

EMMANUEL: THE DIRECTION OF THE INCARNATION

Text: Isaiah 9:6

Occasion: Christmas Day, OBC

Date: 25th December, 2018

A few years ago, I attended a Christmas service at a Lutheran church at the top of the South Island in a town called Upper Moutere, a small old building which housed St. Paul's church, and during the service the pastor gets up to deliver the sermon and says these words: "Today is Jesus Christ's birthday, so I think it appropriate we sing him happy birthday." With that, he roused the small gathering to sing the familiar tune of happy birthday and then promptly sat down. I won't promise to be that brief with you this morning, but on a similar vein I only have a select few thoughts to share with you today.

Who are we here gathered this morning? For some, this is your home, the church that you regularly attend and gather at, being formed together by the opening of the word and the worship of the people. Welcome. For others this might be a place well known to you, but infrequently visited. Perhaps you grew up here, perhaps you come because it's what you've always done, and maybe you come every other month or so—welcome.

Or, perhaps this morning, Christmas day, is the only time you step foot in a church, or even that you've been dragged by a family member or friend to begrudgingly be here today, rather interested in being here apart from the tradition of it. Welcome. Regardless of who you are I am going to share something that is possibly the most important message you will ever receive, so listen close.

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You may have noticed something in the lengths of your lives, whether they have been long or short. Despite the protests of the late-modern world, humanity since the dawn of time (and indeed to this day) has noticed something behind the fabric of this world, a movement and energy beyond humankind. For one humans do not neatly fit into the category of 'animal' as much as some of us would like. There is something about the love we share, the pain we feel, the beauty we create, and the evil we are capable of that is beyond the realm of nature. You might have felt this when you've held a baby, your own child maybe, looked deep in her eyes and seen the twinkle and glisten of her expression look back at you. You might've felt it when you read that book, heard that music or saw that movie that touched the very being of your soul, reached into places you never knew existed. You might've felt it in the strange pathos of watching your parents age and die, standing over their grave reflecting on the frailty and shortness of life. We've been taught by the modern world to write these off as mere 'psychological transference,' as blips in the natural system of the world. Yet for some reason these moments still won't go away, they haunt us. A band from Seattle 'The Postal Service' once wrote: "I want so badly to believe that there is truth, that love is real / And I want life in every word to the extent that it's absurd." Something about the human experience is hauntingly unexplainable.

The other thing that humans, and perhaps yourself have always noticed, is that there is some higher being, if you like, to the world. The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas called it the thing that 'drives the green flower ... that drives the water through the rocks / Drives my red blood ... the hand that whirls the water in the pool.' The great Greek thinkers called it the *logos*, the logic and word that drove all creation, Māori called it Io-Roe, 'Eternal God,' Io-matua-kore, Fatherless and existing forever. Star Wars called it 'the force,' others 'fate' or 'the universe'—you know when something doesn't work out and a friend says, "Well I guess the universe just didn't want it to happen."

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All human effort and desire to understand goes out—outward to the divine, searching for God. Modern people don't use this language of God, but read enough of history and you realise that all people have always been trying to figure one just one thing: why are we here; who put us here; are we alone?

We tell stories, create myths, observe nature, write science, enjoy art—all in attempt to make sense of the world. Everything we do and consume in some way or another is in order to make sense of the world we live in. We watch superhero movies because we want to believe there really can be super-humans who might be able to defeat the things we cannot, we read science and pursue medicine to make sure we have a better grip on the natural world and control over death than we really do, we invest in politics and political leaders in vain attempt to reach the perfect society for all, utopia.

Cultures and religions seek the transcendent, they seek purpose and meaning on this earth. Humanity has constantly been looking, seeking, asking: ‘is there something out there?’ The direction is always outwards; searching for, investigating further, reaching out. Humanity is and always has been reaching out.

God’s response to this great mystery, his grand plan to save the world from themselves, the answer which I am convinced is the one true answer and think is worthy of devoting my entire life to come in the strange story of Christmas, of a peasant boy born in a barn surrounded by animal filth and a dodgy group of shepherds. 2000 or so years ago, an ancient Jewish family had a baby born in the town of Bethlehem. This was, and is, the answer we’ve been looking for. It came as a historical event; the birth and life of Jesus from Nazareth really did happen in the province of Judea during the time of the Roman Empire, yet he soon became known as Emmanuel, God with us. It is an event known among Christians as the incarnation.

The incarnation is the story of God coming to us. It is the direct opposite of the main human project, it is the scandal that says the God who created the universe, the one in whom all things live and move and have their being, the one who is the force behind creation, the answer for all our questions and longings *comes to us*. The movement is flipped, in our longing and seeking after, into, out there, He comes to us. As we fill our lives with false meaning, he gives us our true meaning. This is revelation. This is the unfolding of mysteries once past, of things once hidden. The incarnation becomes the hinge on which the universe swings, as was always planned from the beginning. This is revelation, revealing to us who we are and in whom we can trust.

The late pastor Eugene Peterson writes, “God did not come as a mighty heavenly warrior, brandishing a sword and hurling thunderbolts. God does not come as a wise sage, calling a few super-intelligent individuals to a seminar at which he imparts the secret knowledge of salvation. God does not hide himself in the babbling brooks and whispering trees for us to piece together like some gigantic puzzle. No. God gave us a story: ‘To us a child is born, to us a son is given.’”¹

This force, the mysterious power or being, the source and creator that humanity has always been attune to is fully revealed in the birth of Jesus, the Christmas story. If you’ve been wondering if there is something more, if there is a purpose and meaning to life beyond what you’ve been told then here it is: the most surprising story of God born in a stable, coming to us. “God has commanded a strange word.”

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What does this all mean? What is actually revealed to us at Christmas, why is this Jesus figure is still celebrated 20 centuries from the time of his birth, why does this story still not only linger but dominate the shape of our world? What is the big celebration we are gathered here for at Christmas even have to do with my day-to-day life?

If you’ve been searching, if you’ve been lost; if you feel unloved or unlovable; if you’ve given up trying to make meaning in life; if your relationships have fallen apart and families split; if you find Christmas to be the loneliest time of year; if you wish there was more out there; if you want hope, joy, peace, and

¹ Eugene Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: Conversations on the Ways of God Formed by the Words of God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017), 140.

love based not on your life circumstance and feelings but based on a unconquerable truth that not even death can defeat know this: ‘To us a child is born, to us a son is given’ and he is called ‘Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’ God has come for us. He is not content to remain distant but has come close. Stop searching outwards, he has come to us. He is the author of our lives stepped into the page, the playwright onto the stage. He is the King invading enemy-occupied territory—an evil world—and having somehow defeated and overcome that evil by his life, death, and resurrection, is calling you to participate in his great kingdom. He has flipped the expectations of the world on their head, though “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness ... Therefore God has exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:6-7; 9-11). He has come to us.

*For the joy of the world
He was born
Bringing peace to us all
Through the gift of the Son
Now the darkest of ages are done
For the Saviour of heaven has come. Amen.*