

Worship Service for Cashmere Presbyterian Church - Sunday 24 May 2020
Welcoming Jesus to our World

Call to Worship

God graciously invites us to meet with him this day!
God's love is heralded in the promise of Christ.
God's promises are fulfilled in the coming of Christ.
God's mercy extends from generation to generation.

Opening Prayer

Holy God,
your prophet Micah foretold that a new ruler would come forth from Bethlehem—
we celebrate the fulfilment of your promise in the coming of Jesus to this world.

Your servant Mary welcomed him into her womb
and we have been blessed down through the generations.
today we welcome you to this time of worship;
You reach out to us in Jesus Christ. We respond enthusiastically with love and praise.
Make us bold enough to proclaim with faith—
that you are both all-powerful creator of this amazing universe and yet you came to us as a
defenceless and lovable babe.

We sing out the good news of your salvation,
trusting in fulfilment of your promises.

Loving God,
even in the wake of such good news,
there is much to confess.
In spite of your assuring presence,
stress and anxiety can rule our lives.

We can fail to think about your reordered world—
a world where the lowly are lifted up
and the hungry are filled with good things.
Help us adjust our priorities,
that we might join with you, O God,
in preparing for a post COVID world that welcomes you
the one who brings us peace.

(I invite you now to just continue this prayer in a time of silence.)

The ancient promises of God are fulfilled.
God does not forget us.
God's mercy extends from generation to generation.
Let our souls rejoice in God! Amen

Hymn

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| 1. Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee. | 3. Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring. |
| 2. Israel's Strength and Consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart. | 4. By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all-sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne. |

The Word

New Sermon Series: Welcoming Jesus to our World

For the next few weeks, we are tracing the emergence of Jesus of Nazareth onto the world stage through the lens of some of the early passages in Luke's gospel. I have entitled the series 'Welcoming Jesus to Our World'. I realise that is a little presumptuous and provocative as it was his world in the first place!

John 1 refers to Jesus as 'the Word' and tells it this way:

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

And Paul puts it this way:

¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. (Col 1)

However, the biblical narrative also reveals a God who has created human being with free will and gave them huge responsibility to care for this world. This does allow us the privilege of accepting or rejecting God and His actions in and towards this world. A definitive action of God in and towards this world was the coming of the unique Son of God, Jesus. At that point in human history, we were well settled in. For all intents and purposes, we were treating it as our world. So what kind of welcome did the Son of God get? And what kind of welcome does he get today, in our world, in our church and in our lives. This is the focus of the series.

Today we start with the response of the young unmarried teenager Mary of Nazareth to news that the Son of the Most High was coming, and not just to a place near her, but to her very womb! It is a passage often used in Advent, in the series we connect it to the emergence of the ministry of Jesus and the kind of welcome that got.

Reading: The Birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[b] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Sermon: Jesus, Welcomed to Our World

Do you remember the song from the Toyota advertisements in the 1990's, sung by John Grenell, Welcome to our World? With a backdrop of beautiful New Zealand scenery he sang the words:

Welcome to our world, won't you come on in, miracles I guess, still happen now and then, step into our hearts ...

This is hospitality plus! And it mirrors the response of Mary to the miraculous news that God has chosen her to bear the saviour of the world. It was clearly a shocking experience for her. Yet, rather than being intimidated, overwhelmed, shutting down or running away she humbly welcome God to her world! Her posture is one of hospitality to the Son of the Most High.

This is a story of invitation and response. It is about the extending of hospitality. Today I want to explore this in the context of God interactions with humanity.

1. Hospitality starts with the largesse of God

Can you think of a time when you received great hospitality? I have a great memory of a meal we had with a Ukrainian family when we live in a little logging town on Vancouver Island. It was Christmas eve 1988 and we were invited to a traditional 12 dish meal, one dish for each disciple of Christ. The table was laden with wonderful Eastern European dishes. The meal began when the first star appeared in the night sky. It was big spread offering expansive hospitality!

And yet this is puny compared with the spread God put on for us! God creates this amazing universe then invites us to take a part in it.

