

# Hope Balancing on a Precarious Perch

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Ms Meredith Knight

Advent 2A

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12;

Contemporary Reading - "*The thing with feathers*" poem by Emily Dickinson

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

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The theme of our Advent journey at Pitt Street this year is hope.

Emily Dickinson's poem about the "*thing with feathers*" is a powerful image of hope which prevails despite the forces that threaten to destroy it.

In today's world, hope appears to be perching very precariously, indeed.

In our two bible passages, the prophets Isaiah and John the Baptist both paint a picture of a coming reign of peace. However, when we look at our world today, this seems like a rather fantastical pipe-dream.

- Is peace possible?
- What might that look like?
- What can we realistically hope for?

Today we lit a candle for peace but peace continues to evade humanity despite the very best efforts of countless thousands of people who have worked tirelessly for peace throughout every corner of the globe over generations.

I was too young to appreciate the peace movement of the Sixties with its youthful confidence. I love the songs that this movement spawned but sadly its optimism has long since faded.

We live in a world which is aching and uncertain with war, violence, terrorism, political unrest and exploitation of the world's most vulnerable.

It is a sobering reality that, despite the push for nuclear disarmament last century, today, 20,000 nuclear warheads dot our globe capable of wiping out our planet several times over.

In a 2016 article, chillingly entitled *The Coming War on China*, author John Pilger, a leading Australian political journalist writes about the United States currently ramping up military power in the Pacific to confront China.

More than 400 American military bases encircle China with missiles, bombers, warships and nuclear weapons which Pilger warns is provocative and dangerous. Four of those bases are on Australian soil.

America's newly-elected president is himself, provocative, and many would argue, dangerously unpredictable.

Then, of course, there is the reality of climate change. Not only are the world's peoples not at peace, neither is our planet, which is being pushed to breaking point as polluting and plundering continues unabated with increasingly catastrophic effects for earth and the most vulnerable of her inhabitants.

A recent creditable study predicted that, by 2020, two-thirds of wild animals will be gone.....Life is being extinguished as fast as when the dinosaurs disappeared – and it is happening because humanity is taking a chainsaw to the tree of life.

Where oh where is, the idyllic paradise envisaged by the prophet Isaiah who proclaimed that *all* shall live together in peace?

What does Isaiah's vision mean for our contemporary world which appears as though it will end without this peace ever being realized?

The world that Isaiah was writing about was not that dissimilar to our own. Isaiah looked at the kingdoms of his time and knew that they were corrupt and bent on destruction, just as many in our world are today.

Isaiah likened Israel to a tree which began to rot and die because of the way it treated its most vulnerable. However, a tree that is cut down can often bring forth new life and this was God's purpose in wielding the axe to Israel.

The tree was not to be cut off forever, but God desired to make room for new growth to come from the old. From the stump, would grow a new shoot, a new Israel and from that new Israel would come one who would rule with 'justice and integrity'. This is the one whom John the Baptist proclaimed would usher in a new heaven and a new earth. The harsh words of John the Baptist, that wild man of the wilderness, grate on our progressive ears: "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? .....His (Jesus') winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear the threshing floor and.....the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*".

This passage clearly states that John is addressing the Pharisees and the Sadducees; however, I'm sure that many of us harbour a disquieting feeling that John is also pointing his finger at us.

I certainly felt that as a teenager in the 1970s, when I heard those damning words used in a sermon to harangue gay and lesbian people into repenting of our wickedness. In the dawning awareness of my sexuality this was an alarming experience..... I didn't much fancy being thrown into the unquenchable fire!

I've since learned that John's call to repentance is not primarily about our standards of moral worthiness; it is rather about God's desire to realign us to Christ's life.

Repentance is also not so much about our guilty feelings as about God's power to transform us into Christ's image.

John the Baptist's message is a call to examine ourselves, as we will do today during Holy Communion, to see what needs to be transformed. Let's face it; we can all do with a little pruning now and then which can allow something new to be born within us.

The voice calling in the wilderness is also a call to action; in being the bearers of good fruit we can participate in God's mission, embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, of building a world of peace, justice and integrity.

When we look at the challenges of our world we can easily become overwhelmed and wonder how we could possibly make a difference.

I'm reminded of the story about the thousands of starfish which washed up onto a beach in a storm and the little boy who picked up starfish after starfish throwing them one by one back into the sea.

An old man came along and asked the boy what he was doing. The young boy paused, looked up, and replied *"Throwing starfish into the ocean. The tide has washed them up onto the beach and they can't return to the sea by themselves, when the sun gets high, they will die, unless I throw them back into the water"*.

