

DAY EIGHT – SURPRISE

Good morning to you,

SURPRISE is the order of things in the nativity story. Each thing that happens is a surprise to someone: angels appearing, unplanned pregnancies, shepherd visitors, a king born outside a palace...the list goes on.

Surprises upset the apple cart. From unrequested breakfasts in bed to the appearance of long-lost relatives, surprises happen more often than we might think. And we often like watching people being surprised, although mostly 'good' surprises, like someone proposing or a child getting the gift they have longed for. The joy that comes after such moments of surprise remind us that isn't always mundane and predictable, which is a good thing to hold onto during our current times.

Furthermore, I am becoming convinced that surprises are important for personal and collective growth, and not just in the "with child" sense. To quote a well-known online source:* "Surprise represents the difference between expectations and reality, the gap between our assumptions and expectations about worldly events and the way that those events actually turn out. This gap can be deemed an important foundation on which new findings are based since surprises can make people aware of their ignorance. The acknowledgement of ignorance, in turn, can mean a window to new knowledge."

Whether you love surprises or loathe them, it is good to remember that God is a God of surprises: constantly upending our expectations and showing up in all the 'wrong' places. Thanks be to God! Fee.

*I quote Wikipedia not because of its academic rigour but because, in this case, I think it conveys a deep truth well.



DAY NINE – DREAMS

Morning salutations my friends,

Whether we remember them or not, all of us have DREAMS. They are one of the universal mysteries of the human existence: we all experience them, and we are all perplexed by them. Scientists have been working for decades to understand exactly what they are for, and mystics for millennia have been interpreting what they mean.

In the Bible, dreams are a not uncommon way for God to speak to people. In Matthew's Gospel, dreams are the favoured way for God to speak to Joseph and the Magi and it is their respective dreams that enable the narrative to move onto the next bit. But this raises (at least) 2 questions: how did they know the dreams were messages from God? And, does God ever speak to us in our dreams and, if God does, how do we know? I am not the person to answer these questions, but I can do some wondering about it with you...

If our dreams are a way for us to process things we have seen and felt throughout the day, or emotions we are carrying about the future, perhaps they can give us some insight we might otherwise miss in our conscious state? Could it be that our dreams allow us to notice deep truths about ourselves, or others, or our circumstances, that 21st century living wants us to bypass? What if what we notice in our dreams helps us make sense of things that are happening...could this be as true for Joseph and the Magi as it might be for us? For example, perhaps it was after a chat with Mary and Joseph, and a good rest, that the Magi realised—through their dreams—quite how weird was their interaction with Herod? As such, the wisest course of action was to head home on a different road...? Occasionally in our dreams, connections and clarification are found that we cannot grasp otherwise...there must be a reason we are encouraged to sleep on big decisions or difficult emotions!

I cannot give a definitive answer about when dreams come from God. However, if God is of love and truth, hope and peace, justice and joy, and our dreams lead us in that direction we are, at the very least, engaging in the work of God. And that is good enough for me. Blessings upon you all, Fee.



DAY TEN – JOY

Good morning everyone,

This week's Advent candle—the pink one—represents, amongst other things, JOY. This coming Sunday is also known as Gaudete Sunday, referencing the reading from Philippians that has seemed to follow me throughout coronavirus-time: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice!" Yet I have begun our opening prayer for this week thus: 'Joy; there doesn't seem to be much of that around this year'. So, what are we to make of joy this Advent and Christmas season?

When an angel appears to shepherds near Bethlehem, he says: "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people". And the source of the joy? The arrival of the Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord. Before Jesus has yet done anything, his very presence is the source of great joy for all people. Why? Jesus has yet to preach or teach, perform miracles or overturn tables. Instead, it is Jesus's very presence on earth that is the source of joy: not a fleeting emotion but a deep-seated knowledge that God is present, God is with us, in all things we face.

Some, if not all Christians, can be bad for denying or rejecting negative emotions in themselves or others. We can tell ourselves or others that we shouldn't feel depressed or that we shouldn't grieve the death of a loved one who has 'gone to a better place'. This is not the purpose of Biblical joy and the coming of Jesus. Instead, Christians joy is a deep sense, a gift from the Spirit that we can cultivate, that reminds us of what God has done, what God has promised, and that God is with us now. We are not alone in anything we face—we are seen, loved and accompanied by God—and in that we know joy, even alongside deep distress. In this way, joy is an anchor in our soul that holds us firm and returns us to the deep truths of our faith: God entered our world and will forever be with us! This is the joy of Advent and Christmas.

