

# It used to be so simple

Luke 2:1-19; John 1:6-16

Christmas Day

Rev Jean Shannon

One day, while I was visiting my sister in the United States...I was desperate for a cup of coffee. Now my sister doesn't drink coffee and what she had in her house did not qualify. But she said, "I have to run some errands. "We'll pick up coffee along the way." Well, we went to the camera store – no coffee. The dry cleaners, no coffee. We picked up something from somewhere for someone else ...but no coffee. And finally, she said, "I have to pick up a book on order and I think they have a coffee shop there." Mind you, it was after lunch now. I was crazy in my addiction– ready to bite the head off a brown snake. We went into the bookshop and lo and behold, there was a very elaborate coffee counter. I went up to the counter and said to the young man, "I want coffee". He looked at me like I was an idiot and said, "which one?" – pointing to the lighted menu above his head with maybe 100 selections. Every item had a cutesy name that told you nothing about what weird or flavoured abomination it might be.

I burst into tears.

It used to be so simple. They'd say, "coffee?" and I'd say, "with milk".

When John the Baptist came to testify about the light...

. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

...he wasn't offering us a smorgasbord of lights. There weren't 1000 varieties to choose from. Just one light. Simple. You can turn it on, or off, that's it, simple.

Jesus was the light.

We sometimes think of our theologies like that – it used to be so simple. Believe this or believe that – or bad things will happen to you. But even lights come with dimmers, now a days... and colours and wave lengths and we have choice.

It used to be simple – when we were children but now, we know more. The average person is literate and has some sense of science and history. The simple stories don't make sense in the real world. They were told over-simplified, out of context with no historical, cultural or political background. They were given literally at face value. Children have no ability to distinguish between fact and fiction; magic and miracles. Adults doubt...and question. Much of our church education was designed for illiterate

peasants in the Middle Ages. Much of our experience in the 50s was that we were still being treated like children.

Once upon a time, people were happy to record their religion on the census as whatever they were Baptised in – even though they'd never been to church. Now, more people than ever are comfortable to put “none” down as their religion. They feel no allegiance to a particular brand and they don't identify with a particular tribe. Fewer and fewer families are choosing to baptise their children ...unless they want to send them to a private school.

Some of the “nones” are angry with the church. They are mostly my age and have no idea how much churches have changed. Their memories are from the good old ‘simple’ days and they found themselves on the wrong side of ‘the norm’. We can call them the “no-ways”. No way would they be here today.

Then, as the churches refused to change with social norms and needs, and with the pressure of a time poor generation, people drifted away. Now as we have a generation of travellers, both retired and with families, a new crop of “no longer” crept in. They were once part of a community but no longer have the time or inclination to commit to rosters and timetables.<sup>1</sup> Children have sports on Sundays and with the hours worked – a little time off doing nothing is an essential for survival. Grey nomads who are tired of obligations want the freedom to just say ‘no’.

But the younger “nones” just don't understand the whole ‘branding’ thing and are not interested. They have little or no experience of what happens inside these buildings, nor are they interested in making it a destination.

But every time the church goes outside bricks – young people are there – and surprisingly, they join in.

So let's go back to our birth story. Every story in the Bible is a metaphor. Most were told in a story-telling tradition that allowed people with no literacy to remember and repeat. The lessons were buried in the context.

So for some, the Christmas story is simple and literal. The Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem. God incarnate in a human form. He came to save the world – or at least to teach us how to save ourselves.

But to others, there is a more philosophical side of the story. To start with, it is no accident he was not born in a temple, or a comfy building – but outside, in a stable<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The language of ‘nones’ and ‘no-longers’ is largely drawn from Lillian Daniel's book, *Tired of apologising for a church I don't belong to*. 2017 Faith Words, Published by Hachette Group, New York

<sup>2</sup> You could say, where the young people are. The outsiders.

It is no accident that it was a time of strife and oppression.

And it is no accident that Joseph and Mary are very ordinary people. They are god-loving, obedient to the law and yet, displaced people: refugees<sup>3</sup>.

Faith has a way of being born on the outside, in unexpected places, in unfavourable times to people who rarely feel they deserve it.

We say that Christmas has been taken over by commercialism and symbols we no longer understand. For example, did you know the candy cane shape is an imitation of the shepherd's hooks? The colours of all the shop decorations are red, green, white have a history. Red stands for Jesus' blood (the promise) but it is also used for any spiritual awakening which is cause for celebration. That's why churches are decorated in red for good news events like ordinations. Green is for evergreen. It represents Christ's life and eternal nature. White is for purity, innocence and child-like wonder.

So while we *say* these things have been taken over – in a way, it has made room for a different kind of spiritual discovery – outside the building – a kind of new, innocent encounter. They are meeting a Jesus-like world but without the building. They may even detect 'a light' even if they are unsure what it is.

This year, more than any other year, neighbours are inviting each other over. Reaching out and connection has become a post-COVID ambition<sup>4</sup>.

Small acts of kindness are randomly breaking out with people buying coffees for strangers; passing on parking vouchers; and paying for the groceries of the next person in line. People are finding out that helping, especially anonymously, feels really good! ...and they want to do more of it.

We sang carols in the street and a stranger joined us. The kids wrapped in tinsel garlands chased passers-by to give them chocolate. And people responded with loud and happy "merry Christmases" in a public place.

We know now that hope flares from tiny acts of kindness. Peace and well-being is born from connections to something bigger than us like community and God. Joy springs from awe whether it's nature, fireworks or presents under a tree.

And Love doesn't just come – it is. Love rains on us whether we like it or not; whether we deserve it or not. Because fundamental, to all brands and faiths, God is love and loves creation.

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<sup>3</sup> Through no fault of their own

<sup>4</sup> Even the Sydney Morning herald had an article about meeting neighbours for the first time in 10 years!

Maybe to be a light in the world really is that simple. You just have to turn it on.  
I'll have mine with milk, thank you.

oOo

## **INSPIRATION**

*Gather up whatever is  
glittering in the gutter,  
whatever has tumbled  
in the waves or fallen  
in flames out of the sky,*

*for it's not only our  
hearts that are broken,  
but the heart  
of the world as well.  
Stitch it back together.*

*Make a place where  
the day speaks to the night  
and the earth speaks to the sky.  
Whether we created God  
or God created us*

*It all comes down to this  
In our imperfect world  
we are meant to repair  
and stitch together  
what beauty there is, stitch it*

*with compassion and wire.  
See how everything  
we have made gathers  
the light inside itself  
and overflows? A blessing.*

— Stuart Kestenbaum, [Holding the Light](#)