The old man replied, *"But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on this beach. I'm afraid you won't really be able to make much of a difference"*. The boy bent down, picked up yet another starfish and threw it as far as he could into the ocean. Then he turned, smiled and said, *"It made a difference to that one!"*

I like to think that the boy's selfless act of compassion inspired the old man to help him throw many more starfish back into the sea and that others joined in too.

This is a fictional story. However, last month a similar thing occurred; this time with abalone! On 14 November, when a massive earthquake struck the area of Kaikoura in the South Island of New Zealand, the sea-bed rose two metres, clear out of the water, stranding thousands of abalone. The Kaikoura townsfolk banded together carefully prising each abalone off the rocks before returning them and other stranded sea creatures to their aquatic home.

These stories echo the words of Jesus who said: *"what you did for one of the least of these, you did for me."* I like to think that Jesus' message encompasses the starfish and the abalone just as much as it does us and every living creature because we all come into the ambit of God's loving care.

Our world is inclined to celebrate individuals as heroes and heroines; history is full of individuals who have made a significant positive difference to our world, such as Martin Luther King and Mother Theresa.

However, as Theologian Richard Rohr states, *"we must recognise that alongside each public figure are many nameless people who contribute to the cause. Change happens not because one person was particularly brilliant or unselfish or strong, but because communities joined their energy and wisdom toward a common goal"*

Rohr affirms that: *"the full story of change is often longer and wider than a single life"*.

When we emphasize the individual, there's a danger that people will think they can't make a difference because they're just one person. But all of us, even with our limitations and weaknesses, can be vessels of transformative love - in our homes, our neighbourhoods, our churches and our societies. This can occur in the smallest act of kindness, peace-making or earth-nurturing.

Since June, I have assisted in co-ordinating the National Church Life Survey for the NSW/ACT Synod. My primary duty has been to personally connect with every congregation to encourage them to participate and to receive their orders of surveys.

Now, like most of you, when I started, I was obviously aware that membership in the Uniting Church is declining, as it is in most mainstream denominations. Pitt Street is a rare exception; wasn't it wonderful, last week, to welcome 15 people into membership of this congregation?

As congregations gave me their survey orders I was consistently shocked by how small they were - and I found it depressing.....depressing that this denomination which I have loved since its commencement in 1977 has declined in membership to the extent it has.

However, on the bright side, I enjoyed many affable conversations with people who were keen to tell me about the hopeful things that are taking place in their churches and the ways in which they are connecting with the wider community. These congregations, many of them with less than 30 members, are using their church properties and limited resources to build inclusive communities of friendship, care and support.

This is Advent hope! This is to boldly assert that regardless of the bad things that are happening in our world and how hopeless things seem to be, we will live as though there is a new heaven and a new earth; not at some far-off time but today.

Most of the affirmative things that these faithful few are doing are insignificant by worldly standards but it is their loving intention in making a positive difference that matters. Mother Theresa said, *"Not all of us can do great things...but we can do small things with great love"*.

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Across the world, a spirit of positive change is taking place as people from all religious faiths, and no faith, work together to build communities of love and care for earth and all Her creatures, including humanity.

Through singing with environmental choir, Ecopella, I have become more aware of what is happening to our precious planet. I have become a passionate advocate. My main activity is environmental activism. Our rallies can always do with more people; the community spirit of such gatherings is uplifting and positive change can and does take place.

One shining example is the story of Watarrka National Park in the Northern Territory. For three years, the traditional owners and other Australians fought an application to frack this pristine part of Australia which would have had devastating consequences for the land, the native animals and indigenous sacred sites. Sustained activism and community pressure eventually resulted in the mining application being rejected by the Northern Territory government. Those who worked to make this happen confidently proclaimed that *"we can save country when we work together"*.

In closing, I would love the opportunity to share with you, on another occasion, many more such inspiring stories.

I also urge you to watch the excellent Naomi Klein film called "*This Changes Everything*" which you can download from the internet. This documentary: "*is a purposefully unsettling but ultimately encouraging global overview of efforts by activists to push back against corporate polluters and ameliorate climate change*".

When a small seed of hope is planted in people's hearts who then work together for the common good Isaiah's vision for a world at peace comes nearer.

Yes, the perch is swaying precariously but Emily Dickinson's "*thing with feathers*" is taking flight as we are swept towards a new future of hope and limitless possibility together with the Spirit who lovingly accompanies us and boldly walks with us into a new tomorrow.

Thanks, be to God.

Amen.