Whatever you face today, and in the days ahead, I invite you to take a little time to notice the joy of your faith. We might not want to break open the bubbly, but we can rejoice in knowing we are loved. Fee.



DAY ELEVEN – CENSUS

Good morning everyone,

The place of today's word, CENSUS, in the birth narrative of Jesus is a little controversial. It appears in Luke's Gospel as the reason for Mary and Joseph being in Bethlehem, rather than Nazareth, when Jesus was born. However, factually, it does not make much sense when we try to reconcile dates, and read Luke's account alongside Matthew's. Then again, Luke and Matthew diverge in many nativity details anyway; nonetheless, it is upon the census that most people focus: perhaps because it is an external event that can be 'proved' or otherwise.

The Roman Republic, then Empire, used censuses throughout their history, primarily to keep track of the numbers of men available for military service and to collect appropriate sums in taxes. The head of the household, the paterfamilias, appeared before the censors to inform them of their family members and the value of their property, especially land, slaves, livestock and luxury items (e.g. jewellery). All this enabled the on-going administration of the Republic/Empire. So, to which census might Luke have been referring? We know that, in Judea, King Herod the Great died in 4BCE. His son-successor Herod Archelaus ruled for about a decade before being deposed by Rome in 6CE. It was then that Judea became a Roman province. Quirinius was made governor and it was he who decided to conduct a tax census of the area. It is believed that this is the census to which Luke is referring...although it happens 10 years after when Jesus was thought to be born, and at least that after Matthew's dating of the event. You can see why this is tricky!

There have been various attempts to reconcile the accounts, from the wrong Herod being named by Matthew to a not-otherwise-recorded census being conducted. Ultimately, however, I do not think it is a problem to leave these two accounts unreconciled. From the very start of the Bible, compilers have been OK with contradicting narratives sitting side-by-side (notice how the first two creation stories in Genesis contradict one another). Moreover, get a couple of people to remember something that happened a few decades ago and you only become suspicious if the recollections are identical! What I think is more interesting is Luke's inclusion of the census at all. For me, it highlights that the Jewish people were not free: they were part of a bigger Empire and had to follow Rome's laws, customs, etc. This makes Mary's song of justice and freedom all the more powerful, when it is heard against the backdrop of colonialism.

The place of facts and truth in our world are both important, but not always simultaneous. A census may give us numerical facts, but it is only by hearing the stories of people, do we uncover a deeper truth. May we all hold both in balance each and every day. Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY TWELVE – JOURNEY

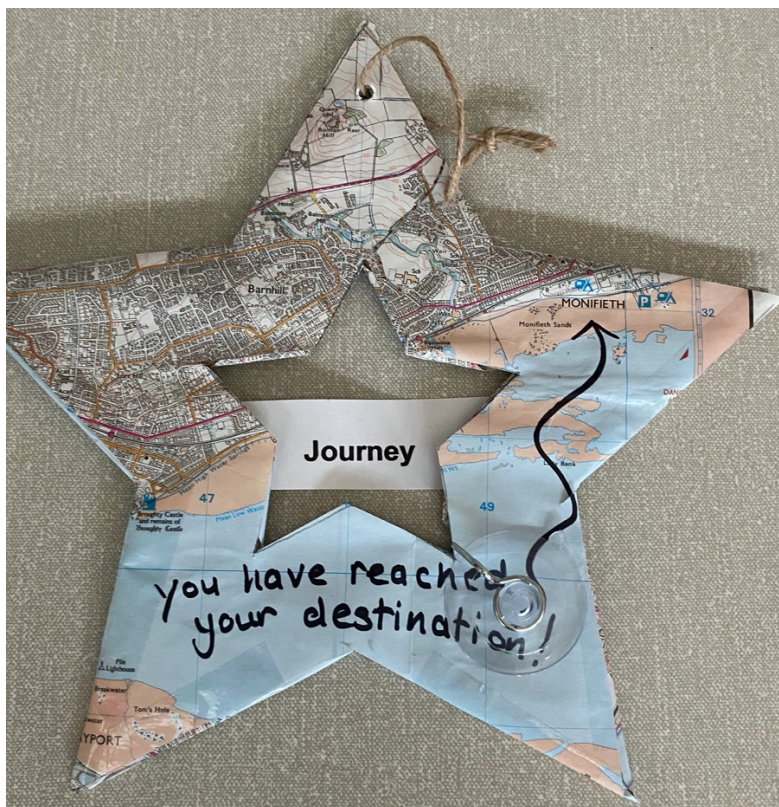
Greetings friends,

Most of the characters in our nativity story go on a JOURNEY, some more than once. All these physical journeys have a starting point and a destination, which we are told at least a little about, but the bit in-between—the actual journey itself—is somewhat glossed over. We cannot know the details, but we can think a little about the realities of first century travel.

