

God's Message of Love

Readings: John 1:1-14, Luke 2:1-14

Open the Bible to us, Loving God, in a new and exciting way. In Jesus name we ask it. Amen

Communication is important at the best of times but most especially at Christmas. The very first Silent Night began with a breakdown in communication. On arriving at Bethlehem and finding no accommodation at the inn, Mary turned to Joseph saying, "I asked you to book ahead, didn't I?" What followed was the very first silent night.

This year has been hard with COVID and the anxiety that goes with it. The team here have worked very hard to keep worship alive over the web and to keep connected with as many as we can. Between lockdowns we opened the newly restored church after more than a decade of planning, fundraising, and building. This has in turn freed up the halls for even more community groups. Our mission partners *Petersgate Counseling Center* and the preschool have had good years too. Among the highlights has been having the first baptisms and weddings here in this building, ordaining Margaret and welcoming Peg. Fueled by COVID, the year has seen a revolution in the way we communicate. Many of us have spent long hours on Zoom. I'm not very good at Zoom - trying to look intelligent for hours on end really takes it out of me as you can imagine. And I always seem to end up beside the leader in what I call the Muppet show boxes.

Christmas celebrates not the electronic communication revolution but a communications revolution in the way God communicates with us. Christmas is God's message of love to us. But why did God choose Christmas to communicate love?

To really communicate you need to become one with your audience.

Born Jozef De Veuster in 1840, Father Damien, as he became known, left his homeland of Belgium to be a missionary to the native people of Hawaii. Things didn't start well at all. After 11 years of preaching to the people of his chosen island and faithfully leading worship, almost no one attended his services, and not one local had come forward for baptism. So, he did what any of us might do; he resolved to go home. It was then he noticed them - some small white pussy sores on his hand. He had contracted the leprosy that so many of the islanders suffered from. That next week hundreds attended church. When he asked why the change, their answer was simple, "You have become one of us." Damien had become one with their suffering and, as it would turn out, with their joys.

That's exactly what God does at Christmas. God becomes one of us. God becomes one with our joys and our sorrows, with our suffering and with our rejoicing. In order to communicate love, you need to become love. You need to become vulnerable. To us it doesn't seem like a very good communications plan. A helpless child born in the corner of the Empire, far from influence, relying on a poor young couple with not much going for

them and then entrusting the message to a bunch of dodgy shepherds. There is nothing more vulnerable than a baby. Totally dependent on his parents, found in a simple stable, God becomes one of us: a message of love.

“Why is it,” asked one Sunday school pupil of her teacher, “that people used to see the face of God and we don’t?” “Because” the wise teacher answered, “because these days we do not stoop low enough.”

We gather tonight/today to stoop that low. To stoop low enough to see the face of God in the baby in the manger.

(John in the majestic opening to his Gospel attempts to do justice to the humility of God. Like an overture to an opera, he gives us the great themes that will be found throughout his Gospel: grace, truth, light overcoming darkness, life overcoming death.)

In Luke we find a special focus on the poor and marginalized, and the message of Christ’s birth is given to the shepherds to proclaim. Shepherds were mostly women and young boys cut off from the rest of society)

For us we have the value of hindsight. We can see that this message of love, although it seemed a dumb plan, was totally inspired. The message of God’s love spread like wildfire, first to the Mediterranean world, and then throughout the rest of the world and finally even to our shores to d’Urville Island in 1642. The journal of an unknown Dutch sailor shows that New Zealand’s first Christmas was celebrated 375 years ago. Never has one message been so proclaimed, so sung, so told, so written about, and never has one child given so much hope to so many.

Jesus grows up and the message of love is his to share. In his life he creates a revolution in faith. Prior to Jesus the Jews never used God’s name, it was too holy, too scary, God was too unapproachable. Jesus in contrast teaches us that God loves us intimately, tenderly, and with an unconditional love. The prayer he teaches us, the ‘Our Father’, is really the ‘Our Daddy’, because it begins with the Aramaic for daddy - *abba*. *Abba* is not just a Swedish come back group, but it is the trustful name a child gives to its father. Daddy.

In wise teaching, miracles, in total self-giving love on the cross, and on to his mysterious rising from death this child will grow to inspire the world.

But for us, it is enough today to celebrate the miracle of it all. God becoming one of us, the vulnerable baby being the message of love. The communication revolution has begun.

Joy Cowley, a New Zealand poet, puts it so well.

Look now!
It is happening again!
Love like a high spring tide
Is swelling to fulness and overflowing

The banks of our small concerns.

And here again is the star
That white flame of truth
Blazing the way for us
Through a desert of tired words

Once more comes the music
in song that lifts our hearts
And tunes our ears
To the harmony of the universe
Making us wonder how
We ever could have forgotten.

And the magi within us
Gathers up gifts of gold and myrrh
While that part of ourselves
The impulsive, reckless shepherd
Runs
Helter skelter with arms outstretched
'To embrace the wonder of it all.

We have no words
To contain our praise
We ache with awe
We tremble with miracle
As once again
In the rough stable of our lives
Christ is Born.

Pause

May God's message of love be born in you this Christmas.