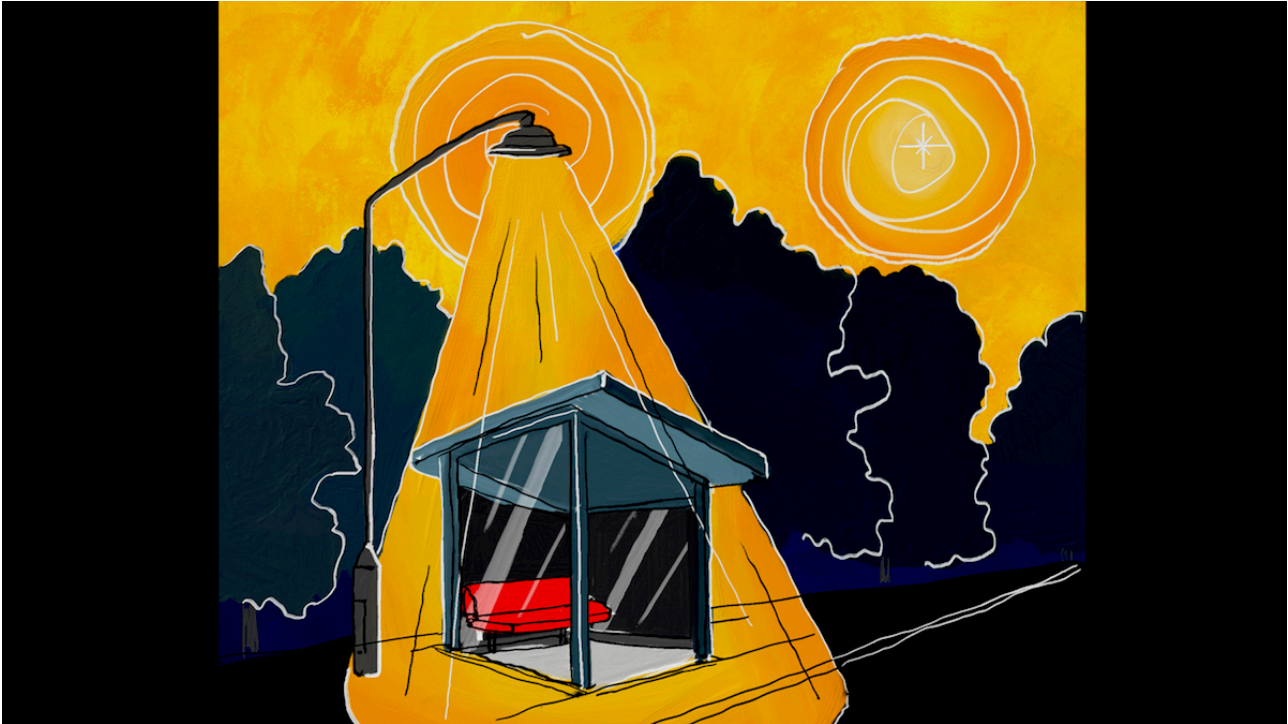


GRACE COMES TO TOWN

December 2019 (1-28 December)



If you are in marketing or retail you will be familiar with the mindset that asks the question, “So what is the big idea this Christmas?” Human nature is somehow always looking to find something that is new and shiny. Often it is to distract us from all that is happening around us. The marketing strategists knows this, so they go looking for something: an idea, a longing, an emotion, even an experience, something to which they can attach the commodity they are selling. Christmas is the time to sell — so they need ideas and feelings that they know will tug at our heart strings. Their skill is to link their commodity to our emotional attachments.

If there is one big idea that the true meaning of Christmas expresses, it must surely be that God is with us in the midst of all our struggles and fears. When we strip all our emotions away there are perhaps just two left: love and fear. And it is these two emotions that in the end shape our lives and destiny. The big idea that Christmas celebrates is God’s amazing grace. In other words: love can conquer fear. Grace comes to town.

From the set reading in the lectionary we have tried to weave the story of God’s grace into the context of our lives and show how it has been experienced and encountered in the history of the world. While it highlights the role and significance of one nation Israel, it does so in order to explain and reveal the grace of God to the whole of humanity. God has an ultimate plan to bring about peace in our hearts and peace on earth. So this Christmas we are running with the mind-blowing idea that we are being invited to live in the power of Grace.

Each week of the theme runs Sunday-Saturday and has its own subtheme, which contains daily Bible readings and thought triggers.

Signs of GRACE (1 December)

This advent we are looking around for signs of grace... Whispers of peace, of promise, of welcome, of hope. Moments of incredible transformation within us, around us, and even across the sky...

1. Isaiah 2:1-5
 2. Romans 6:
1-11
 3. Genesis 9:1-17
 4. Isaiah 54:1-10
 5. Acts1:
12-17,21-26
 6. Isaiah 30:19-26
 7. Isaiah 40:1-11
1. **GRACE displayed in peace.** Seeing swords beaten into ploughshares. Reading the signs and recognising the time for the coming of a new kind of leader. How does power today react to the Christian paradigm of peace on earth?
 2. **GRACE displayed in transformed lives.** We are sowing the seeds of peace by living in the power of God's grace.
 3. **GRACE displayed in promise keeping** — The rainbow: a sign of God's Grace.
 4. **GRACE displayed in making room for others.** What does it mean for us to extend our tent? To make room for others. To prepare for renewal and revival.
 5. **GRACE displayed in resurrection hope.** The reading speaks of renewing hope and replacing lost leadership. We cannot give up, we are called to serve to the end.
 6. **GRACE displayed in a whisper.** In times of trouble and distress the Grace of God is spoken in our ears: 'This is the way; walk in it.'
 7. **GRACE displayed in God's wonderful comfort.** The reading speaks of hope and comfort to all who have struggled.