Let's just take the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, as mentioned in Luke's Gospel. The distance is somewhere between 90 and 100 miles. Today, that journey might take 2-3 hours in a car (providing you can pass through checkpoints OK) or about 6-7 hours on a bus. No such motorised transportation was available to Mary and Joseph; they may have taken a donkey or similar animal with them, although the Bible does not mention one. So, they had to traverse approximately 100 miles of country, much of which is quite hilly (and I am not talking the rolling hills of Angus!), with wild animals to contend with along the way. Oh yes, and a heavily pregnant young woman. We do not know how long it would have taken them, although I imagine a week is a conservative estimate. A week of walking, across unpaved terrain, whilst already in the exhausted pain of late pregnancy: it is a lot to ask. I do not think I could do it unpregnant, never mind with child!

All this depicts a rather bleak, isolating time for Mary and Joseph. And whilst I do not want to downplay their efforts, I also want to suggest that they were probably not alone. I cannot imagine they were the only people heading south towards Bethlehem for a 'world-wide' census. When we walk with others, the distance seems shorter and we cover more than just miles. Furthermore, I do not think they would have been forced to camp out in the elements, at least not every night. The hospitality of the people of Israel/Palestine is astonishing, and all-encompassing. If a family could have provided even a little shelter and food for a pregnant, travelling woman, I have little doubt it would have been offered...and gratefully received.

Journeys today look very different from what they were just 100 years ago, never mind 2000. Few of us would want to return to going everywhere—no matter the distance—on foot. But we might have lost something in our haste to get from A to B. Is there a way to re-capture the companionship and hospitality of such long journeys today? Can we look for such things this Advent? Peace be with you, Fee.



