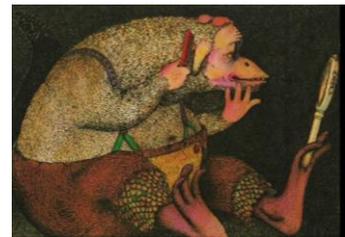


Sermon series – Advent-ually

#4 Longing for peace

One gloomy night, an ugly black creature with webbed feet and a long scaly tail emerged from the mud and slime at the bottom of a billabong in the Australian outback. It wandered the countryside calling out plaintively to every animal that passed: to the emu and the wallaby it cried: “Who am I? Who am I?” The emu and wallaby looked the creature up and down and sniffed at its leathery hide. “You’re horrible,” they exclaimed, and bounded away. Then came along a platypus scurrying down to the water. “Who am I?” called the creature.

“You’re a **bunyip**,” the platypus proclaimed as she examined its huge, webbed feet. But the platypus had no time for the creature and swiftly swam away.



Finally, the bunyip met a farmer who looked right through him and said, “You’re a figment of my imagination. You don’t really exist at all.”

Lonely and depressed the bunyip headed back to the billabong and sat sadly beside its peaceful waters. Suddenly, something stirred again in the mud and slime at the bottom of the creek and another black shape emerged from the waters on the same quest for identity. “Who am I?” it cried plaintively. “You’re a bunyip,” cried the first creature smiling delightedly. With an affectionate hug he added, “And so am I.”¹

Can you relate to this story in 2020? Are you, like the bunyip of Berkeley’s Creek, emerging from the isolation of your home after the long lockdown and asking, “who am I?”

¹ Wagner and Brooks, *The Bunyip of Berkeley’s Creek*

It's a perfectly reasonable question in the light of 2020. After all, we've been disconnected from what usually shapes and maintains our sense of **identity**, **purpose** and **destiny** – family, work colleagues and workplaces, friends, church, travel - even our basic freedom of movement was taken away.



Yesterday, Penne and I met with people we haven't seen all year. The first thing they said to us is "what a bizarre year it's been". They told us how they had to sell their house and how most of their plans were for this year and next were scuttled. We all had something in common with our neighbours in 2020 - **uncertainty**, **isolation**, and **dependence on others!**

In the big story of the Bible, the people of Israel were **more often than not** in circumstances of **uncertainty**, **isolation**, and **dependence** on others. Along the journey God offered them a **remedy** fit to satisfy their deepest longing, thought they mostly rejected God's offer.



A word that sums up God's gracious offer to humanity in the Bible is the Hebrew word "**shalom**". It is often translated as "**peace**" in our English Bibles, but that one English word fails to capture shalom's breadth and depth. Shalom speaks of **completeness**, **wholeness**, **connectedness**, and **wellness** from the Lord.



Psalm 29:11 says: “May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord **bless his people with peace!**” (with shalom)

Peace, in our use is often merely the absence of conflict. Shalom speak of wholeness even amidst danger or distress due to confidence in God’s love. For example, God says in Isaiah 54:10...

“‘Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,’ says the LORD, who has compassion on you” (Isa. 54:10)

Shalom is pictured as a **river that brings life** to all things in the desert (Isa. 66:12; Ezek. 47:1-12). It’s pictured in the Bible as a **mountain-top experience** giving perspective far above the dangers of the lowlands, in God’s presence (Isaiah 2:2-5).

Shalom is on the lips of the heavenly messenger to those lowly shepherds when Jesus of Nazareth was born:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth **peace** (or shalom) to those on whom God’s favour rests!” (Luke 2:14)²

Jesus’ followers recognised him as the **prince of peace** God promised in the prophets – the **sultan of shalom** (Isa 9:6).

It’s through his birth, life, death for sin³, and resurrection to new life that God’s shalom comes to be available to all. It’s what the Apostle Paul called a peace that “**surpasses all understanding**” (Phil. 4:7)

The big story of the Bible moves from a **garden of peace** and tranquillity, through a turbulent history of **division** and disappointment, and moves towards **the vision of a new city of shalom**.

² The ancient Greek word *Eirene* here for “peace” has strong connections to the meaning of the Hebrew word “shalom”, pointing to completeness/wholeness, even in dire circumstances

³ Ephesians 2:14 says that he, Christ, is our peace.

Richard Foster notes in his book *The Freedom of Simplicity* ...

“This wonderful **vision of shalom** begins and ends our Bible. In the creation story God brought order and harmony out of chaos. In the *Book of Revelation*, we look forward to the glorious wholeness of a new heaven and a new earth.”

James Meltzer says:

“The object of all God’s work is the **recovery of shalom** in His creation.”

To this end, as we heard in the reading from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5 today, Jesus included in his list of those who are truly “happy” in life “**peace-makers**”; **shalom-seekers**.

Advent is a good time for Christians to ask, along with the Bunyip of Berkeley’s Creek, “Who am I?” As we emerge from our unwelcome exile, bewildered at the way the world has been shaken, we are reminded that God has named us and defined us and shaped us for His purposes in Christ. Through the lens of Scripture, we Christians answer that question, “Who am I?”, in relation to Jesus Christ and what God has called us to be and do through faith in Him.

On this 4th Sunday of Advent we remember that we are peace-makers as we live and share the Gospel of God’s peace; of shalom.

- In place of violence, we are those who (by God’s Spirit) offer and promote safety and comfort.
- Where there are divisions, we, with God’s help, seek to build bridges that unite and harmonise relationships.
- Where we are wronged by others, we (by God’s Spirit) offer pardon and we pursue reconciliation.
- Where we wrong others, we with God’s help, are contrite, we offer reparation and seek restoration.

These are good descriptions of “Who we are” in Christ, thanks to God’s grace at work in our hearts.

Many people right now are asking “Who am I?” in response to this global pandemic. It can be bewildering to have your world shaken. For Christians **there is a peace** promised that surpasses circumstances and offers an **unshakeable identity, purpose and destiny.**

Perhaps you noticed at the conclusion of the story of the Bunyip from Berkeley’s Creek, that upon recognising the itself in the other creature, the bunyip **smiled and embraced** the other with joy. Perhaps you will have the opportunity to help someone recognise who they truly can be in the light of Christ as they ask “Who am I?”