

A rather ordinary miracle

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 18 December 2022

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Advent 4A

**Contemporary Reading: “Angels leading us around” by Gillian Hunt;
Matthew 1: 18-25**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Human beings need to sing and dance and feast – and tell stories. This is one reason COVID times have been so hard for us. It is natural for us as a species to gather for ceremony and to share the stories that shape our lives and give them meaning and purpose.

Today we have a story – a story of hesitating and holding and humanity.

But before we get to all that, let’s recognise this as the story of a miracle. Oh no – I’m not talking about that rather predictable angel – they don’t even appear in daylight, only in a dream, like the dreams of that other Joseph – you know the one, the gender-fluid one with the rainbow- coloured coat. In this story Joseph is of course essentially a literary device, channelling all those associations of his ancestor to Matthew’s Jewish readership, rather than a real person.

And I’m definitely not talking about Mary’s supposed virginity – that’s just a really bad translation into Greek of the original Hebrew word for a young girl, that has gotten us church folk into a whole heap of trouble over the centuries.

I’m not talking about the sex – or the supposed lack of it! No - I want to talk about the rather ordinary miracle – the miracle of kindness and hope that inserts itself into this very common human story. We know how this one goes. Two families plan a wedding. All is happy – but then the girl gets pregnant by someone else, and then how will it all end? In many places, even still today, it can end in violence and even murder. But this story ends differently. This story ends with joy – with birth, and a new family, and unexpected security for mother and child.

In this story fear is overcome and God is found unexpectedly to be with us in the ordinary and the commonplace.

This is a story about humanity - how can it be otherwise? It is a story written by a human being about other human beings. But it is also a story about the possibility of divinity in each and every one of us. For as Philip Carter so astutely observes in a recent article for *Presence* magazine,¹ incarnation is present now, “a taking of our flesh into God, and the breathing of God’s Spirit into humanity.”

¹ Presence: An International journal of Spiritual Direction and Companionship Autumn 2022 p.8

This story offers us a way to live into our most authentically human selves, and in that lies its spiritual power. The divine possibility in each of us has the power to disrupt the expected story and make space for transformation and hope.

Human beings have a habit of becoming altogether too certain about things, especially when they are under pressure. All too easily we find ourselves living in the glare of other's expectations and imprisoned by cultural and religious understandings of what is permissible and what is not. Jesus' life and teaching is about releasing us from those patterns of thinking and being.

Rather than offering new ways of being religious, the incarnation offers us universal ways of being human. Into our self-assured and controlling narratives of 'this not that; of my way or the highway', the story of Jesus breathes a simple, life-affirming question – "What if?"

"What if we saw this differently?";

"what if there was more than one way?";

"what if we set aside fear and dared to change?";

"what if we started not with the expectations of others, but from the perspective that the divine is to be found in each and every human being - that each of us is the Messiah, bears the Messiah for others and can be held and valued as such?" Now that would be a miracle!

As the story comes to us – and as Marcus Borg loves to say '*I don't know if it happened this way, but I know that this story is true*' – as the story comes to us, Joseph listens to that 'what if?'

In him it inspires a great gift; the gift of holy hesitation. Holy hesitation – just let that idea percolate a little.

Our western culture does not value hesitation - quite the opposite in fact. Our heroes are decisive, active, assured. We are urged, even in church cultures, to set goals and targets; and we re-assure ourselves with strategic plans that plot our progress and urge us to keep moving. All very well and good in their place. But in all our plans and all our words, where is the space? Where do we press 'pause'? Where are the moments of holy hesitation into which the Word can speak and be born?

Let's listen again to the process that unfolds in Joseph. "*Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream*" and so on.

Joseph is described as 'righteous' – not 'right' in the sense of some humanly defined moral or religious code, and definitely not 'self-righteous' as religious people are often perceived to be. It is because he is 'righteous', in the sense of a human being attuned to the inner promptings of the divine and open to mercy and compassion, that he is '*unwilling to expose her to public disgrace*'. He is already, at this point, in defiance of the social and religious mores of his time, because of his openness to other possibilities – to the 'what if'.

He exercises his imagination, placing himself in Mary's shoes and understanding from a place of compassion what the outcomes will be for her if he takes the expected action. He acts from a place of holy hesitation – and even as he decides upon a quiet and inconspicuous divorce, he makes the choice to hesitate further, not communicating his decision until he has 'slept on it'. How important that kind of hesitation is!

Joseph's decision to sleep before he acts, leads to his 'dream' and to a very different outcome. This story provides wonderful insight into how different the world could be if all of us just took a little more time; slept before we sent that email, that text message, or made that phone call. The righteous person the scriptures suggest '*meditates on the law of God day and night*'.

Our hurried culture too rarely encourages the taking of that kind of time. But the gift of holy hesitation is something we can model and encourage in others – gentling our world with decisions and actions that allow time and space for the spirit to speak to us and offer us new perspectives, fresh answers to the question, 'what if?'

So, this is a story about humanity, and about holy hesitation, it is also finally a story about holding – about the kind of gentle, light holding that ensures safety, yet allows for growth. Joseph we are told continues his relationship with Mary but has no marital relations with her until after the baby is born.

Now let us not entangle ourselves here in patriarchal anxiety about notions of virginity or lineage. Let's just hear the respectful holding by one human being of another's truth and reality. Mary is pregnant – however that has happened, let's not engage the speculation – and she needs to be supported, held tenderly, and allowed to bring to birth the life within her before entering into a different relationship.

This kind of spacious holding into new being asks of us those fruits of the spirit exhibited here by the righteous, hesitant Joseph – gifts of patience, faithfulness and self-control, that come from time spent close to the heart of God.

There is great spaciousness here. The kind of spaciousness that is honoured in the two names used here for the child – Jesus and Emmanuel – the one who saves us from our missteps, and the one who is constantly with us – even as Matthew will remind their readers at the end of the Gospel '*to the end of time*'. It is the awareness of the presence of God within us that ultimately saves us and sets us free from the 'glare' of others' expectations and enables us to participate in the daily human miracles of kindness and hope.

So may we like Joseph, courageously engage the reality of our humanness;

offer the spaciousness of holy hesitation to ourselves and others;

and hold tenderly the life and the lives entrusted to us,

that all may come to know the joy and reality of Emmanuel –

God with us.

Amen.