

Sunday 7th January 2024

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, we worship together in God.

Introduction - new beginnings

This is the first Sunday in 2024, a new year bringing new opportunities. Many people take New Year as a time to resolve to do things differently, to eat more healthily, to exercise more, to keep in touch more, to give more. Often these good intentions are swallowed up by circumstances and sometimes temptations and the new year becomes like any other. I wonder if it is sometimes the same in our faith life? What resolutions might we make about our life together as church.

In the Methodist Church this Sunday is often known as Covenant Sunday, a reminder that our life together in God is built on promise rather than contract. A contract lists conditions and stipulations, actions that must be fulfilled and expectations that must be met. A promise has no conditions, no expectations and no stipulations, it is a gift or it should be. It is good to remind ourselves that our relationship with God is covenant, it is based on the promise that God will always love us, is always there and our journey of faith is about growing in our response to this promise. Covenant Sunday is the opportunity to stop and review our journey in God, just as New year is an opportunity to stop and review our life and both invite a refocussing and recommitment to the way we respond to God's love. God's covenant was originally understood in the context of the people of Israel, this was then reinterpreted through the message of Jesus as promise which embraces all people.

Our relationship with God is based on our knowledge of God, and all we have yet to discover of God, it is a journey and like all journeys it is good to stop occasionally and check we are still journeying together and in the direction we intended. New Year is a good time to pause and take stock in our everyday life and our life together a church. you might like to take a moment to stop and consider how your understanding of God has changed in the last year, how has your relationship with God grown and what do you now do differently because of your relationship with God.

Readings Matthew 2:1-12 ([The new Living Translation](#))

Ephesians 3:1-12 ([The Message](#))

Reflection

The gospel according to Matthew is steeped in Judaic tradition. The author was without doubt Jewish and wrote for a Jewish audience but a community which embraced the status of Jesus and the expanding of God's covenant beyond Israel.

In chapter 2:1-12 we read of the visit of the Magi connected in the church calendar with Epiphany, the feast of which was celebrated yesterday. Matthew is picking up the theme of Isaiah where in Chapter 60 we read -

'Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.'

Written at the time Israel were coming out of exile this was a passage to inspire hope in a positive future. Israel would be great again. Matthew connects Jesus with this future hope, he is announcing the message as grounded in the long tradition of God's relationship with the people Israel. However, the real significance of this story is that Jesus was acknowledged by foreigners, gentiles, the wise men from other lands, and in that is the heart of the gospel of Jesus. God's promise is for all people.

In his story 'The hermit' (found in the collection Keeping God Company), Trevor Dennis explores the Magi getting lost on a dark and cloudy night when no stars can be seen. We can all feel lost at times and in the story the Magi find a cave in which to rest and in the cave they encounter Moses. A dispirited Moses, a lost Moses, disillusioned with the God of his younger days. They explain their quest and when the time comes to leave they invite Moses to accompany them. He is reluctant having no need of the God he has discovered but never the less he travels with them and arrives in Bethlehem. There he discovers his friend in the fragility of a baby and all his old feelings of love return, he is overwhelmed and released. It is a wonderful story which I recommend.

There are many people who fall out with God, many who have never fallen in with God and often it is because their perception of God is based on the punitive God of the Old Testament stories. Jesus redrew the picture of God along with expanding our understanding of God if we take the time to stop and think about what we believe in the light of his message. In Trevor's story Moses is disillusioned with God, he has believed the stories wrapped around God's relationship with Israel and actions of the people have left him ill at ease. How much hurt and pain has been wrought in the name of God by people of faith justifying their actions of inner hatred?

Paul as Saul had persecuted Christians, justifying his actions by seeing those outside Judaism as less. His journey took him deep inside himself and almost turned him inside out. He became the champion for inclusion. He understood Jesus message to say that all were one on God, there were no barriers, no distinctions within God's love. He also understood how difficult it would be to convince people, especially those who had never known a relationship with God, or worse fallen out of relationship with God. He was not sure he was up to the task but found deep within the words and the ways to make the connections for others.

We all have that knowledge and wisdom deep within us. The journey is to find it and use it. Paul did and as he writes –

'And so here I am, preaching and writing about things that are way over my head, the inexhaustible riches and generosity of Christ. My task is to bring out in the open and make plain what God, who created all this in the first place, has been doing in secret and behind the scenes all along.'

It is a task we all share, in response to God's love we are called through our own experience to help others see God in a true and relevant light. Just as Jesus did this for those around him, and through the stories of his teaching does for us, we are challenged to grow in our understanding of God and share what we discover. We do not do this in isolation but in the oneness which is God and which enfolds the whole of time and space, and this is our power. Paul puts it this way – 'When we trust in him, we're free to say whatever needs to be said, bold to go wherever we need to go.'

Paul goes on to pray for the church in Ephesus as they accept the challenge to be bold with their message of God's love for all. In his book 'God, Energy and the Field' theologian Adrian B Smith explores a twenty first century understanding of Jesus and Jesus as the Christ through the new discoveries in quantum science. He explores the notion of collected consciousness and oneness and how Jesus embraced ideas which seem so different and

new even now. He looks at Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 and re-expresses it for today. I share this with you now and as we begin a new year I invite you to take time to recognise your growth, and be bold in the confidence of the God within, which enables us all to find the words to make a difference for others.

'Out of his infinite glory, may God give you the energy through his Spirit for your inner self to grow strong, so that you may be known as the Christ through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, the highest form of energy, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length and the totality of the Cosmos, until, knowing the love of the Christ, which is beyond all intellectual knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God which is our final destiny.'

This is the promise of God, this is the covenant we enter into and it is to this that we respond recognising as individuals the seeds of the divine planted within our being. These seeds are the potential energy into which we tap. Just as Jesus recognised this within himself we are called to discover and recognise the divine within us, then consciously choose to journey deeper through reflection and connection, and all the while share the experience with each other. Through this we all grow and change the world.

The birth of Jesus was the start but the Christmas Story grows and grows as we each enter into the wonder of life in God.

Psalm 29 (Psalms for a Quantum World)

Praise to the creator, source of all being.
Lift up your voices to God
and sing with God a song of love.
Everything is in God,
winds and seas,
land and trees,
all animals,
nothing exists outside God.
Everything that happens
happens in God,
is known by God,
is a part of God;
when people hurt, God hurts,
when people laugh, God laughs,
when people celebrate, God celebrates.
Everyone is held in God,
can draw strength from God
and becomes the fullness of themselves in God.
Praise the creator, source of all being,
sing of our oneness in God
and live love, the eternal love of all creation,
in everything you do.

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