

From the edges seek the heartlands

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 18 February 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Lent 1B

Genesis 9: 8-17; Mark 9: 9-15;

Contemporary Reading: 'Lent' by Jean M Watt

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

Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday. Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, that leads us to Good Friday and Easter Sunday. On Wednesday evening a dozen or so Pitt Street people gathered here close to the communion table and marked the beginning of this reflective season by reminding ourselves of our connection to the sacred, to each other and to the earth.

On either our forehead or the back of one hand, we received a mark of ash mixed with a little water to remember our baptism and a little oil to symbolise healing. The brief liturgy reminded us of our connection to matter, to the molecules of our bodies and of creation, and to the spark of our spirits.

The opening prayer included these words:

May God guide us as we perform simple acts of love and prayer, and real works of reform and renewal.

Let us love deeply the earth which gives us air to breathe, water to drink, and food to sustain us.

May we remember that life is begotten from stardust, radiant in light and heat.

We are all one—all of creation, all that now live, all that have ever lived.

Remember we are stardust, and to stardust we return.

Remember we are connected and to connection we return.

Remember we are part of the great mystery.

Remember we are stardust and to stardust we return.

When the ashes were shared, the words "you are stardust" were said to each person. Stardust of apparently grey carbon. Stardust containing the spark of light and life.

Those of us who gathered recalled that though we were small in number, we were part of a gathered community, many of whom do not live or work in the city, a gathered community that included all of you. And we honoured the stardust origin and destiny of every one.

A week before last Wednesday, the Worship Team had talked a little about Lent. Some of the people who had been here a long while talked about creating the banner that we have up today. It has images of desert and oasis. When it was created, the intent was to contrast the barren desert with the beauty of paradise – a paradise that evoked the Garden of Eden. But as the banner was designed and worked on, the contrast became less obvious. In the completed banner, both the desert and the garden are beautiful. The path is no longer linear.

Then our conversation moved on to Australian spirituality and Sue Gehrig made the observation that we have a tendency to romanticise the bush in Australia. Literature and poetry have fostered a bush identity of the Australian soul. Rugged, rough, independent and slightly wild. And yet, the vast majority of us live on the coast. We see the beauty of the outback, the bush, the red centre, but it seems that most of us wouldn't actually want to live there...

Last Sunday morning in Community Time, Robyn Floyd spoke about the installation of large candles and ribbon that we had for our transfiguration service. She went on to talk about the conversation from Worship Team about desert heartland and coast. After Robyn spoke, Beth Sergeant reminded me of the second verse of Australian hymn-writer Robin Mann's song "For you deep stillness." I knew the song but had forgotten the words: "From the edges seek the heartlands"

From the edges seek the heartlands

and when you're burnt by the journey

may the cool winds of the hovering

Spirit soothe and replenish you.

In the name of Christ...

In the name of Christ...

Robin Mann invites us in that song to the desert heartland. The vision placed before us is not romantic. The sun and the desert winds will burn. But he also offers us assurance as we journey - that we are accompanied by a refreshing Spirit, the Spirit released into the world through the love and life, suffering and death, of Jesus.

Lent is a time for memory and for return. It is also a path, a Way; a way that we make in our own lives as we follow the path, the Way of Jesus.

At the beginning of Lent, we hear the call "Prepare Ye, the Way of the Lord." Mark's gospel calls relentlessly for us to join this path; this path into the desert and back again, to the wilderness where the wild things are in order that we may live our wild and precious lives with purpose, connected to the accompanying Spirit, recognising that we humans are the carbon of stardust, stardust that contains within its atomic structure the spark of divine life.

Mark's gospel is in such a rush that it doesn't spell out the details about Jesus time in the wilderness.

