

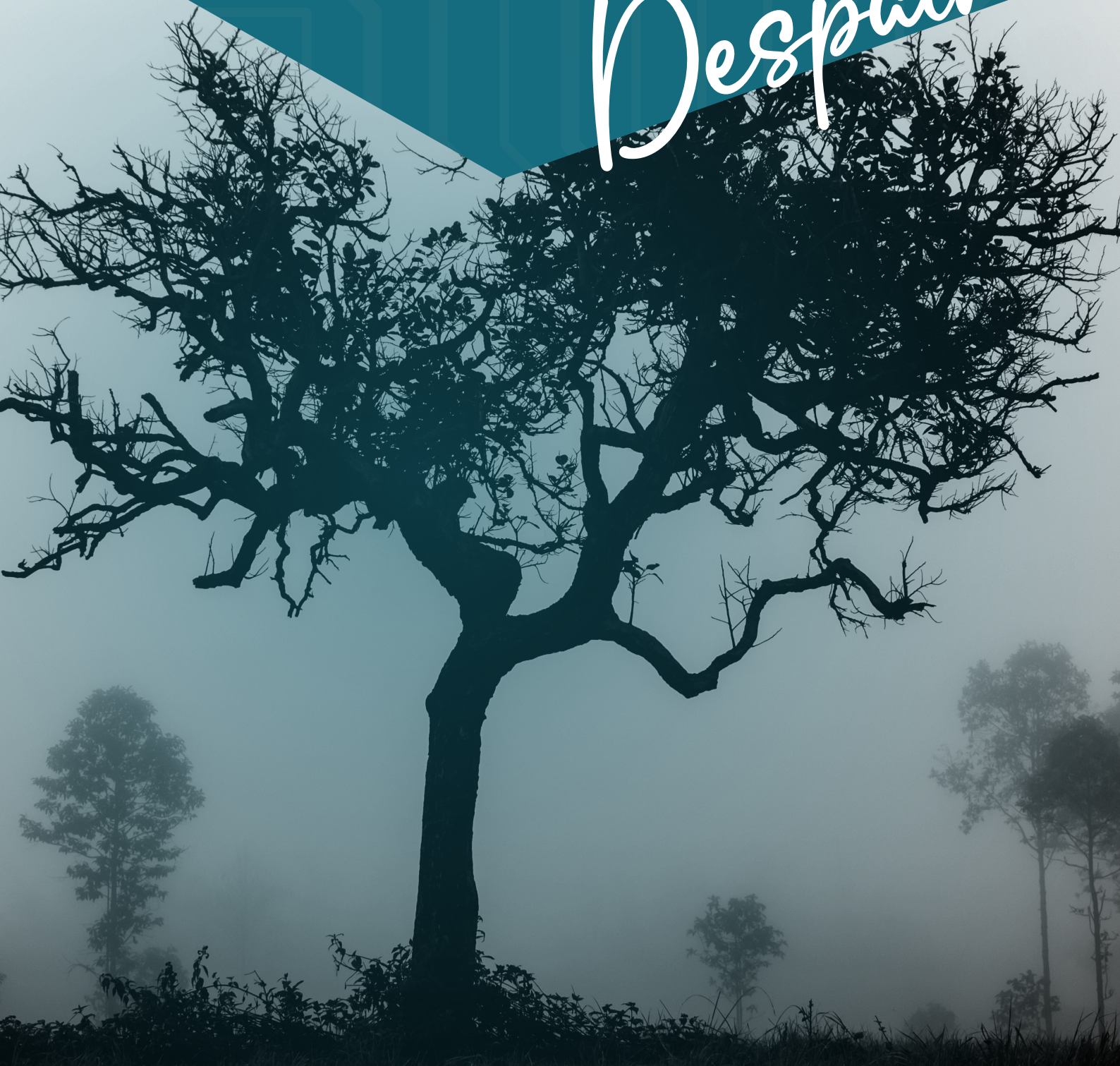
Ruminations

Autumn 2024



SALTBUSH
UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY

Despair



Contributors

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Larraine Hoffman is a lay preacher and lay presider at Lockhart Uniting Church. She is passionate about building connections with community through tai chi and aqua aerobics classes, Scripture in School, and a community library. Her own experiences of journeying through despair have led to the development of a Grief and Loss course which she runs regularly to support people through change and bereavement.

Rev. Dr Ross Kingham is an ordained minister of the Uniting Church. He established Barnabas Ministries in 1986 to support and encourage church leaders in Australia. He has worked in rural and city parishes in both the Methodist and the Uniting Church.

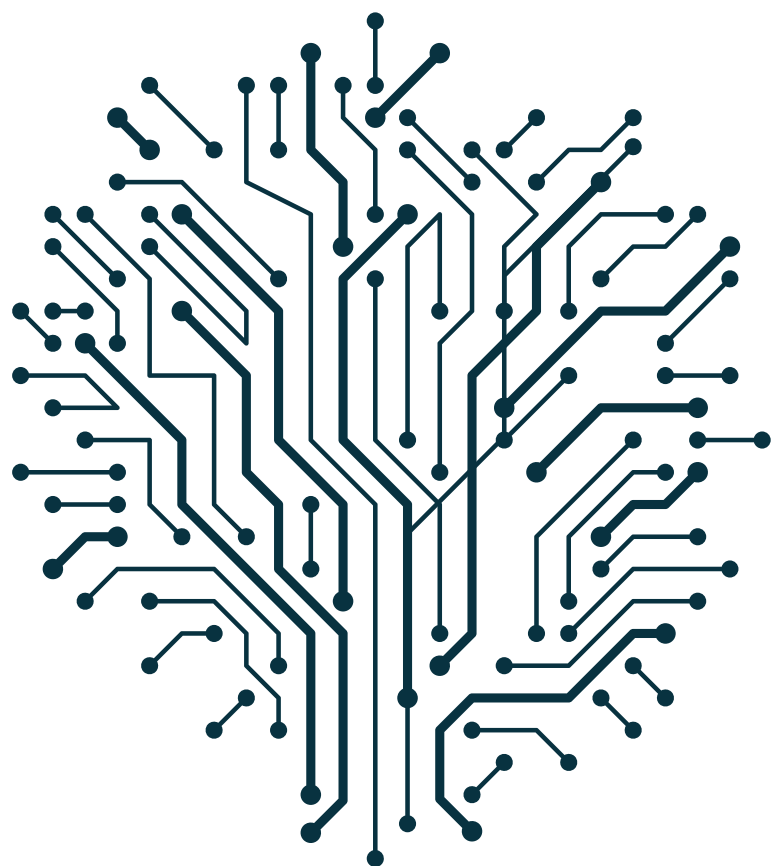
Rev. Dr Niall McKay is a minister of the word with a background in congregational ministry, chaplaincy and education. Niall has a long commitment to flexibility in ministry education and is passionate about discerning, encouraging and fostering the growth of all ministers in the church, regardless of formal or informal recognition or levels of education.

