

**Unexpected Journeys**  
**Midnight Mass**  
**24 December 2017**  
**Revd Jenny Wilkens**



**Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-14**

[http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons\\_pid\\_22.html](http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html)

Just before I closed up my computer on Friday, I received an urgent email from the Health & Safety officer at the Anglican Centre. And this is what it said: 'To all Parishes, Re: preparations for Christmas Midnight Mass services. Benches, stools and orthopaedic chairs are now available for collection by any shepherds planning or required to watch their flocks by night tonight. While provision has also been made for remote monitoring of flocks by CCTV cameras from an air-conditioned shepherd observation hut, all facility users are reminded that an emergency response plan must be submitted to account for known risks to the flocks. The angel of the Lord is additionally reminded that - prior to shining his/her glory all around - s/he must confirm that all shepherds are wearing appropriate Personal Protective Equipment to account for the harmful effects of UVA, UVB and the overwhelming effects of Glory.

To avoid offending those not participating in celebrations, we request that angel singing is moderate only and not loud enough to be considered a noise nuisance in the community. City Council will be monitoring decibel levels. Also, while it is acknowledged that gift-bearing is commonly practised in various parts of the world, particularly the Orient, everyone is reminded that the bearing of gifts is subject to cultural Hospitality Guidelines and all gifts must be registered. This applies regardless of the individual, even royal personages are not exempt. It is particularly noted that direct gifts of currency or gold are specifically precluded under provisions of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. Further, caution is advised regarding other common gifts, such as aromatic resins that may evoke allergic reactions. By the way the same applies to any superabundant displays of lilies.

Finally, an update on the recent case of an infant found tucked up in a manger without any crib for a bed, the Ministry for Children have been advised and will be arriving shortly to investigate. Have a Happy risk-averse Christmas!

Christmas has never been a risk-averse experience. In fact to go by the number of ACC claims submitted by people who've cut themselves carving the ham, slid over on the wrapping paper, flambéed themselves rather than the Christmas pud, and fallen off their children's scooters, Christmas is full of risks, and it might be better to stay in bed all day instead!

But it was no different that first Christmas – if there'd been a risk assessment exercise taken, the first Christmas would never have happened. The Christmas story is full of unexpected journeys taken at great risk.

Think first of all of **MARY**, of the shock when the angel gave her the stupendous news that she, a virgin, probably 13 or 14 years old, was going to have a baby - and not just any baby, but the Son of God!

No wonder Mary was greatly troubled at the angel's words, and says 'How will this be?' And we get the marvellous promise from the angel - **Nothing** is impossible with God. But it must have seemed impossibly hard for Mary, it wasn't going to be easy, think of the shame she was bringing to herself and her family, the scorn, the tattling women at the village well in Nazareth, the hasty marriage, the silent disbelief - you mean to say **God's** the father of your baby? Mary's response to the angel, 'let it be with me according to your word' is a huge step of faith, of trust in God's control of an uncertain and risky future.

And then let's not forget **JOSEPH** - no doubt people thought he was crazy to take on a wife, when he knew he was not the father of her baby - and in Matthew's gospel we sense Joseph's turmoil as he seeks to do the right thing - to honour God's law and to protect Mary. But God deals with Joseph gently, this time by a dream, and says to him 'Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for what is conceived in her is from God'. What a risk though, what a responsibility, and then comes the unexpected journey for them both to Bethlehem for the census, Mary in advanced pregnancy, the anxiety no doubt about the reception of Joseph's relatives, the struggle to find a place to stay, a safe place to bear the child, then the risks of childbirth in a time of high maternal and infant mortality.

So much for the key players, but that night *others* were taken on unexpected journeys they would never ever have dreamt of. I wonder if people thought the **SHEPHERDS** *had* been dreaming or perhaps drinking! , when they came into Bethlehem in the middle of the night saying they'd seen a host of *angels!* who'd told them the Messiah had just been born... and they'd find him in a feed box in the stables! The shepherds were the disreputable rather dodgy outcasts of their day, so people normally wouldn't take too much notice of what they were saying. But these shepherds were sure - at first they'd just been plain terrified, by the angels, the light, but they felt sure that God had spoken to them, sure enough that they acted on it and went on a journey to check it out. They'd probably seen thousands of lambs born - but this lamb born in a stable came to be known as the Lamb of God.

Unexpected journeys – but perhaps the greatest unexpected journey is that in Christ, “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). God is not a remote, distant being watching us from a distance, but a God who longs to *communicate* with us, and not just by *speaking* a Word to us from a safe distance, but by *becoming* that Word enfleshed in our world, in a way we could relate to and identify with: a fragile helpless infant, entrusted to human parents.

Emmanuel, God with us in our world, growing up, sharing our life in all its joys and sorrows, battered and bruised as we are, and never more so than when nailed to a Roman cross, caught in the crossfire of the battles of the Herods and the Pilates and the Caesars, the Sadducees and Pharisees, the power struggles of church and state.

All this, for “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16) But this was not God pushing his Son out on an unexpected journey into the world – God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

I have always loved the poem of the Welsh poet, R.S. Thomas, called simply ‘The Coming’:

### ***The Coming***

*And God held in his hand A small globe. Look, he said.*

*The son looked. Far off, As through water, he saw A scorched land of fierce Colour. The light burned There; crusted buildings Cast their shadows; a bright Serpent, a river Uncoiled itself, radiant With slime.*

*On a bare Hill a bare tree saddened The sky.*

*Many people Held out their thin arms To it, as though waiting For a vanished April To return to its crossed Boughs.*

*The son watched Them. Let me go there, he said.*



None of us knows what unexpected journeys we face in the new year ahead – they may bring us joy or they may bring us sorrow. But we can know that Jesus, the Word made Flesh, Emmanuel, God with us, will walk with us into the year ahead if we do but ask him:

“O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel”.

[from O little town of Bethlehem]