

Sermon: Sunday 3 December: God is at work

Silvia Purdie, Cashmere Presbyterian Church

We had a terrible thing happen in our Cashmere community this month with the death of Vincent, the father of two beautiful little girls who come to preschool music. I wrote after that a comment on the meaninglessness of sudden death, in response to the unspoken question in the hearts of many: "How could God let this happen?" I posted this on Facebook and I have had many many people responding to it with appreciation. Here's what I wrote:

Many people cannot believe in a good God who would let terrible things happen. For many this is a big barrier to Christian faith. We would prefer a safe world run by the perfect dictator, structurally engineered to prevent all accidents and disasters. The God that Jesus called Daddy could have lorded over a cotton-wool universe, I guess, but he chose a different plan. This plan that we call the real world gives us far more freedom than is good for us; freedom to both design traffic lights and legal systems and also to ignore laws and red lights. So people are killed and maimed for no good reason at all, and certainly not by God's action or negligence. The God that Jesus called Dad chose to share this world with us, feeling our pain in order to save us from it.

I came home and had a great conversation with my son Aaron. Aaron is about to turn 18, and does not believe in God. He does, however, ask the best questions and is great in conversation. He challenged the logic of me claiming that we cannot blame God when bad things happen, and then giving God the credit when good things happen. You can't have it both ways, he said.

So I have been thinking about what I really believe about God. If God is indeed a force to be reckoned with in the universe, what kind of force? If God really does act in the world, how is God at work? How can we assess whether the things we like to believe are God's actions in the world really God at work, or are they just things that happen to suit us for which we are grateful?

My claim is that God is at work, in particular ways, and that faith is a way of seeing that can recognise the hand of God and partner with God in what he's doing in the world.

Let's break it down, tease out what I am actually claiming here ... and you are of course most welcome to come to your own opinions about all of these questions.

God is ... my claim begins with the existence of God, by which I mean a spiritual dimension to reality which is outside of space and time. By 'God' I mean an infinite intelligence which chooses to have particular qualities and to communicate with and participate in human community; in other words, a personal God who loves us.

God is at work. Today is the beginning of the Church's year. Advent. When we celebrate the choice of God to enter in to our reality. We sing 'O come, O come Emmanuel'. We connect our longing for God with God's choosing to 'give a damn' about us.

The themes of Advent are expressed particularly in the phrase 'open our eyes'. We remember Jesus saying "those who have eyes, see. those who have ears, hear!". We remember Jesus saying "keep watch. Be alert. look out for God is coming!"

The big idea is that God is at work, if only we have eyes to see.

in other words, most of what God is doing we miss completely. We don't even notice.

My son Ben has been fascinated lately with the idea that the human ear and the human eye perceives so little of the reality around us. He's been watching Youtube videos about this, learning about how dogs or flies or dolphins experience aspects of light and sound that we humans don't.

How is God at work in ways that we just cannot see or hear?

What would we hear if we could listen in on the forming of rock and the munching of ants?

What would we see if we could glimpse the colours of magnetic force or the trail of stars?

What if we could see into the emptiness of atoms, the spaces within stuff?

The more I learn about the universe the more it seems alive with the presence and power of God, that so far exceeds human ability to grasp. And the more it seems to me to utterly depend on God for holding together every atom and ever galaxy.

God is at work sustaining the universe, time and matter and life.

Are you with me so far?

Would you follow me if I then went on to claim that this God is in himself the frame and story of the universe? The beginning and the end?

In Advent we get the toughest Bible readings. They are tough because they speak of the ending of things. Life as we know it is framed by God, from the origins of time to an ultimate consummation of time, which Jesus described in the most vivid of ways:

²⁴ "In the days after that time of trouble the sun will grow dark, the moon will no longer shine, ²⁵ the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers in space will be driven from their courses. ²⁶ Then the Son of Man will appear, coming in the clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ He will send the angels out to the four corners of the earth to gather God's chosen people from one end of the world to the other."

We don't tend to focus much on "the days after that", though there are many in our world today who believe that we are living in these 'end times'. I am not particularly apocalyptic in my theology. My husband and I are in the process of buying a house which is yet to be built, on the assumption that - barring nuclear holocaust - we will actually get to live in the house in future years as we grow old and have grandchildren over for the weekend.

But to me this is an important frame for all reality, that God is Lord of all, Lord of time and space and destiny, and that in due course Jesus Christ will return and the stars will fall and the full power and glory of God will be blatantly obvious, fully revealed.

It is within this frame that we must learn to see the work of God in the here and now.

I chose the James K Baxter poem to begin our service today, because these are some of the best words I've come across to point us to the work of God in the here and now.

God is at work 'inside and outside the fences' ... inside and outside of what we can see and hear, inside and outside of what makes sense to us, inside and outside of the walls we build between 'us' and 'them'. As we share in this holy communion we call on the Holy Spirit to blow through these elements and through us, inside and outside the fences.

God is at work in fire and energy, giving us energy and strength, but also 'consuming us'. We know the hand of God in our very selves in every breath but also in our pain. The tragedies and struggles of human life are not God's doing but they are used by God to remake us and consume us until we are his and his alone. As we break bread we remember Jesus, his coming and his dying, his suffering and his triumph. God's hand at work is not always safe or pretty.

God is at work building a house. "In the love of friends", writes Baxter. We are the work of God. As we sit at table together, at morning tea or symbolically here around this table, God is building his home in our friendship. As we invite more people to the table, little ones, older ones, of all abilities and personalities, God is building his home in our midst.