Christmas Day

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Christmas is astounding. It celebrates the wildest, most astonishing event. One day, the God of the universe was born as a tiny, helpless baby; a real one; vulnerable to all the hazards of a dangerous world. *Why?* Why did God need to come, and why come as a tiny, helpless baby?

Scripture tells us that God did need to come – for the sake of this world. That's a big statement, and it raises a few questions. What did God need to *do* for this world? Did God get it done? And then there's that other question; the big one.

I think all of us will remember a time when we've asked the "big question": *If there **is** a loving God of the universe, why is suffering allowed to happen?* That's the "big question". People have always asked it, ever since we were told that God loves us. *If there **is** a loving God of the universe, why is suffering allowed to happen?* That suffering might be caused by war; natural disaster; disease; abuse of vulnerable people – we can all remember why we've asked that question. It's because someone good has been badly hurt, or died; maybe someone we love, or some innocent victim of a disaster or an atrocity in the news; maybe even us. What sort of a God lets that happen?

We're not the first to ask the big question. The Hebrew people had plenty of reasons to ask it. Years of slavery, countless wars, famines, colonization, exile. They asked the big question, and all through Advent, we've been focussed on the answer they received. It was a promise that they heard again and again; God would raise up someone extraordinary who would set things right. The prophets used many vivid and mysterious images to speak of him. Isaiah said this special leader would

be born to the Hebrew people; born a descendant of King David, a *prince*. He'd have the authority and the power, *finally*, to bring lasting peace; peace which he would uphold with justice and righteousness. Isa 9 This morning, Isaiah told us this would involve a rock-solid military defence. And our Psalmist told us the same.

God would raise up someone extraordinary who would set things right; the anointed one – the Messiah. The Hebrews had huge expectations of this Messiah. They waited for this Prince of Peace to be born; they waited and waited. They waited so long that they started to ask another question; "How long!" Hab 1.2 They had huge expectations. But I don't think they ever imagined who would eventually come.

Jesus was greater than the prophets ever expected. And yet he didn't come in power as some invincible tribal warrior. He came in the most scandalous, defenceless way imaginable. Just before he was born, his unmarried parents had to beg for fifth-rate lodgings 100 km from home. Jesus's first bed was an animal's feed trough. Who were the first visitors to come and witness his arrival? Scruffy strangers, shepherds, apparently turned up in the middle of the night. And soon after, this family would be on the road again as refugees. One day, the God of the universe was born as a tiny, helpless baby; vulnerable to all the hazards of a dangerous world.

Why in the world must any family endure such humiliation? If this baby is God's answer to the "big question", then that question needs to go under the microscope. *If there **is** a loving God of the universe, why is suffering allowed to happen?* This question has a built in assumption; we expect that a *loving* God should prevent tragedies. Is this true? And if it is, how should a loving God do this?

Should a loving God stop all wars; turn all weapons into farming tools? Would that fix relations between nations? Well,

no. Should a loving God fuse the world's tectonic plates together; stop all storms; get rid of mosquitoes? Would that make Earth a suffering-free zone? Well, no. Should a loving God abolish all disease and injury; even our mortality? Well, no. Should a loving God put a force-field round all vulnerable people; make every bully behave? Would all that stop us suffering? No; that wouldn't address the human heart. … So what's a loving God to do?

God did something beyond all expectation. One day, the God of the universe was born a tiny, helpless baby; vulnerable to all the hazards of this dangerous world.

Isaiah calls Jesus Emmanuel – God with us. He was born one of the colonised, bullied people – so the first peoples of this and every land have God with them. Jesus was born one of the people who'd have to depend on the kindness of others just to survive – so asylum-seekers / refugees have God with them. Jesus was born among animals and insects in a stable – so non-human life has God with them too. Shepherds were the ancient world's equivalent of street people. So they have God with them. Jesus grew up to love and care for any people he met who were sick in mind or body, or hungry. So they have God with them. Jesus was arrested, tried and executed by the state. So prisoners and those on death row have God with them. All these outsiders can be told with confidence that Jesus is their Emmanuel – God with them. And the rest of us? God was born, a living, mortal organism on planet Earth. So every creature, the air we breathe and the land we walk on, we all have God with us. In every place, Jesus revealed God; he was – and always is – God with us.

And the question of suffering? It isn't forgotten. At the end of his ministry, Jesus would take it all to the Cross – he'd willingly have all wrong and all evil crucified in his own body, and he'd take it to the grave where it belongs. And on the third day after his death, when he rose, alive again from the grave, all the suffering of the world – even death itself

– lay defeated at his feet.

Yes, we still experience suffering. We're still not at the end times. But the Good News is that while suffering has an end, we do not. Just as Jesus came to be with us in our suffering, he promises that when we die, he will come and take us to be with him. Jn 14 And we are also promised that after the last days, in a renewed heaven and earth, God will again make a home with us and wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Rev 21

One day, the God of the universe was born a tiny, helpless baby; vulnerable to all the hazards of a dangerous world. He came to give meaning to our life, to rescue us all, good and bad, and to let us know we have God with us in every moment, in every place, and we always will. Amen