

# The Season of Creation

Glenbrook Uniting Church & Pitt Street Uniting Church, 20 September,  
2020

Contemporary Reflections by  
Beth Sergeant, Dr Peter Bennett and Rosie Whiley

## Season of Creation 3

**Romans 8: 18-27; Mark 1: 9-13; Contemporary Reading:  
Excerpts from a reflection by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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### **Beth Sergeant**

Hello friends. Many of you will have seen and experienced more of outback and wilderness Australia than I have. But perhaps, like me, you've flown across the country and seen the low ridges of our geologically ancient continent. They look like the gaunt ribs of some very old beast. That's how I picture our Mother Earth.

We lived for many years in Dubbo in the central west of this state. Once I was showing the sights to an overseas visitor. She wanted to see the outback. Her idea of outback was where there are no fences. She headed for Bourke on her motorbike. I'm sure she found the area where there were more stock grids than fences.

On a lighter note, 50 years ago, Dubbo was the last place you could buy deli cheese. Further out than that it was that processed cheddar in a foil pack. But seriously, wilderness, I suggest, is where no-one can live permanently.

Last year, I finally joined the Uniting Church's annual Walking on Country tour. Something I've been keen to do since I'd read that beautiful and neglected Uluru Statement from the Heart. So my journey was to the heart.

We visited Aboriginal and Islander Churches and met inspiring leaders. We saw, too, ill health, poverty and struggle. I saw for my first time, Uluru, Alice Springs, the south of the Flinders Ranges, Cooper Pedy. My travelling companions, about 40 of us, shared their experience of indigenous spirituality.

Both in the Flinders Ranges and at Uluru / Kata Tjuta the creation times came alive for me. The land formations made sense - I might say developed personality - as we were told and shown the features of their origin stories. I think of Moses at the burning bush, Elijah at his cave mouth, John the Baptist and Jesus himself in the wilderness of Judea. All of them had challenging experiences and felt God's leading in those desert places.

Now, in the aloneness of this pandemic time, I pray that we may value this stretch of our pilgrimage. Personally I hope to be open and listening for God and that the cool winds of the hovering Spirit may soothe and replenish us too.

From the far away, but equally rugged area, Peter Millar of Iona, quotes <sup>i</sup> from an indigenous woman who speaks of *dadirri*, meaning sitting or walking on her land, just listening. He adds this prayer:

*Mother and Father God, Creator of the Deep Quiet, may we never be a stranger to the place within our hearts where we are at one with Life's Source and tiniest bloom.*

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### **Peter Bennett**

In the northwest corner of South Australia is the country of the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Anangu people, where my wife Rosie and I have been privileged to live for the last thirteen years. I pay respect to the Anangu and their elders who have lived on their lands for many thousands of years. I am thankful for the welcome and hospitality and friendship they offered us.

I have lived in cities all my life. I realise how much I need the support of city life for my daily bread –and for the other benefits that technology has brought us. I would not like to try to live in the wilderness where John the Baptist ate locusts and wild honey, and where Jesus is subsequently reported to have been driven to be tempted by Satan. We did eat *tjala* and *maku* – that is honey ants and witchetty grubs – and it was impressive to be with elderly ladies digging deep into unpromising looking ground where they knew these treats would be found.

On the one occasion I went with Rosie to a camp overnight I was awake shivering the whole night as the cold of the ground went through me. It made me recall learning, in school in Adelaide, that indigenous Australians coped with the desert cold by letting their body temperature fall several degrees. My feeling was they would have had no choice. On the other hand, as the summer temperatures can approach 50 degrees, people still die in these remote parts from a few hours without water.

My cultural and spiritual life is bound up with the people and institutions of the city. But I was born 20,000 km away from where I now live, I have lived in several cities, and I will never have the connection to a specific place that ties the Anangu to their land. Older Anangu know the place they were born and the place they want to be when they die. We have much to learn from people who, over millennia, have not only gained all their physical needs from this country but have also been able to develop a rich spiritual and cultural life which still continues.

Christianity had a sympathetic introduction at the Presbyterian mission at Ernabella due to the wise leadership of Dr Charles Duguid. Staff learnt to speak Pitjantjatjara and encouraged and attended traditional ceremonial practices. Christian prayer and worship and often a personal relationship with Jesus remain important in the lives of Anangu.

The grim history of much other European contact, however, has brought about a situation of social dysfunction and what is blandly called 'severe intergenerational disadvantage'.

Ownership of the lands by the Anangu, extending over 100,000 square Km, was recognized in 1981 by the South Australian government in the APY Land Rights Act.

However the country of the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people extends into Western Australia and the Northern Territory and includes the great rock Uluru and Kata Tjuta. South Australia's highest mountains, hot springs, waterholes and desert are all part of this magnificent country.

We experienced the peace of solitude and quiet in the vast open spaces of the desert. The spectacular night sky of the clear desert was a regular source of wonder and joy. I remember the visit of the comet McNaught in 2006 which shone in the southern sky for several nights. We could sit out at sunrise and sunset with an outlook stretching 360 degrees around the horizon.

At school in the 1960s I studied a poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins.

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed.*

He goes on to mourn the spoiling of the land by human commerce, but he concludes:

*And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black west went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with our bright wings.*

Even during our short time on the APY Lands big changes were happening. The arrival of electricity wires to bring power from a central power station, the construction of a large reverse osmosis plant to provide good drinking water, the construction of bitumen roads to replace the dirt tracks, and the mixed blessing of mobile phone coverage. Even the accumulation of rubbish and the ownership of domestic cats were all signs of the inevitable encroachment of the outside world.