Nathan Tyson works with the Synod of NSW & ACT in the role of Director, First Peoples Strategy and Engagement. Nathan is an Aboriginal man who has spent most of his life in Sydney and is of Anaiwon/Gomeroi descent.



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Editors Introduction - Despair

Rev. Mark Faulkner | Saltbush Ministry Team Leader

Welcome to our Autumn Edition of Ruminations with the theme of Despair!

I spent some weeks a time ago, within the northern extremities of our planet (above the arctic circle) in the depth of winter. In many ways it was overwhelming. Minus 20's to minus 30's. The sun didn't rise until 9am and was setting by 2pm after hardly getting above the horizon. There was a heavy darkness and it was like a blanket of overwhelming gloom.

We are aware of the affects of darkness, winter, cold and the reality of the long dark night.... and season. For some people it's overwhelming.

For me I had an end.... After a few weeks I was returning home to Australia and a sky full of sunlight. Long days and warm nights. Yet for some there is no escape, just the long dark days and nights ahead.

The theme Despair is dark and it also has within it the loss of hope, the absence of expectation and goodness. Despair seems to say there is no way out and a loss of what might have been. Despair is the dark night of the soul.

In this season we've also had Lent and the darkness of the cross. As hard as it is for us in our modern world 2000 years later to actually grasp the life of Jesus, the daily walk and talk and community life, it is in the struggle and foreboding and fear of Jesus in the time before his crucifixion that we are deeply connected as human beings. Don't let us make light of the suffering and despair within the life of Jesus and his death.

Psalm 69 has some verses not often read, but which, to me, are the image of despair found in Jesus in the garden and at the time of his death; the cross.

**Insults have broken my heart,
So that I am in despair.
I looked for pity, but there was none;
And for comforters, but I found none.
They gave me poison for food,
And for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.**

This is indeed despair.

It's a little scary publishing Ruminations with the theme of despair. Is it ok to talk about this? Shouldn't we continue the fakeness of the happy Christian life? How honest do we want to be? Should we even ponder where in the darkness, the cry, the despair, is God?

The Saltbush team are thankful to each of our contributors who have opened themselves to ponder this theme for us. For some it was particularly difficult. But let us sit with this, if not for ourselves, then for others and if not for others, then for the ways and things that we cling to and which are touched by despair.

Mark .





A word from the Moderator

Rev. Mata Hiliau | Moderator

Last month I travelled to the NSW south coast town of Gerringong, the land of the Dharawal people. There I met with young people to listen to their thoughts on the story of Easter, and how they see the journey from despair to hope translate into their own lives and the modern world.

As we know, the Easter Gospel speaks of the despair of a devout follower of Jesus, Mary Magdalene. Mary arrives at Jesus' tomb in the early hours of the morning only to find that it is empty, except for two pieces of cloth that his body was wrapped in, one at the head and one at the feet. Mary stands and weeps. "They have taken away my Lord and where have they laid him?". Then Mary encounters the risen Lord, "I have seen the Lord". Christ has risen. A miracle has taken place.

One of the young leaders I heard from at the Pulse Retreat Yourself camp said something that resonated with me. When reflecting on the Easter message Ella said sometimes it's easy to over-intellectualize or think about it, when perhaps we just need to celebrate the sheer joy of the miracle. A glorious transformation born from tragedy.

I reflect on some of the darkest times in my life. Moments when I felt so far down the well of despair that I could only see a pinprick of light above me. I felt convinced that my future was doomed. I was a divorced single mother living in regional NSW with not much I thought in the way of prospects. Miraculously that glimmer of light would transform into a life basked in boundless love. As I stood on the beach as Moderator of the Uniting Church, with my husband by my side, filming an Easter message that would reach millions, I thought of that young woman in Griffith. I wanted to embrace her and tell her the darkness will fade, your faith will carry you through, a new life beyond your wildest dreams is on the horizon.

...perhaps
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Miracles, transformations, and resurrections take place everywhere in our waking lives, and it is important we celebrate and share our stories. These journeys which navigate the resilience of the soul and spirit, are the ones that will sustain hope for those currently dwelling in the darkness.

It instills me with hope that young leaders like Ella will continue to shine the light of our Lord's message into spaces and places where the suffering and despair is greatest.





An introduction to the Gospel of Mark

**Rev. Dr Niall McKay | Educator for Life long Learning •
Uniting Mission & Education**

When I was asked to write this introduction to the Gospel of Mark, I was told that it should be concise and earthy. This struck me as entirely appropriate because, of all the Gospels, Mark is the most concise and earthy – intensely focused on the immediate transformation that life with Jesus entails, especially for those who live outside the centres of power and population. In just over 15 chapters, Mark's proclamation of good news plots the story of Jesus' ministry and the way that the people who meet him start to gather and follow him. Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God, his confrontation with social religious and political power and his inevitable path to the Cross demonstrate Jesus' identity and purpose – but as this purpose unfolds, a surprisingly wide range of people are caught up in it.

