

I didn't have my first really big overseas trip until I was 44. It was in the early 2000's and I went to Europe and the UK to perform a wedding and have a look around. I had been to Australia before, but never any further than Perth.

I was in the Baptist ministry at the time in Ponsonby, and a woman from the congregation had left a year earlier to travel and have a look at the world and had met a man in France, and decided to get married there. They asked me to fly to the south of that beautiful country, to take the wedding.

Unfortunately, Janet had just started teaching at MIT and couldn't get time off. So, I went on my own.

I had a great time getting prepared.

I can still remember the immense hope that this trip brought up. That I would see a northern hemisphere night sky. That I would get a beer on the banks of the Thames. That I would see the Eiffel Tower and get to wander around London. My heart almost burst out of my chest at the hope of it all.

I had planned to go to the UK 25 years before, when I had gone to Australia the first time, but that experience of being away from home and a couple of unfortunate episodes with the police, meant that moving on from Perth to London was problematic, so I came home.

So, there wasn't only hope in the mix with going away this time, but expectation. The expectation that I would be setting out in to the wide world on my own. The expectation that I would manage that by being independent, make good decisions, and not be overwhelmed by the experience. That I would be sensible and meet all the challenges that would come my way. A bit of an improvement from the first time round. I was expecting things to go well.

And they did, until I got to the airport.

When I got dropped off, I checked in my bags, ticket and went through the departure procedure through to the passenger's area ... and then it hit me! I was leaving home.

I was leaving Janet, Jess, David, Jonathan and Stephen ... to go haring off to the other side of the world. What if something happened? What if something happened at home and I wasn't there? What if something happened to me while I was away and I never saw them again? It was horrible.

I suddenly realised that this was a dangerous thing to do ... to leave your all family behind and head off into the unknown for two months, I'd never been away from them for two weeks let alone two months. I had no idea what was going to happen, to them, or to me.

I was almost completely overcome with a sense of impending doom and grief. It was extra ordinarily powerful, and it had me on the phone weeping away to Janet, declaring my undying love and devotion in case anything should befall me, in about 10 minutes. 44 and a complete wreck!

Somehow, with Janet's help, I managed to get on the plane ... and once in the air ... almost instantly settled down and had the trip of my life.

Preparation: Hope, expectation and danger. This is what John the Baptists message is all about in our gospel reading this morning. Quoting a 400-year-old oracle of the prophet second Isaiah, John shouts out into the wilderness of Judea to anyone who will listen.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Preparation in the sense that we help in our faith and living ... work towards this.

Hope in the context of the oracle and the times ... the Messiah is coming.

Expectation that God is at work making this happen ... and that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Danger in the opposition of the powers that be, the Roman Empire and the religious authorities.

Today, in the midst of Advent, in the midst of a world-wide pandemic, hope that the Messiah is coming and so is church, as we are opening up next week. Hope for a summer family holiday. The beach, a BBQ, a swim, lying in the sun and reading a book. Listening to cricket on the radio.

Today, in the midst of Advent, in the midst of a world-wide pandemic, expectation that God is continuing to make this happen, filling valleys and levelling hills. Expectation of being with family and friends. The sons and daughters in law. The grand kids, the great grandkids. People you may not have seen for many months. The opportunity to sit at table and eat and drink together. Hospitality, friendship, love and care.

Today, in the midst of Advent, in the midst of a world-wide pandemic, danger ... not so much from the powers that be or from religious authorities ... but from the virus. We aren't out of the woods yet and we will all need to be careful. Stick to the rules. Get our vaccination shots, our booster shots, when available, wear masks, socially distance and wash and sanitize our hands. But let's remember John ... the rough ways will be made smooth ... and that pandemics don't last forever.

But ... Advent points to a world ... that surely does.

A world where ... “all will see the salvation of God.”

The trip of a lifetime.

Amen.