

The in-breaking God

Readings Psalm 96, Luke 2:1 – 14

When was the last time you were truly astounded at something God has done? I don't mean pleasantly surprised or even blessed in some way. I mean absolutely gobsmacked, completely taken aback, totally amazed. Can you recall a time when you felt like that?

For me it was when Kevin and Anne Roberts were ministering to us at the 9am service. Anne preached brilliantly on healing. Her teaching was clear and sensible and sensitive. Then Kevin invited anyone who wanted to be anointed and prayed for to come forward. Were you here that day? We could ask for healing for ourselves or for someone else. Kevin and Anne stood at the front and began praying together. Then more people came forward so they split up and prayed individually. Then more people came forward so they asked me to pray as well.

I was sitting in the front row and had my back to you all. So when people started coming forward I was amazed. More and more of you came forward as the Spirit prompted you to do so.

What was so amazing about that? The fact that God broke into our culture in a new way. 10:30 people are more used to coming forward and more used to sharing their stories with each other. Even so, they can be somewhat reserved. But 9am people are quite reserved and quite private – generally speaking. So when the Lord moved in that dramatic way, he was breaking through the norm into something supernatural.

I have heard a few stories about what God did through that prayer; for people in both services. I am sure there is a lot that God did that day, and has continued to do, in you and in your loved one; that has not yet been shared.

The point is that God wants to break into our usual way of being in supernatural ways. That is exactly what happened when the angel spoke to the shepherds. This was not the norm! The Saviour's birth was something the Jewish people had been hoping for; longing for; wondering if it would ever happen. They were desperate for things to change; for the Messiah to set them free.

Nothing is happening. Things are getting worse under Roman rule.

And then, the Messiah is born.

So God is sitting in heaven thinking, "Hmm, who shall I announce my son's miraculous birth to first? Spirit what do you think? Perhaps some notable Jewish rabbi or even a political ruler like Caesar or Herod." Then God goes "Nah! Let's start as we mean to go on. Let's turn things upside down. Let's break into their complacency. Let's send Gabriel and his mates to see the shepherds."

At this point the Holy Spirit might have had something to say:

But God, don't you want your Son to make an impact on the world? You know these shepherd blokes are unimportant eh! You know they don't even have enough land to provide for themselves. They don't have any influence or power. And by the way, have you taken a whiff? They stink – no wonder people look down on them.

And God nods his head. "Exactly!" God says. And the Spirit is immediately on board. "Ahhh! I get your point. The shepherds are perfect. Good choice God."

So an angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Fear is not an emotion we often associate with worship. And yet the shepherd's fear was the beginning of worship. Mary was initially afraid when the angel spoke with her. We see fear often, at a first supernatural encounter in Scripture and in life today.

The shepherds were watching their flocks at night; in the darkness. Then the glory of the Lord, this amazingly bright light, shone around them. No wonder they were afraid. But the angel quickly reassures them. "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news for you and for all people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

The angel tells the shepherds to swap their great fear for great joy! Joy is appropriate because God has broken into his world through the birth of the Messiah and things will never be the same again.

I want to turn to our Psalm 96 for a moment. Some have divided the song into 3 sections: worshipping, witnessing and waiting. It begins with a call to worship; God's people are to called to praise God and to tell of his greatness among the nations. Then the nations are to join the worship and all of creation is to join in and praise the Most High God of Heaven.

Listen:

Sing to God

Declare his glory among the nations

Ascribe to the Lord all you families of nations

Say among the nations "The Lord reigns"

Let the heavens rejoice; let the earth be glad

Let all creation rejoice before the Lord

Why?

Because he comes to judge the earth; judge not in the sense of condemnation but in the sense of offering forgiveness and healing and freedom and new life.

Some of you might be thinking "Really?" I don't see that happening.

Let's pause to ask ourselves some questions:

If Jesus has come to bring these things; where do we see them? Do we see them?
Do we see the Shepherd King breaking into this world at all?

You may remember Kevin and Anne talking of the five marks of mission:
Do we see the Good News being proclaimed?
Do we see new believers coming to faith and being nurtured?
Do we see loving service to human need being lived out in practical ways?
Do we see the unjust structures of society being challenged?
Do we see violence as unacceptable?
Do we see peace and justice being pursued?
Do we see God's created world being renewed?

If not, why not?

These are the things Jesus came to earth to bring into being. He came to turn the status quo upside down.

I wonder if we sometimes get too complacent. I know that I do. I have been listening to a recording of a guy called Alistair Petrie. He came to our area last year with Ellel which is an organisation which focuses on prayer. At one point in his teaching series he asks if his audience is ready for God to break into the world and transform the whole of society. He goes on to say everyone will probably say "Yes" because we are all polite.

I do have moments where I am ready and praying and wanting this with all my being. But if I am totally honest, a lot of the time I lose God's sense of perspective. I get involved in the busyness of everyday life and I forget why Jesus really came and I forget the awesomeness of his calling to us. Sometimes I do expect God to break in but my expectations are often too small.

God has broken into history with the Good News of his Son Jesus Christ. His birth was first announced to shepherds – the Good news should be good news for everyone. Yesterday I met with a wedding couple who will be married in our church. One partner is a Christian who is very conscious that many of the guests won't be. The couple have recently been to two weddings – neither of which was fun. They told me that everyone said those weddings were awful. "I want this wedding to be fun. I want our friends to know that church is not boring and that Christians are not always judgmental and harsh," she said.

When God brings judgement, he is discerning what is really happening. His judgement brings life and freedom. His judgement is actually Good News. But he is the only one who gets to judge. We don't.

Do those around us experience the in-breaking of God's Kingdom in supernatural ways or do they feel judged and boxed in?

Not only is Jesus coming Good News for people but for all of creation. Evangelicals are very good at entirely missing out the fifth mark of mission – that of safeguarding creation and endeavouring to bring renewal to the earth.

When churches are involved in praying for transformation of society; that has to include the created world. On the 24th and 25th January the Evolve Festival will be held, I think at Founders Park. This is a festival for people who are searching for some kind of spiritual reality. Mostly it is new age type stalls. I understand there will be two Christian stands there this year. Grace Church and the Anglicans are having a stall each. This is an awesome opportunity for people to see that Christianity is Good News.

At the planning meeting I suggested we have some pamphlets from Arocha, the Christian conservation agency, so that people can see Christians do care about the environment. We'll have brochures about Christian faith and Jesus. Two years ago, when the Anglicans held a stall Ron and Kay took part. They have some lovely stories to tell of opportunities for prayer. The Shepherd King brings good news for everyone and everything. Evolve is an amazing opportunity to share that Good News and to pray for God to act supernaturally in people's lives.

The one who follows after him, the Shepherd King who will reign eternally, is announced first to the Shepherds. His Kingdom is and upside one where God is constantly breaking in, in supernatural ways. His Kingdom is Good News bringing salvation and transformation to all of creation.

How does the Lord want you to be part of this? Do you need a bigger vision of what the Shepherd King can do? Does our church? Let's lift our expectation of what God can do in and through us. Let's lift our expectation and not limit God with a narrow vision.