I have read one theory about this that tickles my fancy – that to create the conditions for one planet that could sustain human life, there needs to be a universe as big as ours. To bring God into this equation, it means he was prepared to create something as overwhelmingly expansive as this universe just to house us on planet earth!

In fact, scripture would say that God spreads out this universe, vast beyond our ability to imagine, and invites us human beings to a place in it as special and honoured guests. Psalm 8 spells this out beautifully:

LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
in the heavens.
² Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.
³ When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
⁴ what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?
⁵ You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor.
⁶ You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:
⁷ all flocks and herds,
and the animals of the wild,
⁸ the birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.
⁹ LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

This is about God taking the initiative. It is about God extending the first hand. It is about God inviting us to a big and extravagant spread, set out with us in mind.

But this God/human story is not just about a general invitation to live on planet earth. There is a much more intimate and person dimension to this.

2. Invitation to an intimate dinner for two

The story of Mary's encounter with the angels is about God zeroing in on one individual for a very personal conversation. We might dismiss that as a unique case. Yet I think there is also something universal here as well – God seeks a very personal conversation with each of us. So the image changes from a huge table groaning with food set for a big party, to an intimate dinner for two.

Two weeks ago, when we were reflecting on Ecclesiastes, we contemplated the idea in chapter 3 v 11 that God has set eternity on the human heart. That God has placed in each human heart a longing for intimacy with the creator of the universe. This is an amazing idea, that the all-powerful creator of this vast universe is interested in individual human beings!

However, this idea carries a problem. It is summed up in 1 Chronicles 2:6

'Who could build a house to contain God?'

Or to put it this way, how could a puny human heart like mine possibly accommodate a relationship with the creator of the universe! Surely, any attempt to do so would burst any human heart. There is such a huge power imbalance for a start.

On a smaller scale, we can understand this a little if we think about encounters we might have with those who are famous and seemly beyond our reach. I don't know about you, but I find myself strangely awkward, tongue tied and reticent in these situations! I had an experience like this just recently. I was at an extended family function and one of the Black Cap cricketers was there. It was a young man who I had some connection with from way back, well before he was famous. Now I love my sporting stars, they are heroes to me. And yet finding myself in the same room as one of my heroes I found myself strangely awkward, tongue tied and reticent. The lovely thing is that he spotted me, remembered me and came bounding over to talk to me. He took the initiative and he broke the ice.

God does that with us as well. A prime example of this is in Isaiah 6. Isaiah is in the temple when he has an awe-inspiring vision of God! Stuck by the power differential, Isaiah falls to his knees saying

⁵ *"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."*

And yet the story goes on from here with God taking the initiative.

⁶ *Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."*

This is God reaching out and removing the barriers!

The birth of Jesus is an ultimate and compelling example of God taking the initiative. He invites himself into a humble peasant woman's womb. He is born then as a defenceless and loveable baby in amongst the animals in an out of the way stable. In becoming defenceless he reverses the power dynamic. In the shape of a loveable baby he seeks to draw us into relationship, for indeed what is more lovable than a new-born baby.

And the other compelling thing about this invitation to relationship with God is that it comes in person! This is God come to us with a human face on. This is God coming to us speaking our language. God in the person of Jesus of Bethlehem. Invitations that come in person are powerful! Each Christmas Anne and I invite the people on our street to come to our place on the Sunday before Christmas to share food, drink and fellowship. We try to knock in doors and make the invitation in person. Sometimes we run out of time and leave an invite in the letter box. The difference in response is enormous – in person invitations bring them in, the letter box drop does not. The birth of Jesus is an 'in person' invitation from God to relationship.

3. Do not miss the invitation

A few years ago I attended a wedding at Cashmere Presbyterian. The son of a couple in our bible study group was married here. We were invited but it was one of those awkward situations where we were not sure who else from the group was invited so we said nothing. On the day most of our bible study group were there, only one couple were missing. I found out later they were taking a load to the dump when the wedding was on. When we got to the reception, we found a place set for them, a place with their names on it. I quickly rang them to let them know! Much to their horror, they realised that they had missed the invitation somehow! They quickly got changed and made it just in time for the main speeches. When it comes to an invitation to relationship with God, we do not want to miss the invitation.