More than any of the other gospels, Mark is strongly connected to the everyday lives of the people of first century – those living near the shores of the Sea of Galilee, those scrabbling out an existence in the rough country near the Jordan river, and those living in the shadow of occupied Jerusalem. The gospel is overflowing with references to rural existence: from the parables which assume are nestled in agricultural life – running vineyards, farming pigs and the plight of tenant farmers; to the pre-eminence of the very earthy John the Baptist; and, perhaps most instructively, the accounts of Jesus doing rural things – for example when he and his friends pick grain as they walk along the road. The land (earth) is a constant company in the Gospel as seeds fall on it, demoniacs roam across it and Jesus and his followers get into trouble as they walk across it. All of this is told at a break-neck speed where each event is followed closely by the next – Mark does not seem interested in recounting any superfluous or irrelevant information.

Instead, we are left with a barebones account of Jesus and his ministry, the immediacy of the call to discipleship and the inevitable consequence of this call. The kingdom grows first at the margins, outside the centres of power and authority in the cities and towns. However, ultimately and inevitably, the kingdom of God, embodied in Jesus, must find itself in direct conflict with the kingdoms of the world – and this is made terribly clear in the second half of the Gospel. Even after the resurrection Mark's narrative is excruciatingly brief – simply recounting

that the women find the tomb empty and, in fear, are sent on their way by a young man in a white robe. For followers of Jesus the message is clear: Jesus has been raised – now get moving.

When was Mark written and by whom?

The simple answer to the academic question of authorship and setting is that we are not exactly sure of who wrote the gospel, when it was written nor even where it was written. Scholars have narrowed the time of final production to about 70CE as the author seems to be conscious of the political strife growing in Judea in the late 60s which culminated in the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70CE. The (re)invasion of the Roman army at this time and the destruction of the temple may even have given inspiration to the Markan community (and then later the other gospel writers) to write down the oral stories of Jesus that had been passed around for decades. Whatever the case, whoever wrote the gospel knew very well the life of an occupied people and the gospel is clearly set against a background of political and religious tension.

Jesus
has been
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now get
moving.

Synoptic what?

Scholars are largely in agreement that Mark's gospel was the first written and significant parts of it were then used by Luke and Matthew. The similarities between the three texts are so strong that they are often called the synoptic gospels because they look the same (synoptic = seen together). In fact, a quick scan of the three gospels in parallel shows very few accounts which are fully unique to Mark. Matthew and Luke have taken almost all of Mark's work and then expanded on it. Occasionally Mark does retain a little more information about the disciples and the crowds in his story (which for some reason Matthew and Luke chose to leave out). And there are some snippets of the text, including Mark 4.26-29 and parts of chapters 7-9 in particular which remain unique to Mark. But there are few long passages Mark which have not been copied and modified by Matthew or Luke. To discern the particular insights of Mark therefore requires attention to the characteristic ways that Mark tells the story as much it does to reading the specific stories.

Secrets to be revealed

The first characteristic of Mark's gospel which sets it apart is something scholars call the "messianic secret". This secret refers to the times in Mark's gospel that Jesus seems to guard against others publicly acknowledging his Messianic nature (see, for example, Mark 1:43-44, 4:11, 8:30). It seems that there will be a time when

Another characteristic of Mark's gospel is the immediacy of the call to discipleship.

Jesus' nature will be revealed publicly – but his followers must wait until the appropriate moment arrives. While the “messianic secret” seems quite evident in the gospel, the reasons why it is there are not as clear. Perhaps if Jesus's nature is revealed too soon, his ministry might be jeopardised. Maybe if Jesus comes into conflict with local power too publicly, too soon, he might risk execution or assassination before completing his ministry in Jerusalem. A covert removal of Jesus would likely be more convenient for his enemies. On the other hand, the timely revealing of Jesus' purposes highlights the importance of the “Godly moments” in the gospel as his nature as God's “beloved Son”

become particularly clear. Like the Baptism (1:9-11), the Transfiguration (9:2-3) and the darkness and tearing of the temple curtain while Jesus is on the cross in Mk 15, God's explicit inbreaking must happen in God's good time. Though Mark's story moves along at an incredible speed, and even though future events are often foreshadowed, to jump forward too quickly in the narrative by revealing Jesus' “secret identity” too soon may simply short-circuit the story and undermine the ministry. While the gospel is a significantly rural narrative, and Jesus' ministry is tied to the things of the Earth, at appropriate moments the divine voice and spirit of God promise a future blessing in and through Jesus, the Christ. In time, the secret of Jesus will become revealed throughout heaven and earth.

Discipleship: an introduction

Another characteristic of Mark's gospel is the immediacy of the call to discipleship. As Mark has no birth narratives, by the end of chapter 1 Jesus has already begun his ministry and called his first disciples. There is no discussion or delay for most of them, and they leave their nets, tax collecting booths, and other labours immediately to follow him. You might notice the terms “and immediately” or “at once” repeated in the Gospel. These directly translate a Greek term, *kaì euthùs*, which is found throughout Mark. Its use implies that what God is doing through Jesus is happening quickly and, more importantly, that the disciples are also caught up in this immediate mission and purpose. For readers and followers today, so distant in time and space from the world of the gospel, we would do well to hear again the immediacy of the call. Deep theological, social and personal reflection is important in life and faith. But this reflection must flow out of our daily and immediate discipleship of Jesus. Mark's gospel reminds us of this immediacy – to follow before we are sure, to find our lives shaped by Jesus even if we don't know where that will take us, to respond in each moment as people called by God.

