

Puzzle Pieces - Fitting Together

Waitaki Sunday Service

24 December 2023

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

God is with us!

(Based on Matthew 1:18-25)

When Mary was engaged to Joseph, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us.” We light the first candle to remind us to keep awake and be ready. (Pause while the first candle is lit.) The second Advent candle reminds us to change our ways. (Pause while the second candle is lit.) The third Advent candle reminds us of the good news that the blind can see and the lame can walk. (Pause while the third candle is lit.) We light the fourth Advent candle to remind us that **God is with us!**

Call to Worship – Psalm 96

O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.

**Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.**

Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvellous works among all the peoples.

**For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.**

Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

**Worship the LORD in holy splendour;
tremble before him, all the earth.**

Hymn

Silent Night

Joseph Mohr

Silent night! Holy night!
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin mother and Child.
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace;
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night! Holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight!
Glories stream from heaven afar;
Heav'nly hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ, the Saviour, is born!
Christ, the Saviour, is born!

Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth;
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

Reading

Luke 1:26-27

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

Reflection

Unexpected

The whole Christmas story is something of a puzzle. Why Mary? Why Joseph? Why Bethlehem? Why a manger where animals are fed? Why wise men and shepherds? Often the answer will be that it fulfils the words of the prophets. But I think that rather misses the point. What is God trying to do here? If this is part of a great plan, then why do things this way? Why are things so back-to-front?

It's a little like those Wasgij puzzles that turn everything around so you are looking in the opposite direction to what is shown on the box. All of which makes me think that in some respects what we are looking at is designed to make us reflect on ourselves rather than the panorama laid out before us.

What if the Christmas story is designed to have us examine ourselves? To think about who we are rather than who Mary is. To think about what God is saying to us rather than what God is saying to Mary. To ponder how we are related to the house of David, not through direct line of descent but through adoption. To put it in the context of a Wasgij, what do Mary and Joseph see when they look out of their little nativity scene toward me and toward you?

Song O Little Town of Bethlehem

Phillips Brooks

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by;
yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary,
and, gathered all above
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wond'ring love.
O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King
and peace to all the earth.

How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heav'n.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

www.faithandworship.com

The joy of discovery
that moment

when hope and expectation
were gloriously met
by the illumination of one bright star.
We cannot imagine
what words were spoken by visitors
or if first impressions
left them confused.

Messiah, Saviour, a King
born in the barest of palaces.
Yet they saw and fell down
on their knees in adoration.
Lord, they saw you and knew
whom they had met.
As we meet around crib
candle or advent wreath
draw us into that stable
in our imagination.

In the quiet moments of prayer
this Christmas, that brief oasis
from the bustle of the world
bring alive to us
the smell of the hay
the sound of the animals
the cry of a baby.

Draw us close to our Saviour
Messiah and King as we bring
not Gold, Myrrh or Frankincense
but the gift of our lives
the only offering we can bring.

Lord, hear our private confessions as we bring them to you.

May the man, born as the Son of God, shower you with grace and
forgiveness this Christmas Season. Amen.

Notices

Reading

Luke 1:28-33

²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Reflection

Perplexing

I wonder if they would look at us and be puzzled. Puzzled by what we have made their experience into. Puzzled at how we have turned their somewhat distressing but still rather private family experience into an event. An event that requires spending money that many people cannot afford on things they don't really need. An event that brings out crowds of people to sing together. Drink together. Eat together. Fight together. Or to be reminded of how disconnected we have become. To remember those we have lost. All because a small person was born 2000 years ago.

I suspect that Joseph and Mary would have been far more perplexed looking at what we have done with their story than they ever were at the angels' words. It is almost as if we have taken the intimate birth of their first child and turned it completely upside down. What might we have lost in the process?

Song

Carol our Christmas

Shirley Murray

Carol our Christmas, an upside down Christmas:
snow is not falling and trees are not bare.

Carol the summer and welcome the Christ Child,
warm in our sunshine and sweetness of air.

Sing of the gold and the green and the sparkle,
water and river and lure of the beach.

Sing in the happiness of open spaces,
sing a nativity summer can reach!

Shepherds and musters move over hillsides,
finding, not angels, but sheep to be shorn,
 wise ones make journeys, whatever the season,
 searching for signs of the truth to be born.

Right side up Christmas belongs to the universe,
made in the moment a woman gives birth:
 hope is the Jesus gift, love is the offering,
 everywhere, anywhere, here on the earth.

The Peace

Reading Luke 1:34-37

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

³⁵ The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Reflection Impossible

Luke’s main theme throughout his writing is to remind us that Jesus is God. Everything we read is designed to impress on us that this is not your normal, everyday baby. This is the Son of God. All of which is great for us because it sets the stage for everything to follow. The Son of God is different to us. The Son of God experiences life differently to us. The Son of God is free from the curse of sin. The Son of God sees everything, hears everything, knows everything because God.

