

Puzzle Pieces - Seeing Patterns

Waitaki Sunday Service

17 December 2023

Call to Worship – Psalm 126

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;

Then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.”

The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,

Shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Hymn The First Nowell

The first Nowell the angel did say
was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;
in fields where they lay keeping their sheep,
on a cold winter's night that was so deep.

Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell,
born is the King of Israel.

They looked up and saw a star
shining in the east, beyond them far;
and to the earth it gave great light,
and so it continued both day and night.

This star drew nigh to the northwest,
o'er Bethlehem it took its rest;
and there it did both stop and stay,
right over the place where Jesus lay.

Reading John 1:6-8

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

Reflection

I am not the light

The Jewish leaders were puzzled. Even John's disciples were puzzled. He was drawing huge crowds. They were listening to his preaching and responding with enthusiasm. The stream of people coming to be baptised was extraordinary. John said repent and be baptised and so people repented and got baptised. But when everyone asked what was going on he turned around and told them he was not who they were looking for. It made no sense.

And make no mistake, John was not preaching hope and grace and peace and love. His message was one of sin and repentance and the terrible things to come if people didn't respond appropriately. So why were people so fascinated by it all?

I have this suspicion that he offered what we might call a point of difference. The leaders of the temple had become so separated from the experiences of the regular people that they no longer made any sense. The words they used didn't connect with everyday life. The rules they espoused were dense and difficult to understand. And they claimed to know how to connect with God and that nobody else could do so.

John came and turned it all on its head. You can understand, you can connect, you can be on the right side of history. I wonder if we need a John or two to make sense of our puzzle today.

Song

Here I am to worship

Chris Tomlin

Light of the world

You stepped down into darkness

Opened my eyes let me see

Beauty that made this heart adore You

Hope of a life spent with You

And here I am to worship

Here I am to bow down

Here I am to say that you're my God

You're altogether lovely

Altogether worthy

Altogether wonderful to me

King of all days

Oh so highly exalted

Glorious in heaven above

Humbly you came to the earth you created

All for love's sake became poor

Prayer of Adoration and Confession – Bethne Dodd

God of abundant hope – the light of the world - thank you for anticipation.
For Advent waiting which builds expectation, helping pave the way toward
Christmas.

Thank you for things to look forward to.

For dreams, desires and ambitions that spur us on to better things.

Help us not only to receive hope but share it.

Extending your sense of assurance to those whose circumstances or outlooks
provide little in the way of hope.

The overwhelmed, overworked, or unemployed.

The anxious or depressed.

Those in debt, the distressed or bereaved.

(Pause)

God of lavish love – who first loved us - thank you for affection.

For love which deepens connection.

Thank you for those who care, and show care to us.

For the blessings of good relationships and good company.

For the bonds of friendship and fondness.

Help us to display the kind of love that goes beyond feeling
to embrace those we might otherwise dismiss.

Others, different from us... in personality, appearance, status or manner.

Those far from home. Alone, tired, afraid or uncertain.

Enable us to notice, then reach out in the strength of your love, to those feeling
far

from loved this Advent season.

(Pause)

God of exceeding joy – who comes to complete our own – thank you for
enjoyment.

For events to celebrate and people to celebrate with.

Thank you for the lightness of laughter, good cheer and things that amuse us.

For faux pas and foot-in-mouth moments.

The natural delight of small children.

The endless wonder of our environment.

The pleasures experienced through our senses – of sight and sound, smell, taste
and touch.

Help us to not take these things for granted but cherish and treasure them.

Always aware that others may not experience the same enjoyment we do.

May we lighten someone's day and someone's load, by the joy we bring and the
smiles we share this Advent season.

(Pause)

God of exceptional peace – a peace which surpasses understanding – thank you for serenity.

For a restfulness of mind, body and spirit despite life's often fractious nature.

Thank you for tranquil places, good for the soul.

Spaces of solace and solitude, of sanctuary and retreat, where we are free to still our

hearts and take time to breathe.

Thank you for people of calm within whose presence we find respite.

Who provide comfort and promote healing.

Help us to carry your inner peace at all times.

A peace which encourages wholeness and a sense of well-being not only for ourselves but for others.

Help us to be a piece of other's lives – bringing about good along with a sense of your hope, love, joy and peace this Advent season and beyond.

(Pause)

In continued silence we lift our private confessions to God...

In the name of Jesus Christ we are forgiven, accepted, renewed and blessed.

Amen

Notices

Reading [John 1:19-22](#)

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

Reflection [Who are you?](#)

Imagine for a moment, a dishevelled, unkempt person turns up and starts telling everyone there is a better way to live. Not only that, but a lot of other dishevelled, unkempt people start turning up and listening. Not only that, but many of those other people start responding to what he is talking about and their behaviour begins to change. They speak differently. They act differently. But they don't go anywhere near any reputable institution. No, they stay well away from the establishment. It is the establishment that has helped ensure

they are never able to climb out of their circumstances. So there is no way they are going to support that establishment.

Now you have a large group of people camped outside the norm. There is nothing about their behaviour to cause concern in the normal sense. But they seem to have a sense of purpose and a way of being that doesn't fit well with the established ways of doing things. They don't fit. And that is a worry. How can you control them if you have no way of pushing your power on to them?

We need to know who this person is. Where he is from. How he came to be this way. We need to get our control back.

Song It came upon the midnight clear

Edmund Sears

It came upon a midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth
to touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, good will to men,
from heaven's all-gracious King."
The world in solemn stillness lay,
to hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come
with peaceful wings unfurled,
and still their heavenly music floats
o'er all the weary world;
above its sad and lowly plains,
they bend on hovering wing,
and ever o'er its Babel sounds
the blessed angels sing.