It's all connected

In order to read Mark's Gospel today, we need to be aware that for people of 1st century Eastern Mediterranean, politics, religion and social life were not understood separately but, rather, as intimately connected. This means, firstly, that all the theological language and imagery in Mark can be understood to have inevitable political consequences. For example, to call Jesus the Messiah is not simply a religious affirmation but implies that he will fulfil a clear political hope for the Jewish people. Mark's extensive use of the Old Testament makes it clear that Jesus' story is connected to the history and hope of the people – even though that hope is filled in a way that few expect. Or, if Jesus is truly the Son of God, this does not only mean that he should be recognised in some divine realm (perhaps after death) – but, rather, that he is the Son of God against other claimants for this title. In the first century the most notable competitor for the title of "Son of God" was the Roman emperor himself! And so, the seemingly theological claims in Mark typically have immediate and clear political consequences.

Interestingly and conversely, however, interactions and challenges in Mark which look purely political to us are also theological. For example, in Mark 1:1: the Greek word euangelion is used, typically a word reserved for Roman emperors and military leaders to announce the "good news" of a birth, ascension or victory. And in Mark euangelion is used to introduce Jesus and suggests that a moment of political significance is to occur. But, as we know, this political introduction is part of God's greater action in the world. Therefore, it is clear that good news of Jesus is not simply political but, also, evidently divine. In the first verse of the gospel, political and religious terms are interwoven to describe something which has the potential to supplant the power of Empire both against its political authority on earth, and its divine warrant through the gods of the Roman pantheon.

Smaller scale confrontations with religious and political power continue throughout the gospel. But it is notable that Jesus is marked for destruction by his enemies as early as Mark



3:6. After a heated, but seemingly relatively minor argument about healing a man on the sabbath in the synagogue, Jesus' fate is clearly foreshadowed. Two factions, the Pharisees and the Herodians, typically at odds with each other, are now united in a plot to kill Jesus. Jesus' ministry has challenged the ordering of life around Sabbath and synagogue, and the authority of the leaders seems to be at risk. Their response is immediate. Plotting begins, and in time comes to fruition in Jerusalem.

A Gospel for us?

Mark's gospel is a story for everyday folk about the way that Jesus breaks into our everyday lives. It is concerned with the meeting of heaven and earth in Jesus' ministry and includes all people in God's action in the world. While the powers concentrated in the temple in Jerusalem, and even tangentially, the powers, concentrated in the Empire in Rome must be confronted, it is the people from rural Galilee that are the first to join with Jesus in his ministry. For those of us who feel disconnected from important matters in the world, those who will never be famous celebrities or politicians, those of us who struggle to find purpose, and get lost in the detail of life – perhaps for us Mark's story of Jesus might be heard once more. God has saved and God will continue to save the world through Christ, and we are invited to be a part of this. What a blessing!

Further reading for preachers, teachers and disciples.

Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Mark, John R. Donahue, SJ, and Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, Liturgical Press, 2016

Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus, Ched Myers, Orbis, 2019

"Say to This Mountain": Mark's Story of Discipleship, Ched Myers, Marie Dennis, Joseph Nangle, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Stuart Taylor, Orbis, 2014

Mark's
gospel is a
story for
everyday
folk...



The Unexpected Out of Control Journey

Lorraine Hoffman | Lockhart Uniting Church

Unexpectedly in 2003 my second son Nigel aged twenty-six rang from Sydney to tell me that he had been diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumour. Immediately our family life changed as we began a journey no-one wanted to be on. Nigel was operated on a week later. We met with the professor before Nigel's operation, and he told us that regardless of the operation's results Nigel's lifespan may only be twelve months and there was a fifty per cent chance that he would not survive the operation. The surgery took over five hours, but the surgeon was unable to remove all the tumour. We were very fortunate that he was diagnosed early which gave him a greater chance of survival. Nigel then had chemotherapy for six intense weeks and the tumour went into remission for a couple of months but then grew back. Nigel actually got married during the remission and he lived for twenty months after his diagnosis. Nigel had more chemotherapy, and radiotherapy, but the tumour continued to grow. During this time, we got up very early and drove to Sydney and went with Nigel for every doctor's appointment. If the medical news was good, we would return home later that day, otherwise we would stay.

I had a friend who told me that if my faith was strong enough that I could ask God to heal Nigel and he would. However, I could not do that. I did not know what God's plan was, but I could pray and did every day asking for Nigel not to suffer pain and for God to look after him and us. My husband lost his faith through this journey, but my faith was strengthened. Nigel lived life to the full and was influential to a lot of young people and especially refugees that he had worked with in Woomera Detention Facility. Nigel was a disability worker, played drums in the band Waiting for Guinness and worked with refugees. In 2004 he published his Honours Thesis "*Labour Rights and Border Protection: Attempts at a Viable Life on the Temporary Protection Visa*" I moved to Sydney and helped Jarrah his wife to care for him during the last six weeks. He lived a short, amazing life. His enthusiasm and love for life and his positive attitude flowed out to others and he died peacefully at home in August 2005.



Grief

Nathan Tyson | Director, First Peoples Strategy and Engagement

Grief. I think only those who have known it can really appreciate the complexity and deep impacts of grief.

I think grief includes moments of a range of other emotions – anger, sadness, despair, frustration, hopelessness, and even sometimes glimpses of joy and happiness as we remember fondly who or what we have lost. Those moments are important, as they are the light in the darkness. Eventually, the light gets brighter, and the weight of grief lessens.

Grief is deeply personal. It is based on personal loss, and personal emotions. I have grieved for those I have lost – 2 brothers, a sister I never met, and my father – all who died before their time, so to speak. One death from disease, one death from suicide, one sibling still born, and my father's death at 58 the result of a boating accident. My grandparents have all passed from old age – I miss them, but I think I felt less grief for long lives well lived. Death is, after all, an inevitable part of life.