I have this feeling that God looks at us at this point and is puzzled. Because Jesus came to the world as a very real, very normal human baby. Leaving aside the strange ideas that have been generated since his birth, we know nothing about Jesus as a child until he turns 12. Even the story of his venture into the temple raises more questions than answers. Perhaps there is purpose in this gap. Leaving aside that gossip abhors the absence of information the gap allowed Jesus to grow and mature into the adult we meet at his baptism. The work of the Holy Spirit over that time didn’t cease. He didn’t cease to be the Son of God in the intervening years. He lived. As a kid. As a teenager. As a young adult. As a maturing adult. He experienced life. All of which contributed to the impossible becoming reality. I wonder if

he looks out at us with bemusement at our desperate ambition to remake Christmas in our own imagining.

Song Aotearoa Christmas

The Polkadots (with changes)

Aotearoa Christmas

Under a Pohutukawa tree

Celebrations of Good News

Bringing joy to everyone

It's an Aotearoa Christmas

Under a Pohutukawa tree

When the sun shines on me
Through Pohutukawa leaves
And the red flowers
Tell me it's Christmas
They're saying it's time
For a baby to come
And he will be called Jesus
Bringing hope into the world

Smell the salt of the sea
Play in waves at the beach
And the summer breeze
Whispers, 'It's Christmas'
The Bellbird and Tui
Raise their voices in song
To greet the newborn child
The Son of God has come

Reading Luke 1:38

³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Then the angel departed from her.

Reflection Received

What if the entire point of the Christmas Story is tied up in Mary's words – 'Let it be with me according to your word.' Instead of parading our floats and performing our carols, putting up stars and lights and nativity scenes, Christmas is about stilling ourselves before God. Coming to the realisation that the unexpected and perplexing and impossible are all attempts to have us look at ourselves and be still with God. To know God, not out of some complex explanation of what may or may not have happened 2000 years ago. Rather, to know God because God meets with us every day. The God of Christmas is the same as the God of today. Yesterday, today, and forever, Jesus is the same. Do not be dismayed because the tidings of Good News are for now just as much as they have ever been.

We pause for a few minutes to be still with our unexpected and perplexing and impossible God.

We pray

God of the unexpected and perplexing and impossible we thank you for the story of Christmas. We thank you for the way we are reminded to pause and consider how we may look when we do our Christmas 'thing'. We thank you that what is most important is our relationship with Jesus. And we thank you that the story of Jesus as a baby reminds us that just as a baby has to grow and mature, so our relationship with Jesus needs to grow and mature. Help us to truly be your Christmas people. Through the very human Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Song

God rest ye merry Gentlemen/Star of Wonder

Barenaked Ladies

God rest ye merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Saviour
Was born upon this day;
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray.

O tidings of comfort and joy,
Comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy!

From God our heavenly Father
This blessed angel came;
And unto certain shepherds
Brought tidings of the same;
How that in Bethlehem was born
The Son of God by name.

O, star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.

Born a king on Bethlehem's plain;
Gold I bring to crown Him again;
King forever, ceasing never,
Over us all to reign.

Glorious now behold Him arise,

King and God and sacrifice,
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Worshipping God most high.

God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay
God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay
God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay

Offering

Gracious and Generous God: We offer our gifts to you, knowing that the energy exerted in our giving is tiny compared to what we've expended finding the gifts for our families and friends. You have given us a glimpse of the gift you truly seek in the angel's conversation with Mary: when told that she would give birth to our saviour, she simply said, "Yes, let it be according to your word." May that affirmation of faith and obedience be the gift we offer this day. In Christ, we pray. Amen.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

As we rejoice at the birth of Jesus, our Saviour, we turn with confidence to God our Father praying that the peace and light which Christ brings will be welcomed into the world:

For the Church, that the people of God will always be a light to the world for those who live in darkness.

(pause)

Lord in your mercy

For peace on earth, that the peace which Christ offers will be a reality for all peoples.

(pause)

Lord in your mercy

For all who are welcoming a new child into their family, that they may receive this gift of new life with joy and be blessed with patience, health and strength.

(pause)

Lord in your mercy

For our own community, that our celebration of the birth of our Saviour will make us more aware of our unity in Jesus Christ.

(pause)

Lord in your mercy

For the lonely, the bereaved, the sick, and all those who are suffering in any way, that the light of Christ will shine on them.

(pause)

Lord in your mercy

God of love, Father of all, the darkness that covered the earth has given way to the bright dawn of your Word made flesh.

Make us a people of this light.

Make us faithful to your Word, that we may bring your life to the waiting world.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever.

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

Te Haranui

David Lyle Morris

Not on a snowy night

By star or candlelight

Nor by an angel band

There came to our dear land

Te Harinui

Te Harinui

Te Harinui

Glad tidings of great joy

But on a summer day

Within a quiet bay

The Maori people heard

The great and glorious word

The people gathered round

Upon the grassy ground

And heard the preacher say
I bring to you this day

Now in this blessed land
United heart and hand
We praise the glorious birth
And sing to all the earth

The Grace

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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