GRACE comes to where we are (8 December)

Exploring how things change when we notice grace coming to our neighbourhoods. Grace reaches the unreachable, brings together the unmixable, includes the stranger, bursts into our hearts, turns our world upside down — and makes us sing.

1. Luke 2:8-20

2. 1 Thessalonians
4:1-12

3. Romans 15:14-21

4. Matthew 12:33-37

5. Ruth 1:16-18

6. 2 Peter 3:11-18

7. 1 Samuel 2:1-10

1. **GRACE comes to where we are.** To the outcast and poor, the untouchables of the community, to such as these the Good News comes. Hearing the news the Shepherds respond by going to see; the coming of the Saviour draws people to him.
2. **GRACE comes to form communities.** The reading instructs us to live in a caring manner for all around us.
3. **GRACE comes to include us all.** We are reminded of the inclusive nature of the Gospel. The grace of God is for all.
4. **GRACE comes to grow gracious people.** Words matter — they have the power to heal and power to wound.
5. **GRACE comes to our heart.** Ruth speaks to us about loyalty and faithfulness. These are both attributes of God. Your actions speak out of your heart.
6. **GRACE comes to put things in perspective.** Taking time to grow in grace rather than getting carried away.
7. **GRACE comes singing.** Known as 'Hannah's Song' this vivid song has a lot in common with the *Magnificat* or Mary's Song from Luke 1:46-55.

Unexpected GRACE (15 December)

We are going to spend this week in the company of Mary...

1. Luke 1: 26-38
 1. **GRACE experienced in frightening news.** Mary is favoured by God; his grace is upon her. Mary is rightly frightened by the news the angel brings however she is able to respond to this news in submission and faith. When we hear the news of God's grace how do we respond to it?
2. Luke 1:39-45
 2. **GRACE in a surprising welcome.** When Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, the Holy Spirit gives a surprising welcome to Mary and the child she carries. Elizabeth is enabled to recognise the presence of her Saviour and welcomes him with words of joy and praise. How do we recognise our Saviour and welcome him?
3. Luke 1:46-56
 3. **GRACE turns the world upside down.** Mary sings a song of God's grace changing the lives of all people. Those who have been overlooked, rejected, ignored, abused, the hungry and poor, the marginalised and the victims are lifted up, welcomed and receive good things. As we receive God's grace how do our lives transform the world around us?
4. Luke 1:57-66
 4. **GRACE in great mercy.** The birth of a son to Elizabeth and Zechariah is recognised as a time of great mercy, a time of grace, to them. The name of the God of Israel is grace and mercy, a name declared to a people in need of forgiveness. Forgiveness is new life, new birth. How are we living our new grace shaped lives in response to the God of grace and mercy?
5. Luke 1:67-80
 5. **GRACE in the power of a servant.** Through his servant the Lord will bring blessing to many. Like water on dry ground or a name given to nameless ones. Are we growing into the servants of the Lord through whom his blessing of grace will flow to others?
6. Luke 2:1-7
 6. **GRACE in a stable, not a palace.** The view which the powerful have from the palace window is at best partial, at worst skewed in their favour. The view of the Bethlehem stable is wide open, God comes to the unexpected place and makes his palace there. Where are we looking for God's grace? What is skewing our vision?
7. Luke 2:25-32
 7. **GRACE shines for all people.** When the light of grace shines no wall can keep it in, no darkness can drown it out. The light of grace shines for all people, every nation, every corner of God's creation enlightened by his unexpected grace. How can our lives reflect the light of God's grace for all peoples?

GRACE with us (22 December)

Last week we considered Mary's story and we start this week thinking about Joseph's story and the bigger story that we are part of.. that grace is with us...

1. Matthew
1:18–25

2. Isaiah 9:1–7

3. Micah 5:2–5a

4. John 1: 14

5. Isaiah 42:5–7

6. Matthew 1:1–
17

7. John 1:35–42

1. **GRACE is with us to set us free from fear.** The angel tells Joseph not to be afraid to marry a pregnant woman, not to be afraid to raise a son not his own, not to be afraid to call a baby Jesus. The victory over fear is Immanuel, not that the cause of fear is removed but Joseph learns to live in that situation without fear.

2. **GRACE is with us to shine in our darkness.** The eternally existing Word shines into every darkness. The light which enables life is shining and cannot be mastered. The light that shines is the light of grace, not shining before us or above us but with us. Will we let this light of grace chase away the darkness for us?

3. **GRACE is with us to make Jesus known.** Words of grace spoken centuries before that grace came among us. Our lives are lived after the fulfilment of promise, in the sound of faithful witness. Will we hear and receive God's witness to God's own grace?

4. **GRACE has moved into our neighbourhood.** At the right time — Hallelujah — our God has the right time for Christ to be born among us, to be born for us. Our Jesus is not found far from us but in our home, our street, our town and city. Grace is with us where we are.

5. **GRACE is with us to open our eyes to see God.** "Open my eyes to you, O Lord". What a prayer this is! God promises to open eyes so that he might be seen. God sends witnesses to testify to what they have seen of his grace and presence. Are we bold to pray that God will open our eyes to see his grace so that we might be witnesses to our having seen the glory of God?

6. **GRACE is before us.** The grace of God is with us, we celebrate this Good News. But we do not imagine that we are the first to have God's grace with us, we celebrate the Good News that God's grace has been with generations, mothers and fathers before us. How in our living in God's grace will we celebrate God's gift of grace to others before us?

7. **GRACE is with us for sharing with others.** The grace of God is with us, but it is not ours to grasp and hold tightly to ourselves. Will we point to Jesus saying to others, "behold"? Will we share with others the Good News, "we have found the King"?