For me, time is really the only "cure" for grief. There is really no "cure" though. I think eventually grief just fades to a space in the back of our consciousness. I don't think the experience of profound grief ever really leaves, and overwhelming feelings can pop up unexpectedly when we are triggered by memories or sights/sounds that remind us of our loss. We learn to know the triggers, and we learn to hold the emotions when they surface, until they subside. Sometimes quickly. Sometimes hours. Sometimes days. In holding the grief I think we honour those we have lost, and we honour our love for them... it is difficult, but in time we find the light again. At least, that has been my experience.

Having experienced grief, I am able to empathise with others who are experiencing grief. I can't put myself exactly in their shoes - as I said, grief is deeply personal - however I can understand the overpowering sense of loss and sadness, of anger and despair, the feeling that a part of you is missing and that things will never ever be the same.

What I struggle to comprehend, is how the families of Aboriginal people killed in custody are able to find any light in circumstances of such injustice and inhumanity. The loss of a loved one is always difficult. The loss of a loved one in custody, due to the failure of authorities to follow established policies and procedures, must be extraordinarily difficult. Knowing that just one small decision to assist could have saved the life of your loved one, but instead, that desperate pleas and cries for help were ignored, is a grief that no parent or family member should ever have to endure.

The likelihood that this awful injustice has occurred primarily because the detainee is Aboriginal, leaves family members with another layer of legitimate anger and frustration, which can only compound the impact of grief. If my son or daughter died because a correctional officer thought watching a video was more important than seeking medical attention for a person begging for help, I would be devastated beyond words and angry beyond description.

For the families of over 550 Aboriginal people who have died in custody since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991, I can't imagine how they are living with their grief. My heart breaks for them. I feel their anguish and loss. I stand in solidarity with these families in their calls for justice, and for the accountability of those in positions of authority who failed in their duty of care. Without justice for these families, including those responsible being held accountable, it must be almost impossible to find any light in the darkness. Justice enables peace – it doesn't make up for the loss or the heartache, but it allows for a sense of closure and the ability of families to move forward and begin healing. No justice means no peace. No justice contributes to ongoing grief.

I pray that we will see positive steps by Governments to take effective action to ensure there are no further preventable deaths in custody. I pray for the families who have lost loved ones through a death in custody, that they may find enough light in the darkness to keep going, and that they may see justice done."

...time
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Lent 2024: Despair

Anonymous

"Please don't leave me alone with the children today. I don't know how I'm going to get through the day."

I was a young mother of two little girls. The baby was nearly 12 months old and hadn't slept through the night since her birth. She was refusing solid food and had taken to waking hourly during the night, crying hungrily for breastmilk. I was trying to wean her on to a cup with no success, and I was utterly exhausted.

Looking back I can now see that I also had Post Natal Depression, but at that point the depression was undiagnosed. I was truly worried that if I was left alone with the children that day, I would do harm either to myself or to one of my little girls.

We were living in an isolated town a long way from our families, and I had no one to turn to. I sat limply at the kitchen table and with my head in my hands and pleaded with my husband, "Please don't leave me alone with the children today. I don't know how I'm going to get through the day."

Despite my desperation, my husband continued to get ready for work. With his hand on the door handle as he prepared to leave, he turned back to me with a sneer on his face and said, "I thought you were better than this."

With that he opened the door and left me alone. I couldn't even cry, I was too numb and empty to be able to produce any tears.

Still, many years later, when I hear the word "despair", it conjures up the memory of that moment, the sound of the door clicking shut as my husband left. It was possibly the lowest point of my life.

Thankfully I had the good sense to walk straight to the phone and ring the Maternal and Child Health department in my town and choke out the words, "I need help." Someone was with me within half an hour.

Miraculously, what seemed like the point of total breakdown was actually a point of breakthrough. Though it seemed to me that my life was coming apart, that I was utterly broken and almost deranged, I was at a turning point. Because as I sought practical help, I also sought God.

I had always been very motivated to be the best mum I could possibly be. Up to that day I had been using all my strength and self-discipline to stay in control of the demands of motherhood. But that day I learnt about letting go of control and relinquishing my life to God. Instead of trying harder and harder and being wound as tight as a finely tuned piano wire, I became aware that the circumstances were beyond my own control. I handed my life and my role as a mother over to God, and I experienced for the first time the peace of relinquishment.

Our dead ends are turned into doorways to new life.

I didn't know then that relinquishing control is an essential part of the journey with God. However, over the months and years ahead, I learnt first hand that as we trust God with what looks like our own derangement, God leads us into a new arrangement of our lives.

Through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, God enters into our human brokenness and meets us in a way that transforms our life. Our human woundedness, our inadequacies, even death itself is taken into God through Christ.

Our dead ends are turned into doorways to new life. Our despair at our own limitations is transformed into trust in God's unending love. Our own confusion and dereliction drops away as we live into the liberation that Christ offers.



That is why at Easter our joyful celebration of the Risen Christ never loses sight of the Crucified Christ. For in the cross we see how the grace of God enters into our human despair and transforms it into renewal and hope.

**"Surely the lord is in this place,
and I was not aware of it"**

GENESIS 29:10-19

Rev. Dr Ross Kingham | Retired Minister, Canberra Region

'What we call our despair is often only the painful desire for hope.'

George Eliot, Middlemarch

'You can cut all the flowers, but you cannot prevent spring coming.'

Pablo Neruda

The story of Jacob. Jacob was the rascal, the schemer, the person who thought he could live on his own, by his wits and by his own efforts. He went out trying to deceive everybody and ended up being deceived. Crushed hopes can leave us in despair.

