

Luke 2:1-14

In the words of our Gospel reading, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours...”

In our Gospel tonight, I think we’re reminded of the incredible scope and significance of our Lord’s birth. Tonight, we’re reminded that the very heavens sang for joy – the planets, the moon and the stars joined together with the host of heaven to sing their praise to God - and give thanks for the gift of our Lord.

The scope of this story (the size of this story) is cosmic. In a sense, the full meaning of our Lord’s birth is beyond us - because it spans the fullness of time and history. The story is eternal (it’s big) - and we’re quite small. And yet, tonight we celebrate a God who comes to us – we celebrate a God who is present in the story of our lives – here and now.

We’ve had an interesting year. (At the end of the year, I think it’s common to look back – to remember the events of the year – as they’ve unfolded.)

And, the story of our Lord coming to us in this last year has been an interesting one.

This time last year (back in December 2019), Australia was struggling its way through a series of horrendous bushfires (in Victoria, NSW, parts of Queensland and South Australia) – over 186 thousand square kilometres were burnt – 2779 homes were lost – and 34 people died (even more if we count those affected by smoke inhalation). And, yet, in this time of terrible tragedy and loss – I think we can see signs of a loving God – and God who comes to us – to heal the sick and bind up the broken.

In our time of need, 70 countries around the world offered their support to the people of Australia. Firefighters from around the world came to help us fight these fires – from Canada and the United States – from New Zealand and the UK. We saw firefighters and water bombers come in from Singapore and France. The Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea offered to send 1000 firefighters and soldiers. We saw donations and fundraising events – and government aid – all offered in support of those effected.

I think we see evidence of a loving God in these stories – in these people. These are stories about a God who comes to us – a God who moves through the lives of ordinary people (inspired by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit)– these are stories about a loving God who is born within us.

Following on from the bushfires, in this last year, we’ve seen our lives turned upside down by the outbreak and spread of the Covid 19 virus. We’ve seen fear and uncertainty grip the nations of the world – we’ve heard stories about loss and suffering. But again, through the outbreak and spread of this virus, we’ve also seen the very best that humanity has to offer – we’ve seen incredible courage and sacrifice – we’ve seen care offered to the frail and the elderly – and we’ve seen support for the poor and the disadvantaged. The outbreak of this virus has given many of us opportunities to reflect and re-evaluate our priorities – we’ve seen a renewed emphasis on relationships and community (supported by advances in shared technology and connectivity).

Yes, the story of this last year has been a story of hardship and struggle – but it’s also the story of a God who continues to come to us - to walk with us and share our lives (a God who is born within us - inspiring hope and new beginnings). Yes, the Christmas story is the celebration of a God who comes to us – to walk with us – to shape us - and share our lives.

In our Gospel reading, we’re told that Mary gave birth to her firstborn son in that stable, on that first Christmas.

According to the Torah, the slaves of Egypt who travelled with Moses in the wilderness offered up their firstborn sons to God –this was a faith offering that began a thousand years before Jesus was born. And, this was a difficult time – a time of struggle – a time of suffering and longing (much like our experience of God during this last year – travelling through a wilderness of sickness and uncertainty). The firstborn sons of Israel were given to God in hope and longing – to serve God’s purpose – to teach, to guide and to lead and to heal. These children (born 3000 years ago) were offered to help build a future that they would never live to see – the firstborn children of this ancient race were given to God in anticipation of that first Christmas.

In the book of Numbers (chapter 3) we’re told that God consecrated all the firstborn in Israel, both human and animal. (The people gave their children to God). And, in the first book of Samuel (chapter 1) the pattern is set in place when Hannah offers her firstborn son to God (Samuel). For a thousand years the pattern continued, from one generation to the next. The firstborn child of each generation was offered to God – an act of faith – because the people accepted that God’s purpose would unfold in God’s own good time.

The faith offering of God’s people can be traced back through Christ’s forefathers all the way back to King David and his father Jesse – all the way back to Isaac and his father Abraham.

So yes - the scope of our Christmas story is cosmic – the celebration of the fulness of God born in the hearts and minds of each new generation. And tonight, we’re reminded that we are part of it. Again, we gather to celebrate the love of a God who comes to us – to walk with us – to inspire us - and shape our lives.

So, as we take our place in this story, we remember those who stand with us (past and present). We remember the offering of those people who were inspired to come to us last year – the firefighters and aid workers who stood with us, 12 months ago. We remember the story of our struggle with Covid this year – we remember our struggle and the inspired example of those around us - the example of those who worked with the sick and the dying – we remember the people around us who cared for the elderly in our nursing homes – those who offered financial assistance to the poor and needy. Yes, these are the green shoots of our faith.

As we gather to celebrate Christmas, I think we are called to be mindful of the God who is always with us – the one who is born within us – and then works through us.

Yes, the evidence of this love is truly epic – it surrounds us and fills us and inspires us (through the power of the Holy Spirit). It is cosmic in scope. It has moved and shaped all the generations that have gone before, spanning years beyond counting. We have experienced this God of grace during the year, and we will continue experience the fulness of God’s presence in the year to come. Surely, this is the purpose of Christmas – to celebrate the fulness of God here with us – and to take our place in the eternal story.

The Lord be with you.