



Leura Uniting Church
3 December 2021
Christmas 2
Gail Hinton

Welcome

Welcome to worship this morning to everyone here and to those of you watching at home. Welcome also to those of you reading a copy of the service at home, Peace be with You and may God bless you in this new year.

Acknowledgment of country (Slide 2)

Before white settlement ...the Spirit was already in this land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways. With respect and gratitude, we acknowledge the Darug people and honour their Elders, past present and future.

Announcements

Call to Worship and Opening Prayer (Slide 4)

Sing aloud with gladness (Jeremiah 31:7)

Make music in your hearts.

Poem.

The Work of Christmas by Howard Thurman (Slide 5)

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*

Let us pray: (Slide 6)

*Eternal God, Lord of heaven and earth
we praise you for the wonders of your love.
Before all beginnings you called us by name,
and declared us to be your children.
In the power of your Spirit,
you gather us into the divine embrace,
and in God, your only Son, you reveal to us
the depths of your undying love,
and the path to abundant life.
Open our eyes, so that in you, we see the truth
shining brightly in the light of your Word, Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

Hymn: TIS 156 Morning has broken

1. Morning has broken
like the first morning:
blackbird has spoken
like the first bird.
Praise for the singing,
praise for the morning,
praise for them, springing
fresh from the word.

2. Sweet the rain's new fall
sunlit from heaven,
like the first dewfall
on the first grass.
Praise for the sweetness
of the wet garden,
sprung from completeness
where his feet pass.

3. Mine is the sunlight;
mine is the morning
born of the one light
Eden saw play.
Praise with elation,
Praise every morning,
God's recreation
Of the new day.

Eleanor Farjeon
1881–1965

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Prayer of Confession and Declaration of Forgiveness (slide 13)

Merciful God,

We confess that we often feel safer celebrating a merry and cosy Christmas, instead of allowing your birth to shatter our complacency.

We confess that we cover up the truth, burying your light under traditions, shopping, and feasting.

We confess that we often miss the wonder of the Incarnation. We fail to see how the sweet baby Jesus will change everything.

Lord, give us grace today to make a fresh start. Draw us close and teach us how to be your children so that your light will shine through us and reflect your abundant love for all to see.

Amen.

*The true light that overcomes all darkness,
has come into the world,
In this light we stand as the children of God,
forgiven through the outpouring of
amazing love.
Thanks be to God.*

Readings: Jeremiah 31: 7-14 and John 1:1-18 Jennie Tippins (slide 7)

Sermon based on John 1:1-18

Charlotte was attending a Christmas Eve Service at her local church and she was finding it hard to stay alert. She was also worried that the preacher would see her yawning and think her rude. It had been a busy few days for Charlotte, she had been flat out cleaning her house, shopping for gifts, wrapping gifts, glazing the ham, and putting up the Christmas decorations. She was tired and worn out and needed a nap way more than a Christmas Eve service. To make matters worse the service was the exact same one she had heard last year and the year before and this year there was no singing because of the blasted virus. The service was nearly over, and Charlotte felt like the grinch, she had not felt anything remotely compassionate, religious, or godly during the service and began to feel like an extremely poor version of a Christian. Then, just as the preacher began to speak about the helpless babe in the manger, an infant in the congregation began to cry, no not, cry whale. This was normally something Charlotte would see as annoying and disruptive in a service but on this particular evening and in that particular moment in time Charlotte was suddenly filled with the significance of God in the manger, God in Jesus, God as a vulnerable, flesh and blood, hungry, whaling, newborn babe. It was almost as if she had received a spiritual tap on the shoulder and a call to 'wake up girl and see the wonder of your God'. When Charlotte heard the next hymn, Holy Night, she felt an incredible compulsion to fall on her knees and listen to the angels sing, but she was in church and that kind of behaviour would be weird?

Charlotte's experience that evening is not unusual; it is amazing how little things, seemingly insignificant events, words, images, or sounds can trigger new insights into the truth of our Christian faith. These events are like receiving fresh eyes, we get see to things that we had not previously noticed.

