

## Fourth Sunday of Advent – YrB – 24 December 2023

### Message: *Hearing and Obeying*

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Creator, Redemer, and Giver of Life, known to us, through creation, communities, and communion, may we come to know the Eternal Word and Way. **Amen.**

What I am going to say this morning is really part one of two. Today, we have the angel Gabriel bringing a message to Mary, tomorrow we have an angel of the Lord bringing a message to the shepherds outside Bethlehem.

Two questions arise for us from these stories, one, how does God speak to us? And, two, how will we respond?

The Greek *aggelos*, means messenger. Most of us are not expecting *messengers* in the form of Angel's to appear and talk to us. For which we can be grateful, the general response to angels is one of terror. Yet, there might be other messengers who speak to us. Who are the wise people in our lives to whom we should listen? Who are the people who inspire us in the world today, or even in the past? How can we be more like them and learn from them?

In contrast to angels, Matthew's gospel talks of God speaking through dreams, perhaps a little more common. What are your dreams for the future? are they God's dreams?

If we are followers of the way of Christ, this is an essential question, which is often not that easy to answer. We have so many options open to us; we are not even aware of the full range of choices we have; and, often, in life there is no clear right or wrong answer.

Throughout Luke's gospel is the message of God's bias and favour for the poor and those in need. As a society we are materially rich but that wealth is not uniformly shared and there are many other kinds of poverty.

Perhaps the greatest poverty in our society is in relationships. There is an epidemic of loneliness. Though we live in larger groups than ever before, people are less connected in an authentic personal way than ever before.

Shalom, peace, is more accurately translated wholeness. In Jesus day, this was understood both as peace and wealth, wealth often being regarded as a sign of God's blessing. Luke's gospel challenges the idea that wealth is such a sign. In fact, Luke's gospel portrays wealth as a burden. We are to be good stewards of all we have and the more we have the more that is expected of us. Luke's gospel also invites us to a fuller vision of wholeness, to a vision of fullness of life.

Masson Durrie's Whare, today, Te Whare Tapa Rima, articulates something of the many dimensions of wholeness, physical, spiritual, mental, relational, and rootedness, are all essential to our wholeness. Wholeness, fullness, of life is God's design for us, how will we make it a reality for ourselves and for all those whose lives we touch?

I have consciously put 'ourselves' first but we cannot consider ourselves outside the context of our relationship with others. For most it is easier to become aware of our own needs; though it requires some courage to be completely honest with ourselves, which can be hard. For some this will be too painful at first, and learning of other's needs may be a more appropriate start to this journey.

As we start to perceive our and other's needs, we will begin to get a vision of what God might be calling us to undertake. We will become aware that there are far more needs than we could ever possibly meet. We need to remember that God is not calling us to do this alone. It is not all down to you, however much it feels as if it is sometimes. Sometimes, the things that are undone, should be left undone!

There is just one of you but you are part of a greater whole. A community of people who care, a community without boundaries, anyone who captures the vision of caring for one another becomes a part of God's community and God's vision for humanity.

God's vision for wholeness is for wholeness of our inner world, our relationships, our community, our society, the global community, and of creation. Every dimension of life is embraced in God's vision for wholeness.

We are all given our own set of gifts, each of us has a unique combination of gifts, opportunities, and relationships. Gabriel's words to Mary may be appropriate to us when we get a sense of God's calling: *'Do not be afraid.'* God's calling may move us in uncomfortable directions, it may challenge us, it may feel too difficult, entirely beyond us.

God invites us to trust and take the first step. Even when we have a sense of calling it may not go as we imagined. God's purpose may be served in ways we do not expect. The act of taking the first steps may even be a part of finding out who our calling is to be expressed.

Often, it will only be when we look back that we see how God was at work. Mary had a message from God and trusted

that it would all work out. She did not imagine fleeing to Egypt or that her son would die on a cross. Mary did not need to see that far into the future and neither do we. Our journey, our life is taken one step at a time, sometimes they are big steps, more often they are little steps that build to the journey of a lifetime, the great adventure.

The more we are listening to God the more closely we will follow God's way and God's desire for our lives though at the time we may even feel quite uncertain about it.

Even difficult times can be a blessing. I cannot imagine that Mary was entirely at ease with having a child before she was married. I am sure the appearance of the *aggelos* helped, as did going to stay with her cousin Elizabeth. God has a habit of putting the people we need around us or of giving us an inner strength that is unexpected. God's spirit is at work in us and in the world though it is usually more subtle than we expect.

As we approach the New Year, we often consider what we might change. In this season, I invite you to take time to consider and talk about what God might be calling you to do differently, to give wholeness of body, spirit, mind, whānau, and whenua.

Wholeness is all embracing. For everything there is a time, is now a time to care for yourself, for those around you, for creation, or a bit of all three?

May God bless us with enough *foolishness* to believe that we really can make a difference in this world, so that we are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen. Amen. Amen.