Our reading from Genesis today follows the story of Jacob deceiving his father, Isaac, in order to cheat his older brother, Esau, of inheriting the blessing of their father. This act led to a deep rift in the family....an early example of family brokenness.

Bethel – well known holy place of central Palestine, city of ancient times about 16kms north of Jerusalem. Its ruins now lie by the road from Jerusalem to Nablus. It was here that Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, had pitched his tent on his journey by faith from modern Iraq not the land he did not know....

Jacob's Dream at Bethel

¹⁰Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. ¹¹When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹²He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to

the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

¹⁶When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." ¹⁷He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God! This is the gate of heaven."

¹⁸Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel... ('House of God')

FEAR may be associated with despair - Jacob was frightened out of his wits. His mother, Rebecca, advised him that, because of a dramatic breakdown in family relationships, leaving Jacob facing the possibility of being murdered by his brother, Jacob should flee. He was to go to where his uncle, Laban, lived, in a place called Harran (in modern Turkey). The story tells us that on one particular night, he lay down in weariness and slept. He was not aware of a future of peace and fulfilment.

Fear can be caused by many things.

Many today are fearful because of appalling living conditions (witness the thousands of refugees across the globe).

Some are fearful because of threats to the welfare of themselves or their family or loved ones.

In recent months, untold agony in Palestine has made many of us dread images and stories in our daily news.

Some fear a terrifying God of wrath.

Some women (and some men) live in daily fear of abusive partners.

Some fear is momentary; some lasts for decades.

Some fear that dark secrets from their past will surface in some way and become known.

Some fear for tomorrow.

Some fear their inadequacies. The vulnerable places deep within.

In such a hard place, God may appear to be hidden. Despair sets in when we cry out for God and the heavens are as of brass.

Jacob was to discover at Bethel that the faith of our forebears leaves its imprint... and time does not erase it. Even in the depths of despair, the imprint remains. This imprint is found in the lived experience of Christian community. Even when we are not aware of the presence of grace.

In the place of darkness, where we can see no light, it is possible to discover the presence of God in the dark. Spirit-presence and despair are familiar friends. The sermon by Michael Earl in this issue reminds us of this miracle in the story of the comedian who knows that what he is desperately searching for is in the dark corner of the stage.



GRACE

In his dreaming, Jacob sensed that God was beside him, as he saw a vision of angels ascending and descending on a ladder, and he was consoled by the divine voice giving him assurance that the future would be blessed by the protective, guiding presence of God.

"Truly the Lord is in this place. And I did not know it..... It is the house of God; it is the gateway to heaven!"

In the morning, he poured oil on the stone, and set it as a sacred pillar, calling that place 'Bethel'.

The presence of the Spirit of God is real and active in our life, even when we are not aware of it:

'Known and unknown, the gods are present'.

The Unknown God or *Agnostos Theos* - Acts 17:23 - Paul's Areopagus speech, in Athens, he says that in addition to the twelve main gods and the innumerable lesser deities, ancient Greeks worshipped a deity they called "Agnostos Theos"; that is: "*Unknown God*".

We have shed tears and sobbed in the night when the journey has turned cruel beyond reason.

Psalm 139

'You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

"The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."

Frederick Buechner

"Nothing can separate us from the love of God"!

Lord, be kind to us today. Heal and strengthen our vulnerable, inner self. Baptise us with your grace!

BATTERED AND BRUISED

Battered and bruised
He winced
At the impact:
The Baptist had been beheaded
In a distant cold fortress
To entertain
The mother of a striptease star.

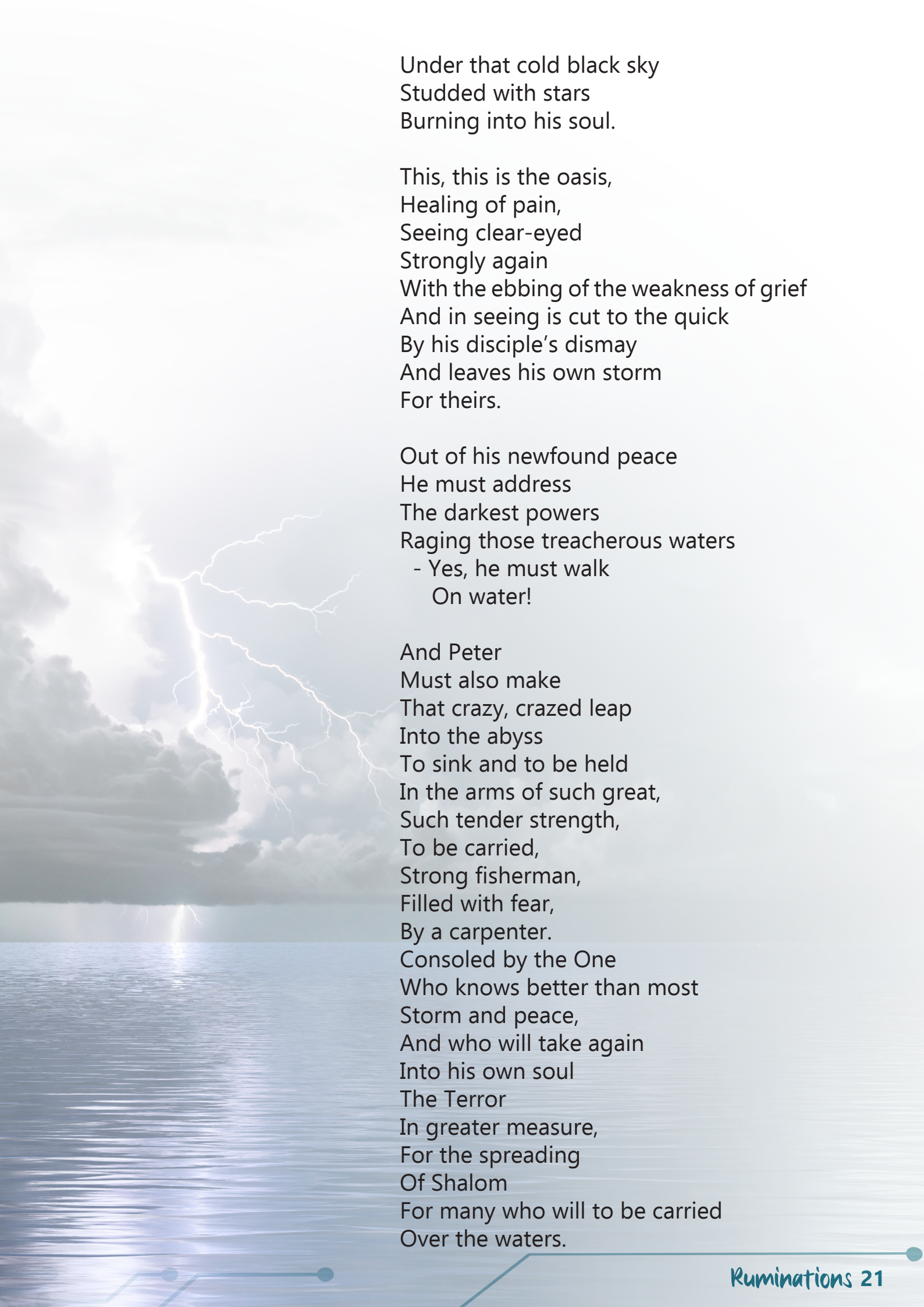
Destroyed was he
Who had prepared for him
With such courage
In the wildest places
The Way.