With that in mind, over the next few weeks, I invite you to see things with fresh eyes and I pray that you can take some new insights with you as you all journey together into 2021. To look for fresh insights there may be no better place to start than John's introduction to the fourth gospel. These eighteen verses are packed with theological statements and ideas, they are full of stuff about God, Jesus, and life. For John's original audience, two thousand years ago this introduction serves as a grand statement that can then be examined and explored in the following chapters of the gospel. We can imagine the early church gathering to hear the words of John again and again as they apply them to their everyday lives. In the same way we too can look into the words of John to learn and grow and transform into the children of God.

A few weeks ago, I spoke to you about our call to live as holy and godly people. Thinking about this call is a helpful way to start or end the day. We can consider how throughout each day we should live and act towards others as a holy and godly people and/or reflect upon how well we did in the evening. Today I would like us to consider what it means to be a child of God. Listen again to verse 12-13:

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Add that, to 'holiness' and 'godliness' as the beginning of a list of things, in no particular order, that we can say about ourselves as believers, our shared character traits as a community and our new personal identity in Jesus Christ. Being made a child of God through the power of God's Word, Jesus Christ, is a truly amazing thing, yet what does this actually mean and how does it shape our lives? When we become a child of God we are blessed with spiritual gifts, and we share in Jesus' victory over sin and death, we inherit abundant, eternal life in the here and now and we find our core identity, something that can never be taken away from us. In a society that seeks to tell us our identity is found in material wealth, possessions, successful careers, social status, fame, perfect parenting and yes, even perfect Christmas days, knowing that our true identity is in Christ is something of a relief. Henri Nouwen tells us that "You are not what

the world makes you; you are (the) children of God.” God knows us and sees our true worth. God as our divine parent loves us unconditionally, and offers us grace, love, and spiritual gifts not because we have in any way earned them but just because we are so loved.

God as our divine parent, our Father and Mother can be hard concept to get our heads around particularly if our earthly parents struggled to give us the unconditional support and guidance, that every child needs. Some of us may question if we can even trust God as our Father, after all this God of ours is portrayed in some of the scriptures as vindictive and blood thirsty, judgemental, and heartless. Well as if John has heard our questionings, he offers us the answer. Without any doubts, without any reservations, John states that the very nature of God is revealed in Christ. Listen again to verse 18:

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,^[a] who is close to the Father’s heart,^[b] who has made him known.

When we understand ourselves as the children of God, we will be changed, made new and transformed. The impact of our spiritual adoption is well summed up in the following quotes:

Max Lucado observes that “To call yourself a child of God is one thing. To be called a child of God by those who watch your life is another thing altogether.”

And Kevin DeYoung reminds us that “It’s not convincing to say you are a child of God if you have none of the characteristics of your (heavenly parent) Father”

These observances about being a child of God are challenging. How can we even begin to possess the characteristics of God? The first and most important thing to keep in mind is that we do not achieve this on our steam or through trying really hard; just as grace comes as a gift of love so does the power to transform both our lives and the lives of those around us. This gift from God can be surprising, just like Charlotte’s spiritual tap on the shoulder. When we have been doing the Christian thing for quite some time we can sometimes get a little bit stale, yet unexpected spiritual promptings show us that God never stops tapping us on the shoulder, giving us fresh insights and new ways to see the world and the people around us.

I would like to finish off by going back to some of the phrases in Howard Thurman’s beautiful poem, reworked to express the wonders of God, our divine Parent.

God our divine Parent finds us when we are lost, even when we stray away or become complacent.

God our divine Parent heals us when we are broken, giving us a new way to see things and the promise of new life.

God our divine Parent feeds us when we are hungry, sending spiritual nourishment even when we feel burnt out and have lost our appetite.

God sets us free; we are no longer trapped into thinking we must live up to societies ideals.

God brings peace into our lives, despite the fragility of peace in the world around us.

God the divine Parent sends the Spirit to make music in our hearts.

Amen.