There are examples of this idea of ensuring we do not miss the invitation in scripture – Matthew 22 tells the story of invitations to a wedding banquet that are turned down. On the other hand, in Genesis 18 we read of Abraham showing great hospitality because he had enough spiritual nous to realise that his visitors were angels in disguise.

Mary got the invitation to bear the Son of God and invited Jesus in.

The innkeeper saw a similar invitation in the desperation of Mary and Joseph looking for a room. He found space for them.

The shepherds got a spectacular angelic invitation and hurried off to accept.

The wise men saw the invitation in the stars and travelled a great distance to accept.

King Herod got wind of it and even though he would have been welcome, he tried his best to stop the party!

Ultimately, the pharisees, Governor Pilot and the Passover crowd turned down the invitation, the welcome and the hospitality of God expressed in Jesus.

Conclusion

Now as much as ever, the invitation to relationship with God is crucial on this planet earth! There is another song called Welcome to Our World. It is a Christmas carol written by Chris Rice. It carries with it the idea that this world so desperately needs the healing touch of God in Jesus Christ with lyrics like this:

*Make Yourself at home
Please make Yourself at home
Bring Your peace into our violence
Bid our hungry souls be filled*

In a similar way we have been joining Christians around the world currently to pray for God to make himself at home in our present crisis, to bring peace to our anxiety and healing to our pain.

And then it comes down to you and me ... through the expansive generosity of God expressed in this lovely universe and in the coming to earth of Jesus the Christ we are invited into relationship with God. To both acknowledge the amazing spread of this universe with worship and praise, and to enter into the intimacy of a personal prayer life with God.

But it does not stop there. For the natural flow or effect of relationship with God is to reach out to others with the same kind of love and hospitality he offers to us! Once Isaiah was lifted up and redeemed by God in the temple he enthusiastically volunteered to work for God

'Here I am God, send me!'

One of the doors we knocked on in our neighbourhood last Christmas belonged to a man who had just arrived from China, coming to New Zealand ahead of his family to start a new life here. He accepted our invitation. But it flowed on from there because he arrived at our

place with a very expensive bottle of Cloudy Bay wine and a whole ham to be shared with the neighbours! Good hospitality is contagious. And that is how God's hospitality should be too – us accepting this invitation from God to a relationship that in turn flows out from us to all those around us.

Prayer of Intercession¹

O God our Healer, show your compassion for the whole human family that is in turmoil and burdened with illness and with fear. Come to our aid as the coronavirus spreads globally, heal those who are sick, support and protect their families and friends from being infected.

Hear our cry, O God, Listen to our prayer.

Grant us your spirit of love and self-discipline so that we may come together, working to control and eliminate the coronavirus. Make us vigilant, attentive, and proactive in the eradication of all diseases, malaria, dengue, HIV & AIDS, and the many others that afflict that create suffering and often result in death for many people.

Hear our cry, O God, Listen to our prayer.

Heal our self-centeredness and indifference that makes us worry only when the virus threatens us, open ways beyond timidity and fear that too easily ignore our neighbour. Strengthen and encourage those in public health services and in the medical profession: caregivers, nurses, attendants, doctors, all who commit themselves to caring for the sick and their families. Inspire, give insight, and hope to all researchers focused on developing a vaccine.

Hear our cry, O God, Listen to our prayer.

Sustain all workers and business owners who suffer loss of livelihood due to shut-downs, quarantines, closed borders, and other restrictions... protect and guard all those who must travel.

Hear our cry, O God, Listen to our prayer.

Guide the leaders of the nations that they speak the truth, halt the spread of misinformation and act with justice so that all your family may know healing. Heal our world, heal our bodies, strengthen our hearts and our minds, and during turmoil, give us hope and peace.

Hear our cry, O God, Listen to our prayer.

Hold in your gentle embrace all who have died and who will die this day. Comfort their loved ones in their despair. Hear our cry, O God, Listen to our prayer. Remember all your family, the entire human race, and all your creation, in your love.

Amen!

¹ From resources provided by the World Lutheran Federation