Hungry for solitude,
He left followers and crowds
All replete
At day's end,
And retreated
In that hard and lonely place
To the famine of his own desert storm.

This, this is the Way
John had paved
In his bold, brash manner,

This, this is the storm;
The wrestling in a deserted place
Echoing with the cries of beasts
Hungry to devour the humble,
Vulnerable, spirit,
Of that earlier wrestle,
Fresh from baptism by this same John.

This, this is the place
Of tears
Of the flinging of questions
And the framing of options
And of arguing with Self
And Satan
And God,



Under that cold black sky
Studded with stars
Burning into his soul.

This, this is the oasis,
Healing of pain,
Seeing clear-eyed
Strongly again
With the ebbing of the weakness of grief
And in seeing is cut to the quick
By his disciple's dismay
And leaves his own storm
For theirs.

Out of his newfound peace
He must address
The darkest powers
Raging those treacherous waters
- Yes, he must walk
On water!

And Peter
Must also make
That crazy, crazed leap
Into the abyss
To sink and to be held
In the arms of such great,
Such tender strength,
To be carried,
Strong fisherman,
Filled with fear,
By a carpenter.
Consoled by the One
Who knows better than most
Storm and peace,
And who will take again
Into his own soul
The Terror
In greater measure,
For the spreading
Of Shalom
For many who will to be carried
Over the waters.



Despair through to hope, with faith in God

Rev. Natasha He | Saltbush Scattered Community Minister

My first memory of despair was when I was 14 years old. It happened after I had significant surgery, and the doctors delivered the heart-breaking news to both my parents and me that the chances of me being able to conceive were extremely slim to none. While this kind of news may not have had a profound impact on other teenagers, it felt as though all hope had been mercilessly stripped away. As I matured, a profound sense of loss began to permeate in me. It was as though something fundamental to my nature as a woman had been taken away. This feeling only grew more intense with time.

In a heartfelt conversation with my now-husband Masiu He, I shared that I had been diagnosed with a medical condition at the age of 14 that would prevent me from bearing children. I expressed my worries about how this might affect Masiu's commitment to our relationship and marriage in the future. To my surprise, Masiu responded with unwavering faith. He reminded me that doctors are not above God and that if it were meant to be, God would make a way for us to have faith in Him.

After years of marriage, we received startling news from the doctors that we were going to have a baby. For a moment, I was at a loss for words, trying to grasp the reality of what I had just heard. However, despite the shock, I couldn't help but burst into laughter, completely overwhelmed with a range of emotions, but primarily disbelief.

As I reflect and contemplate that particular moment, my thoughts are drawn towards an intriguing story from the Old Testament - the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17. When they were told that they would conceive a son, they laughed with uncertainty, their minds filled with doubts and questions. This story has always resonated with me, as it highlights the nature of faith in all its complexities and the human tendency to question even the most miraculous of promises. But more importantly, it is a story of despair where hope and unwavering faith in God's ability to revive even the most barren and desolate situations. This chapter of a captivating story illustrates how God enters into the darkest corners of life to offer hope and the promise of an abundant kingdom. Abraham and Sarah are a profound demonstration of God's merciful deeds

towards the Jewish people, etched forever in their memory as a testament to his unwavering love and concern for them.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is a beautiful testament to the power of faith. They never wavered in their faith that God would bless them with a child and make them the ancestors of a great nation. Their faith was not blind but rooted in their relationship with God. They turned to Him for guidance whenever they faced obstacles, and He never failed them. This powerful story serves as a reminder for me that all things that are humanly impossible are divinely possible with God.

There were moments when I felt lost and hopeless, unsure of where to turn or how to move forward. It can be easy to lose sight of the bigger picture and forget that the journey is entirely of valuable lessons and experiences. Even when hope feels far away, I had to keep faith and trust in God to guide me. I could only build the strength and resilience to overcome despair by embracing the journey.

I am not the perfect Christian or more faithful than my neighbour, but I believe in a divine God who fulfils his promises. My three wonderful children, Tupou-Grace, Timotheos, and Ma'ata, are a constant source of joy and inspiration, reminding me of God's transformative spirit.