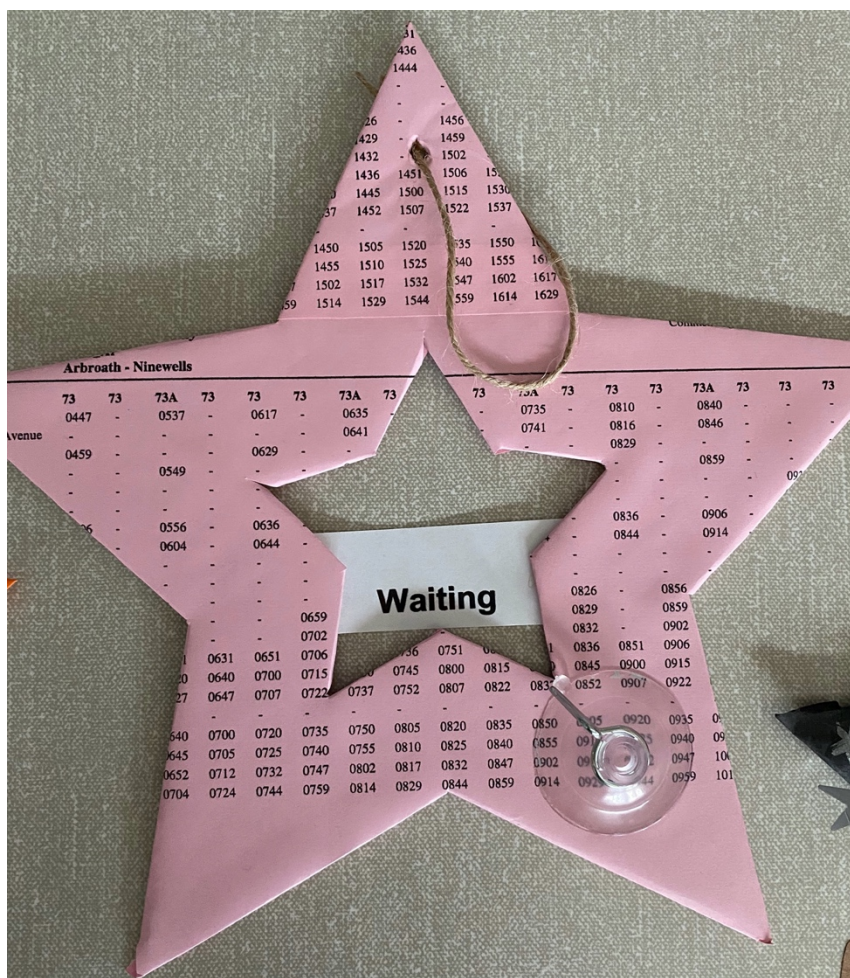
DAY THIRTEEN – WAITING

Good morning to you all,

WAITING is not something many of us are particularly good at. In a speeded-up world, we can get frustrated if we are waiting for action, news or results for a second longer than we expect. I know I get frustrated when something on the computer takes any longer than about 3 seconds to do something; a far cry from the days of my teens and waiting an hour for a rather basic game to load up via my television! People of faith have known for millennia how hard waiting can be and have built-into their spiritual exercises times to practice waiting. Advent is just such a time.

We are asked to wait for three things: the birth of Jesus, marked in our tradition on 25th December; the birth of Jesus in our hearts and souls; and the second coming of Jesus to earth. But our waiting is to be more than just sitting, tapping our feet and checking our watches. It is to be an active, seeking, engaged waiting, that embodies both patience and hope. Not for us the lounging in a corner with our arms crossed waiting for Jesus to return and fix things in our world. Instead, we are to live-into the presence of Christ already here, engaging with the work of God's kingdom of justice and peace, fully expecting to meet Jesus already there. At the same time—and this is the really tricky bit—we are not to jump the gun. We are to mark each day of waiting, and longing, without celebrating too soon...a really tough ask in a commercialised country that pushes Christmas music, gifts and parties from the end of October and removes them on Boxing Day (when we Christians are supposed to be just really getting into our 12 days of festivities). In many ways, Advent has disappeared from our lives, but the practice of waiting—attentively, hopefully and faithfully—is even more important than ever.

If you find yourself struggling to wait in the days and weeks to come, pause for a moment and notice how you feel. What does waiting do to your body and mind? Can you sense a reason for this? And can you turn this waiting on its head? Either by placing it in a wider sense of humanity's waiting or by using the time to draw closer to God? Waiting can be painful; I pray you find a sense of hope in your Advent waiting this year. Fee.



DAY FOURTEEN – BETHLEHEM

Monday morning greetings to you all,

The birth of Jesus in the town of BETHLEHEM is one of the few things upon which Matthew and Luke agree, but what do we know about this place? It means 'House of Bread' in Hebrew and 'House of Meat' in Arabic, and has a history stretching back nearly 5 millennia. It is first mentioned in the Bible as the nearest place to which Rachel (wife of Jacob/Israel) was buried. Bethlehem goes on to be the place where Ruth and Boaz are married, where David is born and crowned the second King of Israel, and from where Micah predicts a great leader will rise. It is this link to the Davidic line and Micah's prophecy that makes it such an important part of the nativity story.

The name 'Bethlehem' ('House of Bread/Meat') suggests a place of abundance, but it has faced more than its fair share of conflict and violence, being destroyed and rebuilt more than once.

Today, located in the West Bank area of the Palestinian Occupied Territories, less than 10 miles south of Jerusalem, it is a far cry from the small, quiet, idyllic scene found on many a Christmas card. Abundance is not something the people of Bethlehem know, unless it is an abundance of poverty. Instead, it is home to (amongst other things) 3 refugee camps, established in 1948 as many Palestinians sought new homes, having had their land seized from under them. In the intervening 70+ years, generations of Palestinians have been born, lived and died as refugees in this town, waiting and hoping for peace in the Land of the Holy One. Between 1967 and 1995, Bethlehem was controlled by Israel, although the latter withdrawal of troops did not see peaceful streets for long. The early 00s saw more fighting and, today, the city is surrounded by by-pass roads for Israeli settlers and the Israeli West Bank barrier. This towering wall of concrete, topped with barbed wire and patrolled by military personnel, is a stark daily reminder that the people of Bethlehem are not free.

Seeing this wall during a visit in 2014 has left a lasting impression upon me. It is difficult to discern from satellite images on sites such as Google Maps but, if you are able, I urge you to go to street view. Find where Hebron Street and Manger Street meet, near the Aida Refugee Camp, and have a look from street level. This is the town into which the Prince of Peace was born. May it know lasting justice, peace and safety, and may it be soon.

Peace be with you, Fee.