Hymn: TIS 158 God has spoken by his prophets

1. God has spoken by His prophets
Spoken His unchanging word
Each from age to age proclaiming God
The One the righteous Lord
In the world's despair and turmoil
One firm anchor holds us fast
God is King His throne eternal
God the first and God the last

3. God is speaking by His Spirit
Speaking to our hearts again
In the ageless word expounding
God's own message now as then
Through the rise and fall of nations
One sure faith yet standing fast
God abides His word unchanging
God the first and God the last

2. God has spoken by Christ Jesus
Christ the everlasting Son
Brightness of the Father's glory
With the Father ever one
Spoken by the Word incarnate
God of God ere time was born
Light of Light to earth descending
Christ as God in human form

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Offering

*Lord and giver of every good thing,
we bring to you our lives and gifts
to make way for the healing of the broken and the lost,
through your grace and love
made known to us in Jesus Christ your only Son.
Amen.*

Prayers of the People and The Lord’s Prayer: Annie Cox

Could I ask you to respond “Hear our prayer” after I pray.

Let us pray:

*“⁵ The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it.”*

Loving God, as this new year dawns may we not be overwhelmed or blinded by the darkness that has consumed our world through 2020. The horror and destruction of a pandemic, racial tensions, economic hardship and political battles have created an unprecedented time of unrest and anxiety and have all impacted to different degrees on our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health.

God as this new year dawns help us to remember that the darkness can never extinguish the light that is in Jesus Christ. As we enter into this new year may we take the time to see the newness that God is giving birth to. May this new calendar year keep alive in each one of us our hope for things to be better.

God of light and hope.....**hear our prayer.**

We pray for our Federal and State leaders and their medical and scientific advisors that they will make wise decisions with regard to the welfare of all people. We pray particularly for all front line workers, essential workers and emergency services who daily risk their lives to care for and protect us in the community. We also think of those families who have lost loved ones and are grieving and those who are in quarantine.

Merciful God as we compare the 2 weeks quarantine to the many years that refugees have suffered in detention camps throughout the world and especially on Manus Island and Nauru, we pray that world governments, including Australia, will show compassion and respect for human life and give dignity and a safe permanent residence for those seeking refuge.

God of the displaced and homeless.....**hear our prayer**

We pray for our local Blue Mountains community and leaders, including Indigenous leaders. Give them wisdom in decision making and may we join with them in caring for our community. We give thanks for the generosity of those agencies and individuals who have given time and money and food for the disadvantaged over the Christmas period and we give special thanks for the ministry of Open Table and the volunteers. May this spirit of generosity and care continue throughout this new year.

God of compassion.....**hear our prayer**

We pray for our church community and give thanks for the appointment of Myung Hwa Park as our new Minister. We pray she will have a smooth move from Coffs Harbour to our Mountains and will feel welcomed as she settles into her ministry here. We give thanks too for the ministry of Gail over this month and the ministry of others in our church throughout the ongoing Covid restrictions.

We remember also those in our church community and those on our hearts who are in need of prayer and support and just pause a while now to remember them..... We especially lift up Gwen Wilson in Buckland Nursing home whose family are not able to visit due to being in lockdown in the Northern Beaches and also with the nursing home now closed to visitors.

God of mercy and grace.....**hear our prayer**

We pray that along with changes in our lives we will experience God's love and blessings. May we all enter into this new year with the knowledge that we are loved and cherished and that nothing, not even the virus, can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. Whatever situation we find ourselves in, may we always remember God is with us in the Word that became flesh and dwells amongst us.

Immanuel, God with us.....**hear our prayer**

And now let us pray the prayer that Jesus gave us:

Our Father in heaven

Hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done

On earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread

And forgive us our sins

As we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial

And deliver us from evil

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours

Now and forever.

Amen

Hymn: TIS 256 From heaven you came, helpless babe

1. From heav'n You came helpless babe
Enter'd our world Your glory veil'd
Not to be served but to serve
And give Your life that we might live

His heart with sorrow was torn
Yet not my will but Yours He said

Chorus

*This is our God the Servant King
He calls us now to follow Him
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to the Servant King*

3. Come see His hands and His feet
The scars that speak of sacrifice
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails
Surrendered

2. There in the garden of tears
My heavy load He chose to bear

4. So let us learn how to serve
And in our lives enthrone Him
Each other's needs to prefer
For it is Christ we're serving

CCLI Song # 78897

Graham Kendrick

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Blessing:

May God, this day and in the days to come, make music in your hearts.