And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way
with painful steps and slow,
look now! for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
and hear the angels sing!

The Peace

Reading John 1:23

²³ He said,
"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord,' "
as the prophet Isaiah said.

Reflection A Voice

There is little as frustrating and concerning as feeling that you are out of control in a situation. That is only made worse when our own words are quoted back to us. Having said that, there is a pattern beginning to form in what we are seeing. If we are able to step back from the immediate situation we begin to see an arc forming. If we look to the fig tree, now softening and shooting out leaves we know that this is a process that began a long time ago. In the beginning was the word. Before the word came into the world there was work to do. The ground had to be prepared, fertiliser put down, the tree planted and the sap begin to rise.

This voice that cries out in the wilderness is a part of the long process needed for the fruit to begin to form. It is a voice that challenges the old ways, hunkered down to survive the harshness of winter. It challenges the established ways of doing things and says, here is a new way, walk in it. Here is something that I have only recently begun to appreciate. One of the underlying principles of the Presbyterian Church, of the reformed movement as a whole, is reformed and always reforming. And yet I have this feeling we have lost the capacity to reform. We have become so set in our ways, doing the things we like, retaining control where we can that genuine reform has almost become like a puzzle. We can't understand what is happening, why it is happening and why it happening to us. We need to hear the voice that cries out in the wilderness – not 2000 years ago. Today.

Song Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Charles Wesley

Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King:
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with th'angelic hosts proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King"

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of the Virgin's womb:
veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail th'incarnate Deity,
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth.

Reading [John 1:24-28](#)

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Reflection [Why then are you baptizing?](#)

Sometimes reform happens whether we like it or not. There have been stories repeated down through the centuries of people connecting with God from outside the 'normal' church process. Often in ones and twos, sometimes in large numbers. They 'find God' on their own, the Holy Spirit speaking into their lives and drawing them into relationship. People among them rise up to take leadership roles and movements are born, churches are planted and new life is breathed into entire communities. All too often this happens apart from the establishment. The institutional church looks on, often making scathing comments about all the mistakes and things that aren't being done right. You don't have a proper liturgy. You aren't properly trained. You don't have a proper meeting place. You don't do the sacraments properly.

Meanwhile, people are coming to faith and rejoicing in their new-found relationship with Jesus. They don't care that it's not all decently and in order.

They care that the curtain between them and God has been torn away and they can see the light that John spoke of for themselves.

For the old church it is all a puzzle. For these new people it all makes sense.

They can see the pattern of salvation forming in their lives and they rejoice that Jesus is now a part of all they do. Of course, they make mistakes. But that's life, isn't it. A great pattern of mistakes gathered into a life lived to the best of our ability.

We pray

God who looks over the great arc of history and sees a wonderful, mistake-filled, glorious pattern of women and men and children finding hope in their relationship with you. We confess that we are often confused and disappointed with what is happening in our church. We grow older and fewer and hope seems to fade even as we fade. Remind us that you have not stopped connecting with people just like us. Just like we are now. Just like we were 50 years and more ago. Remind us at this time of hope as we look to the birth of Jesus, that you continue to bring your hope into our world with a message of grace and love and peace. In Jesus we pray. Amen.

Song What child is this?

William Chatterton Dix

What Child is this who, laid to rest
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom Angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and Angels sing;
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh,
Come peasant, king to own Him;
The King of kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.
Raise, raise a song on high,
The Virgin sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and Angels sing;
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud,

The Babe, the Son of Mary.
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

Offering

God of hope and compassion: Just as John the Baptist came long ago in Judea to witness to your light, we remember that light he heralds is the saviour of hope. Sometimes it seems our world is determined to extinguish hope and light. We admit that there are times when we feel the darkness is just too prevalent, too strong, and hope is just wishful thinking. May we witness through our giving not scarcity and despair but fierce joy, hope, and compassion. May we also witness through what we say and what we do. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves – Stef Jeschke

God's Puzzle 2

Loving God,
You created each and every one of us.
You know each of us down to the smallest detail.
You love us and you call each of us by name.

We believe
that YOU put together our own life puzzle
into a unity with Your creation.
We know
that with good cohesion and loving cooperation
many things are easier.

So that we try to do this again and again,
we now present our requests to you:

Loving God,
You are the foundation of our life puzzle.
But we are still searching for the place that YOU have planned for us.
Help us to take this place.

Each of us is a piece of the puzzle in the community.
We are all equal and each of us is valuable.
Help us to respect and care for each other.

Each of us is unique.
Everyone has their own abilities and special talents.
Show us how we can work for the good of the community.

We form the community of Jesus.

You are our centre.

Let us recognise how important and valuable this fellowship with you is.

We pray for all people who are far from you,

who are wandering in the world,

who need our and your help.

Hold Your hand over them all and guide them.

Almighty God, we ask you for all this

and thank you

that You have made each one of us precious and unique.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in Heaven holy be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.

Amen

Hymn

O Come All Ye Faithful

John Francis Wade

O come, all ye faithful,

joyful and triumphant!

O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem!

Come and behold him,

born the King of angels.

O come, let us adore him,

O come, let us adore him,

O come, let us adore him,

Christ the Lord!

God from true God, and

Light from Light eternal,

born of a virgin, to earth he comes!

Only-begotten Son of God the Father:

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,

sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above!

Glory to God, all glory in the highest:

The Grace

As we go on from here may we see the pattern of Christmas and be filled with hope as God continues to work among us and beyond us.

May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the Love of God,
and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all, now and forevermore. Amen.

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