

## Reflection: 25 December 2022

Yr A Christmas (readings option II)

Isaiah 62: 6-12

Titus 3: 4-7

2 Timothy 2: 8-15

Luke 2: 1-20



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## Longing, Disruption, Surprise, Response

As we reflect on your message today, may our words and thoughts be acceptable to you, O God.

At last it is Christmas morning. Have you looked forward to today?

Have you *longed* for this day?

Some of us experience anticipation by bringing in Christmas-themed decorations, events and music from as early as possible.

Some of us build anticipation by holding off the themed decorations, events and music till much closer to the day.

But this day carries a jumbled mix of symbolism from two thousand years of celebration in different places, and equally mixed cultural baggage to go with those images. This day carries social & commercial expectations and often relationship expectations too. As we approach this day, there is a lot of mental clutter to filter through – weary brains work hard to prioritise what matters and discard the rest.

Perhaps some of us long to get past this day and into some necessary summer rest & recreation – and that's OK, too.

Traditions can increase the burden (*oh no, I'm expected to host a lunch feast AGAIN!*). Equally, traditions can ease the burden, with comforting & familiar actions.

Some might say that the measured pace of a traditional church Advent season guides us away from the mental clutter, and perhaps keeps the social or cultural expectations in a different perspective.

The tradition I grew up with was that only Christmas cards and advent calendars were allowed until Christmas eve. Then decorating the lounge together was completed by placing the angel right at the top of the tree – and that same angel is on top of the tree at my home today.

However your own advent goes, Christmas day arrives each year as a shared disruption – work, school and other normal activities take a hushed pause, and our whole society experiences a day that is unlike any other.

How wonderful it is, that we come together on this special morning. What a joy to share part of this day with each other as a church family; to re-tell, honour and celebrate the “reason for the season”

Of course we expect to re-tell the story of Jesus' birth in churches today, and the reading we just heard from Luke might feel very familiar, even if you haven't much history of attending church services.

But I'll come back to the Luke reading in a moment, because first we heard from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is one of the greatest voices in the first testament, speaking God's message to the Israelite people who were God's ambassadors in the world.

Why did we hear that reading, which isn't a Christmas tale? Well, the Isaiah reading has a lot going on, but one aspect that stands out in this context is that it reminds us the Jewish people had longed, through hundreds of years, for the arrival of their promised Messiah— a royal saviour who was expected to kick out the brutal occupying Roman forces and rule Israel with power and godly wisdom. Our own anticipation of this day is just a shadow of that longing – but keep it mind...

because, when some hundreds of years later Luke writes about Jesus being born, he just outlines how a disruptive census rule led to Joseph & Mary being at Bethlehem, and skips lightly over the actual birth. Luke spends almost twice as long focused on some shepherds who were called away from the fields to worship a new-born baby – a baby who was promised to be a great and godly figure.

Now, in our time, through endless repetition of the image, and a lack of cultural context, it seems quaint and serene to picture a traditional nativity with the shepherds – it's not shocking or amazingly exciting any more.

But God was up to something VERY unexpected here: perhaps the rich and powerful would dare to hope that they might be involved in the arrival of the Messiah but shepherds were low-status working class nobodies.

So if you've ever had a surprise about something important, multiply that many times over to get some sense of how significant the Christmas events were to those shepherds, as soon as they believed and saw what the angels told them. I suspect Luke (or our translation) has a touch of understatement when it says they "returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen". I suspect their response was a lot more energetic than our reading style might convey.

The second reading, from our sequence today, comes last in a history timeline. It was from a letter to someone named 'Titus', written around 65AD. That reading draws our attention, even here on Christmas day, towards Jesus' adult mission & resurrection. It draws our attention towards baptism and receiving the holy spirit. In this way, the selection of readings draws our horizons past the manger and on to life as a follower of the Way.

Because Christmas is not the end of the story. Like many churches, we will cycle through a wide and wise selection of readings in the coming year, to explore the unfolding story of what God was, and is, up to.

In many ways Christmas is not even the most important part of the story. We include communion in our service today, with its prayers which shadow our Christmas happiness with the darker, but even more surprising and powerful Easter story.

We do this precisely because Easter is the bigger event, and its effect is with us all the time. Our church calendar's journey towards and through Easter is longer than this Advent - Christmas season, and we spend even longer exploring what life after Easter means for us.

But Christmas day – whether in mid-winter or mid-summer – is deliberately scheduled for a day when ordinary daily life is disrupted (even in many non-Christian contexts).

For us, the disruptive event of Christ's birth is the moment when God's great rescue mission visibly launched. C.S. Lewis likened it to the Allied landings in occupied Nazi Europe – there is a lot of important story before that moment, and much more still to take place, but without the arrival of the key people on scene, the victory could not follow.

So we remember the manger as a massive disruption to the status quo, an inflection point where the story turns a corner and changes direction.

And in response, all these years later, like the shepherds we abandon the posts where our surrounding culture expects us to be. We have put aside meal prep, muted the phones connecting us to distant whanau & friends. We might have delayed some gift-giving or screen-time.

Why do we abandon those rituals of the worldly & commercialised festival? We gather around the manger because we are drawn to something longed-for and significant, something surprising, a sign of hope that the hard ways of the world simply don't provide.

And instead of a mighty force, a prince surrounded by troops and fortifications, this disruption centres on, well, you know. A socially unacceptable child, a weak little baby, born into poverty and soon to be a refugee. A middle-eastern tradesman's boy named something like 'Yeshua' [later Roman-ised into 'Jesus'].

So we remember the fragile beginnings, we ponder what these familiar yet strange stories and symbols might mean. The earliest Christians associated Jesus with the title 'Emmanuel' – meaning 'God-is-with-us' – which the prophets of Israel had foretold for the Messiah.

Try to hear that with fresh ears - this humble helpless child is supposed to be God-with-us? Does that seem like a bold conclusion to reach?

How do people find meaning here that involves an infinitely good and loving Creator of all life and being... one who is busy doing something that re-connects us to that Creator? Can this really have something to do with me? With you?

How do we respond to the Bethlehem story? On its own, it probably seems a bit slim to carry all the baggage that hangs on it.

Perhaps, like Mary, we might find something puzzling in these events, something to ponder in our hearts.

Perhaps after our structured service is done, you'll choose linger for a few minutes with this crib scene to reflect on the mystery of perfect love taking human form.

Perhaps over the coming year you might explore these puzzles further. If you do, a community gathers regularly to explore them together – that community is, of course, the church.

To wrap up, then:

Our anticipation of this day can remind us of how a Messiah was longed for by the people of Israel

The disruption of this day might remind us that the birth of Yeshua / Jesus was surrounded by disruptions large and small.

The surprises of this day may remind us that the manger itself disrupts how the world understood power and importance.

In response we gather and, like Mary, we ponder these strange events in our hearts.

There is so much more to the story of God's redeeming love, that it doesn't all fit into one celebration.

So, may we continue to respond to these signs that God-is-with-us throughout the new year, and the years to come.