



Hard Won Hope
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Year A, Creation 1
Genesis 1: 1-2:4A, John 1: 1-18
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Two people watched the same sunset.
One said: "At times like this I am afraid.
The sky is so vast, the sea so immense.
In comparison, I'm a speck of dust,
Here today, gone tomorrow.
When I look at the hugeness of creation,
I feel my insignificance
And I wonder what my life
Is all about."

The second person said:
"What a glorious sunset!
Just think!
I am the reason that this exists.
I am the only proof I have
Of all the beauty in this world.
Without the gift of my life,
The gift of my senses,
All this would be as nothing.
I praise God that the universe is held
In the wonder of my being."¹

I like these words of Joy Cowley. It is a psalm I return to over and over again. It offers two different perspectives on the same thing, in this case a sunset. One person speaks of fear, of the sense of being small and insignificant and deep questions of the meaning and purpose of one's life. The other expresses joy in the moment and a profound sense of wonder at what is being experienced.

¹ Joy Cowley, *Aotearoa Psalms*, No. 16: Vision

I like this psalm because I recognise both responses. I used to think that this psalm suggested that one of these responses was better than the other. That the text suggests a movement away from those feelings of fear and questions about the meaning of our lives and towards a deeper embrace of the wondrous life we have been given. That's a fair interpretation, but what I have come to see is that it is simply my interpretation.

There is a beach on the South Coast of Wellington that has always been a very special place in my life. There is a particular spot I like to go to, where one can sit at a cliff top and look out over Cook Strait. From there you can see the not insignificant amount of water that separates Te Ika a Maui from Te Wai Pounamu. You can see the Marlborough Sounds, the snow covered peaks of the southern ranges, and sometimes you can even see the tiny speck that is the Picton ferry sailing between the Islands.

What I feel when taking in this view is actually something of a strange mixture of the two views in Joy Cowley's psalm. I certainly become very aware of just how small I am, how vast the ocean, sky and land are as they stretch out before me, and how I will never fully grasp the absolute grandeur of this world. Sometimes there is that sense of fear, but that fear more often than not is the beginning of a sense of awe. Awe is the moment we step beyond fear into a place where we are so overwhelmed that words slip away. Awe may include a strong sense of our own limitations, our inability to grasp all that there is. But the overall feeling is not one of fear but rather of amazement and joy.

One of my favourite Old Testament texts is the book of Job. And for those of you who were paying close attention you might think that I've just taken a strange pivot given that we heard two readings, one from Genesis and one from the Gospel of John, both of which were creation narratives. These are but two creation stories in the bible, but there are others, you just have to look for them. A very different creation narrative is found in the book of Job, and for the next few weeks at our 10am service we will be using a Great Thanksgiving based on the creation narrative found in the book of Job.

The story of Job is an allegory that seeks to grapple with the premise of why bad things happen to good people. Over the course of Job's story he goes from being a man with children, farmland and animals

to losing absolutely everything. His children, servants and animals die. Job himself is afflicted with boils. It's a terrible turn of events.

Job has friends who are convinced that Job himself is to blame for what has happened. Job however is convinced that he is not to blame and that God is just, despite his experience that suggests the contrary. Finally the voice of God enters the narrative. God speaks from a whirlwind, and what does God say?

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?... Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?... Have you commanded the morning since your days began?”

God's response to Job's suffering is not an answer as such. Instead God overwhelms Job with the vast expanse of the universe and all that has been created. Is God trying to make Job feel small and insignificant like the first vision in Joy Cowley's psalm? Or is God encouraging Job to look beyond his misery to a vision of the universe that draws him out of his pain and into a greater understanding of himself and all he has endured? Because yes there is pain and suffering and injustice in this life. And there is also joy and goodness and beauty and the overcoming of injustice. One does not negate the other; God's challenge to Job is to grasp how all is held together within creation.

During my recent time in Tonga attending General Synod I recalled the many times I visited that country with Rod Oram. Rod who was once a parishioner here, and was well known as a journalist, was also a passionate advocate for the preservation of creation. He thought deeply about the complex issues regarding our climate and wrote with great insight about such things. More than that, he wrote about creation from a position of faith. Faith in the inherent value of this world, but also faith in humanity and our ability to work together to address issues as challenging as the climate crisis. For many of us, dwelling on the climate crisis is cause for despair. Rod certainly had moments of despair, and yet he worked tirelessly to find glimmers of hope. Rod taught me that hope is often hard won, meaning it takes real dedication and commitment to continue to uphold the value of creation and to advocate for its preservation.

Rod was particularly on my mind at General Synod when the discussion turned to the environmental realities facing Polynesia. We learnt about the huge amount of single use plastic that has found its way into our Pacific Ocean and the many negative impacts that is having. We were told about the vast rafts of plastic that are forming in the ocean. Plastic that is abundant because it is cheap to produce and durable, but takes thousands of years to biodegrade. These are problems at such an incredible scale it is easy to begin to feel overwhelmed and despondent.

But there are signs of hope. We were also told about a church project where some of this plastic is being removed from the ocean and analysed. Scientists looking at this plastic have been able to find some ocean dwelling fungi that are actually eating this plastic and helping it to biodegrade. So, there are some early trials being conducted to see if some of these fungi might provide a long term natural solution to removing the plastic already in the environment. It is early days, but the signs are very hopeful. People with the right expertise are coming together to find real solutions to these seemingly overwhelming problems, and the church is already involved in supporting this important work. For me that was a sign of hope. A small one yes, but an important reminder that many faithful people are making a difference.

Today as we begin our season of creation, I encourage you to take the time to remember how amazing our environment is. Take a walk, smell some flowers, feel the goodness of spring bringing new life into the world. Because if we are going to face the difficult environmental challenges before us our response must be deeply rooted in love and reverence for all of creation. To truly love something is not to simply enjoy it in this moment, it is to also care about its wellbeing now and into the future. In this way love for our world is the foundation of hope for this world. Amen.