

“Through people”

Wesley Uniting Church

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Bible readings: Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 1:68-79, Luke 3:1-6

This afternoon in the small country town of Spalding, South Australia, around 250 people will gather to talk about the drought. After a once in a lifetime flood in April – 17 centimetres of rain in two hours – a large grassfire in September, and a record dry for the past 8 months, the residents are reeling. They’ve titled the meeting “Fire, Flood, Frost, Flippin’ Dry, what next!” Why I know about it is because the gathering is sponsored by the Uniting Church South Australian Synod. The local congregation – only a dozen people – decided the community needed such a gathering, contacted the Synod and said “help”, and the Synod said “sure”. Synod staff are even driving the two hours up to Spalding today, to provide in person the barbecue, the icecreams, the drinks, the crèche, and they’re paying the expenses of several speakers.

They may end up praying for rain during their meeting, although a farmer I spoke to this week said please no rain until we’ve finished what little harvest we have. More likely they’ll end up bemoaning the year of weird weather, acknowledge that God has set up our natural laws with their cycle of seasons and unpredictability and seldom intervenes in those laws directly (although mind you, we do believe in miracles, although we know to ask for God’s intervention in the way he has set up creation is a big ask), and they’ll no doubt get on with helping each other through the tough times as caring faithful people committed to each other in their community.

God works primarily through human beings. When I mulled over today’s gospel reading about the beginning of John the Baptist’s ministry I was drawn to three things:

- the fulfilment of Isaiah the prophet’s words from about 600 years earlier, with that marvellous imagery of valleys filled in and mountains levelled to make way for the way of the Lord; this imagery comes from the time the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon, and the idea is that God will lead them back to Jerusalem and make the journey easy for them by providing a smooth level road;
- secondly, the listing of names – the Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, Caiaphas, Zechariah and John – placing John’s ministry firmly in identifiable history and with impact upon the rulers of the world;
- and thirdly the very last verse “and all flesh shall see the salvation of God”; God’s good news is for everyone, without distinction, God’s love and forgiveness are offered with astonishing generosity to every person no matter who we are or what we are like, “all flesh”.

The events surrounding John the Baptist’s birth, told in the first chapter of Luke, give us an extraordinary story. It spells out for us the mind-blowing significance of what God is doing with the coming of Jesus. Zechariah, going about his priestly duties in the temple, is visited by the angel Gabriel who tells him he and his wife Elizabeth will have a son whose Spirit-filled mission will be to prepare people for the coming of the Lord. When Zechariah doesn’t immediately accept this news he is punished by being struck dumb, and he never speaks again until the baby John is 8 days old and about

to be named, when he confirms the name given by the angel and then bursts forth with this marvellous prophecy or poetry, known ever since as the song of Zechariah. Look at it again now, Luke 1:68-79, page 144 in UIW.

Zechariah's poem recites for us God's action in history going back to the promises to Abraham 1800 years before, notes the roles of king David and the prophets and the mission of this new-born baby John to prepare the way for the Lord, and then concludes with these beautiful spine-tingling words:

"In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

That's the good news, the meaning, of the coming of Jesus; that's why we love Christmas.

God works through people. God works through you and me, any and every one of us. Last week I took part in the centenary celebrations of St Andrew's Church in Perth, the original home of the Presbyterian Church in Western Australia. One of the elders made a beeline for me after the service. He told me first how he disagreed with some of the policies of our Uniting Church Assembly, especially regarding sexuality. But he then went on to thank me for the sermon I preached at the Assembly in July and he said to me I was right to stress there's far more in the faith that holds us together as Christians compared to what differences we might have on lesser issues, and he said it had convinced him to stay in the Uniting Church for the rest of his life. Wow, I thought, and said, "It sounds like God has been working in you", and he replied "and in you too".

God can and does work in and through each one of us. Pause for a moment and recall a time, an event, an encounter of some sort, when you felt sure God was working in you, speaking to you, guiding you, reassuring you....

Or think of an experience you've had where God worked for you through someone else, through their words to you or their caring for you or their taking some action which impacted on you... hopefully you said thanks to that other person and told them you believe God was acting in and through them.

We're going to sing in a moment the beautiful hymn which is based on the account of God's call to Isaiah. The verses are composed as God's calling to us, his people, and the refrain is our response to God's call. The hymn reminds us that God calls us, wants us to follow his leading and seeks our positive response. Our last hymn is the grand old Advent hymn, a bit too triumphal really, "There's a light upon the mountains", which I've chosen particularly because of the third verse "his angels here are human not the shining hosts above", and "the drumbeats of his army are the heartbeats of our love".

God works primarily through people – through Abraham, David, the prophets, through Zechariah, Elizabeth and John, through Mary and Joseph and Jesus, through me and through you, each one of us. Thanks be to God.