lumberton, NC.

It's a modest, brick ranch, built in 1960,

which belonged to my husband's mother until her death two years ago.

We had a reasonably good photograph of the house, taken from the street,

but we wanted something artsy, like a pen and ink sketching with a watercolor over-wash.

So, I did what I now do whenever I have a problem, question, or a curiosity:

I Googled it: “pen and ink rendering of a photograph,”

and voilà, a program called Photo Sketcher popped up

which you can download as a free trial for 30 days.

Perfect, I thought, this will be easy and within my price range!

So Emily stepped in, took the color photograph,

tried to crop it accordingly to get the best view,

picked the artistic effect we liked the best,

copied it to a CD and took it to CVS,

and had it printed into an 11x14 picture to be framed.

We couldn't figure out how to preview it beforehand,

so we had to wait until the finished product emerged to get the full effect.

But, you know, it turned out surprisingly good, stunning actually,

considering that two amateurs downloaded a free app on a computer,

plugged in a photo, and tweaked it to make it look like an artist's rendering
of an old house.

But it's not perfect!

We never could crop out the telephone wire that droops low over the front stoop,
or manipulate or eliminate the large pine branch looming over the roof
that looks like a good wind might do considerable damage,
nor did we notice until it was printed that no one had swept the front walk
leading up to the house, and it was covered with messy, brown pine straw,
or that the house number, 3001, painted on the front curb, which would identify
this house specifically, was blurred and illegible in our artistic rendering.

It's not perfect, no matter how hard we tried to replicate the perfect house
that Hedge wants to remember as "home"

or that my children want to remember as "Grammy's house."

But it is what it is – a place where growth occurred,

a place where people dreamed dreams, daydreamed and had nightmares,
a place where birthday parties were held and candles blown out,

where pine straw was raked into piles and re-raked into piles,

where pick-up basketball games were played on the driveway,

where Sunday dinners were served,

where laundry was washed, hung on the clothes line to air-dry

and folded neatly into laundry baskets to carry inside,

a place where people were born, lived and died.

And it is sacred and precious for just that, in spite of the messy pine straw,
in spite of the looping power lines and threatening tree branches.

As the newly born baby Jesus is brought by his parents into the Temple in Jerusalem
to be dedicated to the Lord, according to Jewish custom,

two aged, pious Jews, Simeon and Anna, who are on the other edge of life,
recognize the divinity in this long-awaited child of promise

and marvel at what their failing eyes manage to see in him.

Simeon, inspired by the Holy Spirit, sees in him God's perfect embodiment of salvation,

a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory to Israel, too.

But, as Simeon stage whispers to Mary,

 this God-child is being born into a not-so-perfect world:

lines of power will hinder his going out and coming in, challenging every step of his journey;

his path will be littered with stumbling disciples and messy opposition,

 sure to trip up even the most God-focused and God-driven;

the Herod-bough over his head will cause constant consternation to his mother,

 as it suggests the cross that will one day break her heart.

But growth will occur in his Spirit-filled presence.

 Young men will see visions of hungry crowds being fed,

 of little girls rising from their sick-beds, healed,

 and of lame men walking, running, not weary.

Old men will dream dreams

 and live to see their dreams fulfilled, right before their very eyes.

And peace will become a realized possibility, perfect peace, God's shalom,

 of Word made flesh, of promise fulfilled.

Anna, the prophetess, also sees in this child the perfect redemption of Jerusalem,

 the manifestation for which she has prayed night and day, year after year.

But she also knows that this God-child is being born into a not-so-perfect world.

The House of David house is not in order. Her state is under siege.

 Her clergy are self-serving and manipulative.

Her pious keepers of the dream are old and close to death,

 her prophets all but silenced,

with no certainty as to who will take up their torch,

 who will keep the light of hope alive

as this long-awaited child takes even longer to mature

 in wisdom, stature and knowledge of God.

As we step into a new year in the life of First Presbyterian Church

 and begin the commemoration of 140 years of ministry

 at the crossroads of Roxboro and Main,

we begin, like Mary and Joseph, with the dedication of a child in the Temple,
the baptism of little Millie Delano Mogkoro Admay, a long-awaited child,
a child of promise, a child of hope.

But instead of beginning the year with fireworks and parties,
with bombastic music, with resounding speeches and proclamations,
I think it is important to begin with acknowledgment of our weaknesses,
with the confession that our house is less than perfect, too.

The history of First Presbyterian Church sounds good on paper, to be sure.
We've been at the task of ministry for quite some time on this very spot of turf.
We've spawned numerous mission outreach ventures from this congregation,
we've sent missionaries overseas to share and enact the gospel,
we've nurtured a cadre of good preachers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and philanthropists
from our midst,
we've stayed anchored to this volatile downtown community when others have chosen
to relocate to more stable environs,
we've led the way for women to be ordained as officers and clergy in
the southern Presbyterian Church,
we've been at the forefront of movements for racial reconciliation
and compassion for the poor.

These are the note-worthy accomplishments of First Presbyterian Church
which we are all proud to proclaim.

This is the perfect house which we would like for all the world to see.

But the real story of our history also includes our weaknesses—
the blurred number on our curb of the people who came to our door
and were turned away because we were unable or unwilling to help,
the blurred number on our curb of the pastors who disappointed,
who did not provide spiritual nurture or encourage the faithful,
the blurred number on our curb of congregation members who
quarreled and quibbled over minor matters,
the blurred number on our curb of marriages that failed,

of children who grew up here and left the church,
of misuse of funds or of the temptation to rest on our laurels
as the FIRST Presbyterian Church.

This is the real church into which little Millie will be baptized this morning,
our less-than-perfect house,
just as the world and church into which the little Lord Jesus was dedicated
was less than perfect – strawy, littered, threatening, looming, blurred,
unclear, not like we want to remember.

Nevertheless, God is in this place. God is here!

Nevertheless, this messy, strawy, not-so-perfect house is the matrix
out of which God works best, if we admit as much.

Sin, hurt, wrongdoing, brokenness, barrenness, disappointment, messiness
are the artistic media out of which God renders new creations,
restorations, new memories of beauty from God's perspective—not ours.

Nevertheless, forgiveness, redemption, and newness of life are the order of the day
for those who come to this place requesting, desiring, yearning for
healing, goodness and peace.

Nevertheless, Jesus is born and graced with a name that means “God saves,”
and he is accompanied by a phalanx of heavenly hosts
who yell from the clouds, “Fear not!”

Nevertheless, God continues to do a new thing here in this place,
with these people, for these people, among these people, within these people,
and you and I are witnesses and participants in this on-going miracle.

This place is sacred because growth is occurring here, and day by day,
we are being transformed into the full humanity which God intends for us,
which God has imaged for us in Jesus Christ.

Like it or not, the Sovereign Lord continues to litter our path with words
like spirit, promise, peace, salvation, revelation, light, glory, blessing,
thanks, redemption, wisdom, and grace—
words that suggest God's strength breaking through our weaknesses.

And the Sovereign Lord continues to bless our new years with stories of babies,
who come to the Temple to be dedicated, bringing light to sore, aging eyes,
and with real babies, like Millie, who come in perfect helplessness, in perfect dependence,
reminding us of our proper stance before Almighty God,
and who stare at us, smile at us, and render us hopeful, in spite of it all. Amen.