The Anangu date their connection to these lands to creation time. They have always been there; they've been sustained by the country and have obligations to care for it. The relationship is reciprocal. When Anangu were told the government was considering giving them freehold title to their land, their response was: '*what are you talking about, this has always been our land.*'

In ignorance I asked a friend, a senior Yankunytjatjara elder, who had been involved in the land rights negotiations, what he thought about constitutional recognition for indigenous people. He said: '*we don't want that, we want a treaty.*'

Alec Derwent Hope, born in Cooma, has been called the twentieth century's greatest eighteenth century poet. In his somewhat bleak poem *Australia* he credits the deserts with the potential for spiritual renewal in opposition to the urban civilization of the colonisers, saying he would:

*'Turn gladly home  
From the lush jungle of modern thought  
To find the Arabian Desert of the human mind  
Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come,  
Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare  
Springs in that waste'*

We have a spiritual need for wilderness areas, but wilderness as part of God's creation should exist intact, solely for its own sake.

We thank God for desert and wild places and like Anangu may we love and care for the land. May we listen to and learn from insights offered from the wilderness.

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### **Rosie Whiley      Wilderness and the Outback**

How much cultural meaning is layered on both the place and the people of these places. Desert. The outback. The red centre. The heart. The dead heart. The wilderness! Very evocative and sometimes conflicting images. Harsh, dangerous and indifferent - or still, silent and peaceful? A place of extraordinary colour and beauty -or a barren nothingness? A place of testing - or a place of visions? A place to be conquered – or a place to walk lightly?

Add to this the central image the desert has in the Judeo-Christian tradition: the Israelites encountered God while wandering in the desert; Jesus went into the desert and was tempted there. The desert: a place of intense experiences where God is encountered and the spirit grows.

Today many seek to reclaim the desert as a central part of contemporary spiritual life: fostering solitude, purification and then re-emergence into the life of the community.

We headed out into the desert to be with Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara Anangu, a desert people in 2006. I acknowledge and pay respect to Anangu and thank them for their generosity in welcoming us into their land and allowing us to live with them for many years.

I try to recall what I was expecting to find. I grew up in country NSW where we had a small indigenous population. Years ago I had travelled for work to Lake Mungo and we had spent a few months, years before, in Alice Springs while Peter did a locum with the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

I had a basic understanding of indigenous issues and that SA had handed back the land to Anangu in 1981 and they spoke and were strong in their own language.

The physical memories of the desert are of walking in sandy creek beds and on rocky dirt tracks as if in a hot oven. Billowing red dust pouring out from behind travelling cars, flies, sticky flies and the smell of the earth.

But I cannot separate my experience of the desert from my experience of its people. One of the facts I knew, like everyone does, was that Indigenous people have a deep connection with the land, but I came to feel the depth of that connection: an attachment that is always present and Anangu are happiest when expressing it.

In my first job in Indulkana there were two young women I got to know well. On one occasion we were travelling to Pukatja, also called Ernabella, a trip of about two and a half hours. For the whole journey they would be pointing out the window at different rocks, rock formations, gullies, creek beds and vegetation, making sure I observed them and telling me stories about them. They were so animated, and they related to these places like long lost old friends. They made me feel these were living beings and I remember how they would sing to them.

On the way home, after dark, they would tell me about the night sky, and as we got nearer to Indulkana the more excited and happy they became. This joy at returning home, with animated talking and singing was something I experienced often travelling with Anangu and it is infectious. You feel the deep affection for their land and despite the difficulties in their lives you become aware they see a harmony and a richness in the life around them, given by the land, which they share with generous stories and laughter.

In Anangu culture different family members can have responsibility for looking after children. You will hear people say "*she grewed me up*" when talking about the person who cared for them. People also say "*the land grewed them up*". A deep, real and personal feeling of being nurtured and cared for by the land. One of the Elders said: '*I love this country. It has watched us Anangu for many years. It is a wise country.*'

It was for me a slow process connecting with another culture and appreciating it.

I remember an Easter Day worship service. At services people are scattered around a small covered stage. Some pull up in cars, some are on the ground or sitting on rocks, and there may be just a few chairs. There are children running up and down, maybe on bikes or kicking footballs, and there are dogs everywhere. Cars leave, others arrive, and there may be a dogfight or two. It was not my idea of a service of worship. Yet the Spirit is there. You hear it in the singing, and the voices of people who read and spoke. It is also in the singing that happened most evenings, for weeks before and after Easter.

Another experience was when we attended a funeral of a senior elder at his homeland. We were part of a convoy of vehicles travelling there. At one point we stopped at a creek bed which was his birthplace. Everyone got out, walked around and talked. There was no formality; the significance was in the stopping, in the being; being there, in that place.

The indigenous understanding of land as *mother* was familiar to me. But living with Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara I felt the depth of this connection, a huge humbling experience, when so much of Western culture's relationship with the land is characterised by a detached 'development and progress' model, with associated climate change and extinction rates.

We have much to gain from those who have a profound spiritual connection to their earth, a maternal nurturing and caring received from the land, an experience of God, a loving God. For the desert and its people I give thanks.

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<sup>i</sup> "Touch the Earth Lightly" by Peter Millar, p16. Iona Community- email: [enquiries@iona.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@iona.org.uk)