

# *A Happy, Healthy Hippocampus*

## John 1: 1-14

Rev. Tom VandeStadt  
December 29, 2019  
Congregational Church of Austin, UCC

I'd like to wish your hippocampus a very happy and healthy new year.

Of course, I wish all of you, every part of you, a very happy and healthy new year.

But in particular, I wish your hippocampus a very happy and healthy new year. Because your hippocampus will be very active this year. It will get quite the workout.

Just as athletes from around the world will suit up at the Olympics this year to perform at the highest levels of human athletic capacity, your hippocampus will suit up here at church this year to perform at the highest levels of human imaginative capacity.

Your hippocampus is the part of your brain—which is to say, the part of you—that's most actively involved in remembering the past and imagining a future.

It's also helps situate you in the present through spatial awareness, and by discerning patterns and processing context. In other words, it helps you get your bearings.

This means your hippocampus plays a significant role in who you think you are by connecting your present to the past through memory, and by projecting your present into the future through imagination.

I find it so interesting that the part of our brain most involved in what we remember is the same part of our brain most involved in what we imagine. Through memory and imagination we construct the story of our life—this is who I am, this is who I've been, and this is who I want to be.

Your hippocampus is a pretty important part of you.

I hope you appreciate your hippocampus, and care for it well. Thank God for it daily.

And I hope you're prepared to use it here at church. Like I said, it's going to get quite the workout this year.

From what I've read, imagination takes more energy and effort than memory. Imagining your future places greater demand on your hippocampus than remembering your past.

Donna Rose Addis, a neuroscientist, writes, "When we imagine a future event, we have to integrate details that may never have been integrated before. When you remember something, you are reintegrating details that already had linkages. So it's not so demanding for the hippocampus."

That's so interesting.

When we imagine a future, we have to integrate details that may never have been integrated before. Connect things, and people, that have never been connected before. Rearrange reality to include what's always been left out.

For our hippocampus, that connecting and integrating is like going to the gym. It's a good, strenuous workout.

We ourselves are going to be doing a lot of imagining this year. Olympic level imagining. So I wish you a happy and healthy hippocampus.

I'm sure it's no surprise to you that a happy and healthy hippocampus functions better than an unhappy and unhealthy hippocampus.

What makes a hippocampus unhappy and unhealthy?

Mainly stress, anxiety, and fear.

Your hippocampus is particularly sensitive to cortisol, the stress hormone. High levels of cortisol can damage or destroy cells in your hippocampus, and reduce the overall size of your hippocampus. Researchers can detect the contraction of the hippocampus in response to cortisol. When you're stressed out, anxious, or driven by fear, your cortisol-infused hippocampus is far more likely to think in pessimistic terms and to imagine negative outcomes.

Psychologist Daniel Schacter writes, "Anxiety has an important relationship to imagination, because it can lead us into a position where we're focusing on imagining negative future outcomes that may further cause us to become even more anxious."

Stress, anxiety, and fear contribute to a vicious cycle of negative thinking and more stress, anxiety, and fear.

A happy and healthy hippocampus, on the other hand, is one that's not doused regularly with cortisol, one that's not overly burdened by too much stress, anxiety, and fear.

For that to occur, your hippocampus must experience—which is to say, you must experience—a measure of safety, security, and stability in your life. If you feel relatively safe, secure, and stable in your life, you won't suffer unduly from stress, anxiety, and fear. And you're more likely to have a more positive outlook, and imagine more positive outcomes for your future.

That's why it's so important that we create a communal space with one another, and for one another, that feels safe, secure, and stable.

A place where we can situate ourselves in the present, get our bearings, without stressing one another out, producing anxiety in one's another's lives, or being fearful of one another.

A place where we feel safe, secure, and stable with one another, in the context of a wider world that may indeed stress us out, make us anxious, and scare us. And for good reasons.

But at least here, we can feel the safety, security, and stability that we need in order to imagine alternative worlds, alternative futures, futures that are better, that are less stressful, less anxious, and less scary. And we can't work together to create a new world, a better world, until we can first imagine it.

So when I wish your hippocampus a happy and healthy new year, I'm also praying for our church to be a safe, secure, and stable place, one that creates the environment for your hippocampus to be happy and healthy, that creates the environment for you to imagine.

By the way, two other things that contribute to a happy healthy hippocampus are sleep and meditation.

This morning we read from John's gospel, the Word became flesh.

That may be my favorite passage from the Bible.

The Word became flesh.

I like to think the Word becomes flesh. Over and over again,

To harken back a few weeks to my Advent reflection on love, the Word becomes flesh when people don't just say, God loves you, but when they say, *I* love you or *we* love you as well.

The Word becomes flesh when people don't just say, may God help you, but when they say, *I* will help you or *we* will help you as well.

When people say, God demands justice and *we* demand justice, the Word becomes flesh.

When people incorporate, when people embody, the spirit of God, and act in ways that are holy and wholesome, the Word becomes flesh.

When has the Word become flesh here, in this church?

We've just entered the year 2020, not only concluding one year and beginning a new year, but concluding a decade and beginning a new decade. That means the hippocampi of lots of pundits, op-ed writers, and commentators with a wide range of expertise are working overtime trying to explain what happened in the last ten years, and what will happen in the next ten—how we got here, how things got to be this way, where we're headed, how things will be.

It's what we do as humans with a hippocampus—make sense of our past, get our bearings in the present, and imagine our future.

So I invite you this morning to fire up your hippocampus, to shift it into memory drive, and to remember when you encountered the Word becoming flesh in this church over the past decade. For those of you who haven't been here for ten years, think back over the time you've been here. When did you encounter the Word becoming flesh in this church?

When were you the recipient of someone else's love, help, or care? Someone else's holy and wholesome presence? Someone else's passion for justice?

When did the spirit of God, embodied in someone here, touch your life in some way?

When were *you* the one who loved, helped, or cared for another? When were you a holy and wholesome presence to another? When did your passion for justice inspire another to act?

When did you embody the spirit of God, and touch someone else's life here?

And how about people outside our church?

How did you, and others in this church, love, help, and care for people outside our church?

How were you and others in this church a holy and wholesome presence to people outside our church?

How did you and others in this church demand justice for people outside this church?

When did we, the people of this church, embody God's spirit, and touch the lives of people outside this church?

Remember—when did the Word of God become flesh?

Shifting your hippocampus into higher gear and revving it up, I invite you now to imagine how the Word of God could become flesh in this church over the next ten years. In the future.

Flex your hippocampus! Come on, work it! Work it!

Use your imagination to make brand new connections between things and people that till now haven't been connected. See them, envision them, imagine them connected in the future in this church.

Use your imagination to rearrange reality in order to include and integrate new things and new people that till now have been separated and left out. See them, envision them, imagine them brought together and integrated in the future in this church.

Imagine new ways for the Word of God to become flesh in the future in this church.

Imagine new ways for this church to say to people in this neighborhood, in this city, in this world, in the future, God loves you and *we* love you.

God cares for you and *we* care for you.

God demands justice and *we* demand justice.

Ok, take a break. I can see smoke coming out of your ears.

It's hard work, flexing your hippocampus.

But get used to it, because you're going to be exercising your hippocampus a lot this year. We're going to ask your hippocampus to suit up here at church and perform at the highest levels of human imaginative capacity. Olympic level.

To construct the story of our church—this is who we've been, this is who we are, and this is who we imagine ourselves to be in the future.

That's why I wish your hippocampus a happy and healthy new year.