

Over the past two weeks we have been thinking about what Christmas really means. We've seen that Jesus was born at just the right moment. Because of the Greek and then Roman empires travel was comparatively easy and, for the first time it was possible for the message about Jesus to pass through the area around the Mediterranean. And then we saw that there was good news about Jesus, but that he also was the Good News, as he broke into human history in an amazing way and showed how much he loves us.

Today, I want to start by thinking about one of the mysteries of Christmas that always fascinated me as a child. It may be that it's something you have thought about too. How is it possible for Santa to deliver toys to all of the good boys and girls in the world in just one night? It's quite mind-boggling when you think about it!

In the movie, *Miracle on 34th St*, Kris Kringle explains how it is done.
Video clip

Isn't that just amazing? Now you know how Santa is able to deliver all of the presents in one night. I can tell from looking at your faces that some of you have heard a different story. Some of you might even be wondering what on earth this has to do with the Christmas story, and I'm glad you asked.

God's methods are not our methods

Part of the miracle of Christmas is the miracle of the method. God's methods are beyond our understanding.

Romans 11:33 *Who can measure the wealth and wisdom and knowledge of God? Who can understand his decisions or explain what he does?*

Paul starts this section of praise to God by focusing on the fact that we cannot fully understand his thinking or decisions. His riches, wisdom and knowledge are far beyond us. His methods are beyond our understanding and sometimes, when you think about God's methods throughout history, and in particular in the Christmas story, it makes about as much sense as Kris Kringle's explanation.

I don't know about you, but if I were writing the script for saving humanity I would have written it differently than God did. He chose to reveal himself to us in a way that we could understand, but not in a way that we would have expected. He came into the world as a helpless, defenceless baby. He chose to be born to poor parents. He wasn't born in a palace but a stable.

he was born to a young couple whose hearts were pure but who held no worldly influence. They were plain, ordinary, obscure individuals. Yet they were the ones God chose to be the parents of Jesus.

Isaiah 55:8-9 *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.* ⁹ *“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

We really shouldn't be surprised about God's methods. He chose Abraham to leave his home and go on a journey although he didn't know the destination until he arrived. He chose Joseph, the second youngest son of Jacob, to become the saviour of his family. He chose Israel, the least important nation, to be his special people. He chose David, the shepherd boy, and not any of his older brothers to become the king of Israel. He chose Bethlehem, a small and insignificant spot on the landscape of Israel, to be the birthplace of his son.

Do you see the pattern being revealed? Over and over again God chose simple, ordinary people and places through which he could do his extra ordinary work.

Luke records in his story of Jesus birth that Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem to register for a census. While they were there, the baby was born. Mary wrapped her son in cloth's and put him to sleep in a feeding trough for animals.

God's methods include us

To celebrate the occasion of Jesus birth the heavenly choir was sent to earth with the good news. But they didn't go to Kings and Queens, not

the religious or military leaders. They went to shepherds watching the sheep on a hillside. God chose these people whom everybody else looked down on to be the first people to hear the good news. It's just remarkable!

part of the miracle of Christmas is the miracle of the method. God uses ordinary people to accomplish extra ordinary things.

Following his resurrection from the dead, Jesus appeared 1st to a group of women. In those days, women were of no value. He didn't appear to the Pharisees or religious leaders saying, "I told you so!" If I had been writing the story that's exactly what he would have done to prove that he had been right all along.

God's plan was different. God's plan was for Jesus to reveal himself to his followers and give them the responsibility to go and make disciples. They were to teach other people about Jesus and baptise them in his name. Jesus entrusted the good news to this group of people who had run away and disowned him when things got hard. They argued and fought about who was the greatest; they were an incredibly mixed bunch. They were straightforward, ordinary people. Paul, one of the early church's most amazing people comments on the surprising methods of God. 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 *Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of "the brightest and the best" among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these "nobodies" to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies"? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ.*

God's methods haven't changed. He still uses ordinary people to accomplish his extraordinary work. Our abilities are not as important as our attitude and availability. God has entrusted to us good news of salvation.

God's methods sanctify us

There is another aspect to this miracle of the method that we need to understand. God makes us more like Jesus. Even now, God is at work in our lives in ways that we do not, and cannot, fully understand. Just as I would have written a different script for how God should save humanity, I would write a different script for how God should make me more like Jesus. My spiritual journey would be one of constant love and devotion. There would never be any problems and life would be blissful until I get to heaven.

God's script includes the experience of problem, pain and pressure. We experience struggles and sickness, temptations and failures. We take one step forward in a spiritual growth followed with two steps back. There are victories and celebrations accompanied by defeat and despair. It's not the way I would have written it.

I honestly can't tell you why some of the things you have gone through have happened in your life. But I do know that when we go through circumstances we don't understand we are not on our own because God promises never to leave his children alone. We can trust that God is at work in our lives, shaping and moulding us so that we become more like Jesus. This is why Paul writes in Romans 8:28 *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

Even when the angel appeared to Mary to tell her she would be the mother of God's son, there was no way she could have predicted everything that would mean for her. Joseph had no idea what would be involved when he responded in obedience to the angel's message to take Mary as his wife. I suspect Mary and Joseph endured shame, accusation, embarrassment and ridicule but they also experienced the miracle of seeing God become flesh right before their eyes. The cost of obedience to God's plan was worth it for the prize of being near to God himself.

It is as if God is at work in our lives to produce a beautiful tapestry. From our perspective, we only see the back of the embroidery. We are

looking at the underneath and don't understand what the picture is; why it seems so ugly; and why is so confusing. It's impossible for us to understand all the different knots and colours, and seemingly random directions our lives have taken. But the front reveals a different picture.

One day we will finally be able to see from the front of this tapestry God has been weaving of our lives. Then we will be able to see how seasons of pain brought some rich, vibrant colours to our tapestry. We will see the fullness and richness of God's design reflected in the seasons of joy and celebration. We'll see the depth of character revealed through the times of testing and trusting. We'll see that despite our many failures and failings; despite our perceived inadequacies; despite all those times we thought we weren't good enough and those times we were deliberately disobedient, God has produced this utterly beautiful tapestry of our lives. And so we continue to trust that he is at work and that he is working for good in our lives.

So, trust him even though you may not understand what he's doing in your life. Trust him when things are going well. Remember that God uses ordinary people like you and me to accomplish extra ordinary things for the sake of his kingdom and one day we'll see that beautiful tapestry of our lives he has woven.