

## God of the unexpected

Bible reference for sermon Luke 2:10

*<sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:*

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, from Jesus Christ our Emmanuel, and from the Spirit who gathers us in hope. Amen.



If you ever wondered what the Christmas story might look like if it unfolded not in ancient Judea but “out Woop-Woop, beyond the back of Bourke,” I think this morning’s nativity play has answered that question beautifully. And what strikes me—every single year, but especially after watching Bazza, Sheila, some very lively sheep, and a couple of confused wise men wander around our sanctuary—is this: God keeps showing up where nobody expects God to be.

The third Sunday in Advent is traditionally called Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of Joy. Not joy as in “everything’s perfect,” not joy

as in “we’ve solved all the world’s problems,” but joy as in “God is coming anyway.” Joy as resistance. Joy as hope. Joy as light shining in a very ordinary paddock, or a shed out the back of a pub, or in the middle of our own messy and uncertain lives.

In our play, the first people to hear the good news, besides Mary and Joseph, are not priests, not politicians, not perfect holy families. They are drovers—dusty, tired, just wanting a cuppa and a lie-down. Scripture tells the same story: God doesn’t send the angels to Caesar. God sends them to shepherds—people doing ordinary work, probably underpaid, probably underappreciated, probably not expecting anything miraculous at all. The Christmas story insists that God chooses the edges, the unexpected places, the people who would never imagine themselves as important enough to receive a heavenly choir.

And the play makes that real for us. Because when Bazza and Sheila are startled awake, their first reaction is not pious awe. Their first reaction is, “Stone the crows!” Which, honestly, is probably more accurately what the real shepherds felt than anything we put on Christmas cards. But here’s the miracle: God comes to them anyway. God comes to us anyway—whatever we’re carrying, whatever we’re in the middle of, whatever doubts or exhaustion or worries we’ve brought with us.

I also love that in the play, both Mary and Joseph, and later the wise men, ask Bazza and Sheila for directions. And every time, Bazza and Sheila basically say, “We’re not from around here, mate.” And yet—through their imperfect, unhelpful directions—God still gets people

where they need to be. That's what happens in Advent. We are not perfect. We do not always know the way. And yet grace keeps moving. Love keeps travelling. The star keeps leading. God keeps working through our half-right, half-wrong, slightly muddled efforts.

In a world where we often feel overwhelmed by injustice, inequality, suffering, and conflict, Advent tells us that we don't have to know every answer for God's purposes to unfold. Even small kindness, even ordinary decency, even a hesitant attempt at compassion can be part of God's guiding light.

The joy of Advent is not superficial happiness. It is not based on everything being peaceful—because the world wasn't peaceful then and isn't peaceful now. Its joy based on God choosing to enter the struggle with us. Into a world taxed by empire, God comes as a baby. Into a world of fear, the angels say, "Do not be afraid." Into a world of uncertainty, the star keeps shining. And into a dusty Aussie campsite, in our play today, God shows up again.

Joy, in scripture and in life, is what happens when hope arrives in the midst of exhaustion, when love surprises people who thought they were overlooked, when light shines in places the world calls "nowhere," when God chooses the ordinary and declares it holy. As the narrator says near the end, "The message of peace and salvation is for everyone—from the sands of Bondi to the red dirt of the outback, and everywhere in between." For everyone. No exceptions. No outsiders. No one too far away, too unimportant, too unconventional, too late, too lost. Advent joy is radically inclusive joy. It is the joy of God saying: "Yes, you. You matter. Come and see."

The Bible doesn't tell us what the shepherds said, or how long the wise men stayed, or what Mary thought when strangers walked in. That means the story remains open—open for imagination, open for our participation, open for us to enter it again each year. Today's play invites us to imagine ourselves as Bazza and Sheila—sleepy, confused, flawed, but included in a miracle. Included in God's joy. Included in the unfolding story of hope. And Advent invites us to do the same: to look for God in unexpected places, to listen for angels in the midst of our ordinary days, to follow the star even when we're not certain where it leads, to practise kindness, hospitality, and justice—even in small, fumbling ways—trusting that God can use them.

So, on this third Sunday in Advent, may we remember: joy isn't something we manufacture; it's something God gives. Joy doesn't wait for perfect circumstances; it sneaks into the paddock at night, into the back shed of a pub, into the tired corners of our hearts. Joy isn't about pretending everything is fine; it's about knowing that God is with us even when things are not fine.

And like Bazza and Sheila, like the shepherds and wise men, like Mary and Joseph, may we be open to joy finding us—even in the middle of nowhere, even when we least expect it, even when we feel unprepared. Because Emmanuel is coming. God is with us. And that is good news of great joy for all people.

Amen.

*Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul's Lutheran Church Youtube page <https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133>*