

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 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.

Sunday 3 December 2017, Cashmere Presbyterian Church

Advent 1: Christmas Communion Service

Preacher: Silvia

for bulletin:

'God at work' image

God is at work
in particular ways
for those with eyes to see

ORDER OF SERVICE:

Please stand as the Bible is processed in.

Lighting the Advent Candle

Today, this first Sunday in Advent, we light the candle of hope

Come, light of the world

Open our eyes to see your glory

even when it is hidden.

Come in the little things and everyday.

Shine your hope in our hearts.

Amen.

Opening Hymn 193: O come O come Emmanuel

'Song to the Holy Spirit', by James K. Baxter (excerpt)

Lord, Holy Spirit,

You blow like the wind in a thousand paddocks,

Inside and outside the fences,

You blow where you wish to blow.

Lord, Holy Spirit,

You are the sun who shines on the little plant,

You warm him gently, you give him life,

You raise him up to become a tree with many leaves.

Lord, Holy Spirit,

You are the bright cloud in whom we hide

You bring us to our Brother Jesus

To rest our heads upon his shoulder.

Lord, Holy Spirit,
You are the kind fire who does not cease to burn,
Consuming us with flames of love and peace,
Driving us out like sparks to set the world on fire.

Lord, Holy Spirit,
In the love of friends you are building a new house,
Heaven is with us when you are with us.
You are singing your songs in the hearts of the poor
Guide us, wound us, heal us. Bring us to the Father.

Prayer of confession

Prayer Song (*remain seated*): Open our eyes, Lord (SIS 390)

Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus
To reach out and touch him, and say that we love him
Open our ears, Lord, and help us to listen
Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus

Notices

Prayer book

Passing the Peace

We offer each other the 'right hand of fellowship' as a sign that all are welcome and accepted by God.

Carol: The stars danced, the angels sang (by Barbara Gillard)
(Carol our Christmas 43; teach this)

The stars danced, the angels sang
the night God came to earth.
The whole vault of heaven rang
to celebrate his birth.

**We will dance, we will sing,
we will praise our heavenly King at his birth!**

Mary, his mother smiled
to see her babe new born.
Shepherds came hurrying,
left their flocks forlorn.

We will dance, we will sing ...

Wise men who saw his star,
knew their Lord was here,
came with their offerings,
incense, gold and myrrh.

We will dance, we will sing ...

We too will give to him
gifts of love and praise.
Dance for him, sing for him,
rejoice in him always.

We will dance, we will sing ...

Kids Box

Angel ... also nativity set

Imagine if you had really important news and you were trying to tell a friend

you knock on their door but they can't hear the door

you call them but their phone is on silent

How do you get their attention?

How do you get your message through?

It was like this for God when he wanted to tell the world that his son Jesus was going to be born

He needed the help of some ordinary people, but first he needed to get their attention

The Bible tells us about how some ordinary people heard God, just when the least expected to. When they talked about how God got his message through into their life, they described it as the visit of an angel. A girl called Mary had an experience of talking to God, a bit like talking to a person standing there. She was a bit freaked out but the angel said 'Don't be afraid' and they talked for a while.

Her fiancé Joseph, he had an experience of God speaking to him while he was asleep, in a dream; he saw an angel in his dream and the angel had a very specific message for him about how God was sending his son Jesus to be born, and how Joseph had an important job to do. He woke up in the morning and he totally knew in his heart that his crazy dream was not just made up, that God really had talked to him.

And when the baby was born angels also appeared to some travelling wise men, and then in the sky above a hill and some shepherds saw it and heard their message. The shepherds were totally not expecting that!

We will be hearing more about all that next week. What I need you to do today is to make some angels for our nativity set.

(Children are invited to go out for craft and story time.)

Bible Readings

Isaiah 64:1-8

Mark 13:24-33

Sermon: God is at work, in particular ways, for those with eyes to see

Offering

Dedication of the offering (*please stand*)

Hymn 200: Come, thou long-expected Jesus
(elders come forward)

Advent Communion

(from Isaiah 64:1-9)

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,

The mountains will quake at your presence.

May your name be made known through all the earth

The nations will tremble at your presence.

No ear has heard, no eye has seen

but you meet us when we walk in your ways.

In our sin we were cut off from you

In our failings we fade away like dead leaves.

Even our best is worthless

when you hide your face from us.

Deliver us from our sins

for you are our Father.

We are the clay, and you are our potter

remember us, your people!

...

Father of all, Lord of all creation

to you be all praise and glory and thanks

for you remembered your people,

you came to us.

You spoke to your people through your prophets

and through your angels in dreams and visions.

For those with eyes to see and ears to hear

you announced the coming of your Son

and the in-breaking of your kingdom.

In Jesus, born of Mary, born in a manger,

you came to us, came to be one of us

came to be one with us.

In Jesus, teacher and friend,

you walked as one of us

In Jesus you showed your power and your love

for those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

In Jesus you showed your power and your love

as all was stripped away and he died on the cross.

We want to close our eyes to your pain

but we turn again to you.

Open the eyes of our hearts that we might see you in your risen glory.

O come, O come Emmanuel.

With the people of God through every age, in every nation we praise you:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might

heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Open our hearts as we share in this Communion with Christ together with God's people through all the world.

Come Holy Spirit, be in these gifts of bread and juice may they be to us the body and blood of Christ.

Strengthen your love in us as we gather as friends around your table.

Build a new house in our midst, build your kingdom

O come, O come Emmanuel.

Heaven is with us when you are with us.

Guide us, wound us, heal us.

Amen.

Sing 676: The Lord's Prayer (*while the elders receive Communion*)

All are welcome at the Lord's table. Our sins are forgiven and we are made whole. We share together as one family in the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Please remain seated while we share in Holy Communion. All are welcome to receive the elements of bread and grape juice. We pass these around the rows; if you do not wish to receive just pass them on.

Closing Hymn 201: Lo he comes with clouds descending

Advent Blessing

Be alert, be awake, be ready, for the Lord is coming!

Be watchful, take note; open your eyes for the Lord is here!

Listen carefully for his voice in the crowd and in the stillness.

Be on the lookout for his hand at work, for God is at work.

Look and you will see his love in action.

Be ready to notice God's grace making space for hope, and his peace shimmering on the water.

Amen, amen, amen (sung)

Isaiah 64:1-9

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

64 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

² ^[a] as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—

to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

⁴ From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.

⁵ You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.

But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed. ^[b]

⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.

We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

⁷ There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered ^[c] us into the hand of our iniquity.

⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13:24-37

Good News Translation (GNT)

The Coming of the Son of Man

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.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

²⁸ “Let the fig tree teach you a lesson. When its branches become green and tender and it starts putting out leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ In the same way, when you see these things happening, you will know that the time is near, ready to begin.^[a]³⁰ Remember that all these things will happen before the people now living have all died. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

No One Knows the Day or Hour

³² “No one knows, however, when that day or hour will come—neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son; only the Father knows. ³³ Be on watch, be alert, for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It will be like a man who goes away from home on a trip and leaves his servants in charge, after giving to each one his own work to do and after telling the doorkeeper to keep watch. ³⁵ Watch, then, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming—it might be in the evening or at midnight or before dawn or at sunrise. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, he must not find you asleep. ³⁷ What I say to you, then, I say to all: Watch!”