Sometimes, the key to the theological meaning of a Gospel passage is found inside its structure. Structurally, this story narrates just like a textbook rite of passage: the candidate is singled out, then taken for a proverbial length of time into a liminal space, a “thin place” where old identities dissolve and new ones are forged, before he or she is thrust back into society with a new identity, to enact a new role. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark's Gospel does not go into the details of the temptations. We are told only that Jesus was tempted by Satan, that he was with the wild beasts, and that the angels waited on him.

New Testament theologians suggest that Mark is using this stark story to preview the rest of his Gospel. Jesus spends time in the company of wild beasts. The desert is the place where the wild things are. The rest of Mark's gospel portrays Jesus as a wild thing, as one who refuses to be domesticated into the household of conventional religion. Jesus' disruptive taboo-violating ministry of touching lepers and bleeding women, of healing on the Sabbath, of eating with tax collectors and sinners, turns his earthly career into liminal space, into liminal time for all of the other Gospel characters that are accounted by Mark.

As we listen to the stories of Jesus in the coming weeks we will hear of this disturbing wildness which unsettles and threatens the scribes and Pharisees who refuse to deepen their religious journeys, preferring to remain in religious childhood rather than take the path of initiation, through to religious maturity.

Even the twelve disciples resist the transition by refusing to let go of their old identities.

Identifying with the stories in Lent connects us to our own path, our own journeying on the Way of the Lord. Yes, preparing the Way of the Lord is preparing the Way of Jesus; it is about making a space for him in our lives. But it is not a path that we prepare in order to watch him walk by us like some kind of celebrity or superstar. It is a path that we are caught to make in order that we can walk alongside Jesus - and alongside his sometimes stumbling friends who we might identify with. This preparation time forces us into a rite of passage, to struggle through the tensions of holding on and letting go.

This is exactly where we belong on the first Sunday of Lent.

This week my own Lenten reflections returned me to the wisdom of Howard Thurman. Before I went to live in New York in the early eighties I knew nothing of Thurman, who had died just a couple of years earlier. Born in 1899, he was an African-American theologian, a Baptist Minister, an author, philosopher, educator, and civil rights leader. As a prominent religious leader, he played a leading role in many social justice movements and organizations of the twentieth century. Thurman's theology of radical nonviolence influenced and shaped a generation of civil rights activists, and he was a key mentor to leaders in the movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Thurman quote, of many quotable quotes, that resonates with me this Lent is from near the end of his amazing life, in a speech to Spellman College students in 1980, a speech that is sometimes called “*The Sound of the Genuine*.”

Thurman told the students at a predominantly African American college:

“There is something in every one of you that waits, listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself; and if you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching and if you hear it and then do not follow it, it was better that you had never been born...”

“You are the only you that has ever lived; your idiom is the only idiom of its kind in all of existence and if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls...”

“You will spend your, life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls...”

I rediscovered Howard Thurman this week via Parker Palmer.

Through Lent, Parker suggests that we ask ourselves: *“Am I speaking and acting from the “sound of the genuine” in me? Or am I tied to the end of strings that other people pull?”*

In our anxious world, there are puppeteers, in the government and in parts of the mass media, that are pulling are strings day and night. The government’s rhetoric about refugees and asylum-seekers, about African immigrants, is both evil and masterful. The demonising sound bites tie us to strings that pull us away from being truly human, pull us away from who we were created to be, who we genuinely are.

Some of those strings pull people toward fearing or hating whole groups of people, as defined by their race, nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.

Some of them pull us toward living in the moment of consumption and short-term pleasure rather than in relation to the earth.

Some strings pull us toward “blaming the victim” in crimes ranging from sexual assault to deaths of indigenous people in detention. Others pull us to turn away from the poor and from people who are homeless.

The call to reflection in lent does not require us to turn away from the world. In the desert we spend time with the wild things so that we may too may be wild, that we too may be undomesticated by conventional religion and politics.

In Lent, we pay attention to what’s pulling our strings. In lent, we listen for the sound of the genuine; and hopefully, in lent, we cut the strings of all that pulls us away from being human in community with one another, with the earth, and with our rainbow God.