

St Margaret's Uniting Church
Fourth Sunday in Advent, Christmas Eve, 24th December, 2017
Luke 2:1-20
Sarah Tomilson

We are standing on the threshold. The threshold of another year...In a way would could also say that we are standing on the threshold of the story, at the stable door in Bethlehem, preparing to welcome the Christ Child into the world. The waiting is over.

How many of us here have ever participated in a Christmas pageant? Or perhaps I should ask has anyone not participated in a Christmas pageant?

I must say that my earliest and strongest memory related to the nativity story is the yearly Christmas pageant at the local aged care residence...I always wanted to be Mary.

And then my favourite memory was reading "*A Christmas Mystery*", every December...

When I was preparing for today I was thinking, this story is so well known, it is difficult to hear it with fresh ears. I don't know if others among us today also find this a challenge, that when you hear the nativity narrative it is hard to look beyond the pageant, beyond the childhood memories. Or perhaps this story does speak to you in fresh ways. For me the Christmas story is like visiting a childhood friend, a grandmotherly type of friend, it is like a comfortable memory. So, what I wish to know is ...how do we hear it with fresh ears? How do we look at the story from a different perspective? *Is it even a worthy pursuit?*

Running with this idea of perspective, I thought I'd take the rather playful stab at physics, and as the physics teachers in our midst would know I'm no physicist. But here we go! The first perspective we will explore is with time, the second is with space.

During the weeks of Advent, we've been speaking a lot about time... we've described Advent as seasons within season, we've moved through the season of hope in the first week of advent, then to peace, to joy and now in the fourth week of Advent, we are in the season of love. We've been speaking of the ways we mark time – and how God time, Kairos time, suspends and expands our human way of marking time. An in-breaking into the chronological progression of life, what the Celtic Christian tradition calls the 'thin places', where the proximity to God is close, and many of us would have experienced a sense of this... in the birth of a child, in the death of someone we cherish, in falling-in-

love, in the oceanic crevasses of deep grief, in the particular experiences in our own lives... perhaps this is another place to find the story.

Perhaps another way to describe this Kairos time is to think of it in terms of a cross section. Human time is the horizontal axis, the chronological progression of time, and God-time the vertical axis, running on a different track, running deep, not across. And at the point where these two lines meet, where God and human meet, that is the axis mundi. A friend told me about the axis mundi a few years ago. In many of the world philosophies, there is a point at the centre of the world, where the lines meet, where the compass points connect, it is the heart of the world, the most sacred place, the axis mundi. It is there at the centre of time, the centre of the world where humanity meets the divine, here is where we find the stable in Bethlehem, here is the birth of Christ. And it is a crux point, the axis mundi has the cross at its centre. Somehow suggesting that the cross, what it means to follow Christ, to be a Christian disciple, is caught up in this centre. The in-breaking of the human and the divine.

Now for perspective two:

Carl Sagan the American astronomer, was part of the starship voyager expedition in 1977... Taking the first ever portraits of the solar system.

Photos were taken of Neptune... A storm raging on Saturn that had been going for 300 years.

The story goes that when the last photo of the planets had been taken, the camera was ordered to be switched off to conserve energy. But in a moment of inspiration Carl Sagan turned his camera around to capture the blue planet, our planet, earth from 6 billion kilometres away. It was the first portrait of the earth, a speck of light in the darkness of space.

In this now famous photo called the pale blue dot, you can tell it is nearly impossible to see. But if you were to google pale blue dot you would find it. It is an extraordinary photo – and Carl Sagan has written movingly about his reflections of the photo he took: “everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was... every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician” lived out their lives on this pale blue dot.

I wonder if this photo catches some of the wonder of the birth of the Christ child in that tiny stable. Seeing, experiencing, knowing that all the world is contained in that moment. I imagine this is what it must feel like for every new mum and

dad at the birth of their own child. It almost seems cliché to say it. And yet it is true.

I'm aware that the analogy is slightly stretched, as Jesus's arrival is something for the whole universe, it is not apart from the world, but earthed, grounded, seeped in our humanity and in our yearning for wholeness, for God. Something extraordinary happened in our world with the arrival of Jesus, and it continues to affect us.

So perhaps the most wonderful thing about the nativity story of is what is to come. That the wonder of the universe is contained in this story, that the divine mystery can be contemplated when we hear the story. Yet it is also true that the story of the birth of Jesus is not the big story of the Gospel. Two of the gospels, Mark and John, do not include the birth narrative. The story of Jesus' ministry, his life, his death and his resurrection, this is the BIG story.

So perhaps our question is not how do we tell the story of Jesus' birth but how do we retell it in the light of Jesus' ministry for us, now, at this point in time.

And yet we keep telling the story of Christ's birth, telling it beyond the Christmas pageant. It is inviting us to sit be still and contemplate the wonder of our universe, the wonder of the in-breaking of love - Christ being born into our lives, born into our world, time and time again.

Amen