Lament: voicing despair creatively

Rev. Yvonne Ghavalas | Saltbush Scattered Community Minister

In Uniting in Worship 2, an alternative form of gathering as God's people is offered to make space for lament when there has been a traumatic event in the congregation, community, or country, or in the penitential season of Lent.

Often, when we think of "Lament," we turn to the Psalms for inspiration for the language of searching, aching hearts desperate to hold on to the sense of God's presence amid their troubles.

Recently, however, I've been spending some time with the book of Lamentations, which consists of five poems that express the unimaginable grief and despair felt by the Israelites over the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 BCE. Walter Brueggemann notes that "the poetry proceeds to bring to speech the deep emotive reality of loss, suffering, and abandonment."

As we consider the ongoing wars in the world, the struggle between capitalism and creation at a significant cost to life for all creatures, surging suspicion of and hatred towards "the other," a Western Church that is demonstrably growing older and struggling to imagine what happens next, and, closer to home, broken relationships and battles with finances or health, it is hard to find creative and constructive ways to sit with the emotions and questions that rise within us. Yet the poems in Lamentations tell the brutal truth in the shaky hope that God hears us. They name the specific ways in which sin, wickedness, and injustice are making human lives miserable. They gather their bitter pain, resisting the way things are and demanding that God pay attention as they beg for a new day and a bright future. They let their tears fall and "wash out space once occupied by despair, fury or sorrow ... so that hope can emerge uninvited" (O'Connor, 2002).

"the poetry proceeds to bring to speech the deep emotive reality of loss, suffering, and abandonment."

What is so interesting about these Lamentations is that each poem is acrostic, i.e., each line starts with the following letter of the Hebrew Alphabet. So they are not just a resentful rant but a carefully constructed, disciplined form of expressing our loss and grief in totality - from A to Z (or alef to tav if we are being technical).

When journeying through despair, you can use this form to give voice to your lament creatively and create a clear space for hope to emerge. Our English alphabet has some pretty yucky letters you can omit if they are more of an obstacle than an opportunity.

Here is mine in response to seeing my tiredness reflected in the weariness of many who minister in our scattered communities:

Abbas, my Father on whom I depend for unconditional love and abundant life,
Be near me in my worry, my frustration, my exhaustion.
Can't you see how your Church is struggling?
Don't you care what it costs to keep on going?
Even those we look to to hold us together are tired and falling apart -
For the world has changed, moved on, and so few are left in places once full.
God, our God, we are your beloved people:
Honour your promises to us!
I long to walk by the still waters,
Journeying with a sense of passion and purpose,
Knowing that you are with me every step of the way.
Listless in this February heat,
My energy is low, and my vision of the future is blurry.
No easy answers come to "What must we do? How do we turn things around?"
Only hard questions about what it means to be the salt and light of the earth today.
People feel hopeless and disheartened.
Quiet my mind for a moment;
Remind me that before I am a leader, I am a follower;
Save me from my attempts to be a saviour;
Touch my weary bones and my wandering heart;
Understand even the cries for which I have no words.
Welcome me into your waiting arms like a mother enfolding a weary child.
Yours always, Yvonne.

Here is a space to play with your own lament. You are invited to send in your laments to us, either with your name or anonymous, with some to be printed in our next Ruminations, Winter.

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Here is an alternative, less structured lament by Lorraine Hoffman on the same subject.

Riverina Rural Lament:

Listen to my words, O God and hear my sighs
I am worn out, O Lord, have pity on me,
Give me strength; I am completely exhausted
How long will you wait to help us?
Our numbers continue to dwindle and our
congregation is getting older,
Our loved ones have moved away, and our
 young ones are indifferent
Where do we go from here Lord?
I am gripped by fear and trembling
What is in our future?
How can we find a clear path to follow?
Who is there to lead?

Give praise to the Lord
For He hears our cry for help
The Lord protects his people
The Lord will save his people and bless them.



News from Saltbush

Rev. Tim Jensen | Saltbush Scattered Community Minister

In many ways our church year is a pilgrimage through the different seasons of devotion. Lent is that time where we are invited to go deeper into contemplating our fragility, what it means to suffer and how we journey with despair. To sit with our pain and be compassionate with ourselves. To be aware of the Spirit speaking into our lives. Then may we know our lives moving through despair to the life giving grace of God.

'One who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.' *Aeschylus*



A lot has happened since our last publication of Ruminations. We are very much a different (and good) looking team with Rev. Yvonne Ghavalas joining us in December and then Rev. Natasha He in January. Both Yvonne and Natasha bring a wealth of creative

energy, thoughtful insights, vision and pastoral passion.

At our Lismore gathering in December, we were joined by Synod General Secretary Rev. Jane Fry who preached on the changes we are facing as a church and we celebrated Yvonne's induction into Saltbush ministries. Yvonne joined us from the Riverina following, prior to that in ministry in South Africa.

At our past three gatherings we have been exploring chapters from our latest publication 'The Great Unravelling'. While we explore some weighty subjects regarding the future of the church the conversations have been incredibly engaging. We trust that as we discern the movement of God we continue to be open and receptive to each other's insights. Free to explore together where we feel the Spirit is leading.

Early in February we gathered in Dubbo to spend some time exploring the year ahead. But more importantly we supported Natasha's induction into the role of Saltbush Scattered Minister. Along with her family, members of Synod, Presbytery and the Dubbo congregation, many travelled from Sydney and Cecil Gribble Tongan UCA (Natasha's home church) to celebrate her journey in ministry. Moderator Rev. Mata preached about what it is to serve and being vulnerable to be served.

Our most recent Gathering was in Ganmain (Riverina Presbytery), where we enjoyed exploring 'The Great Unravelling' and in the afternoon attend to some important decisions relating to



presbytery life. A lot of time was allocated for morning tea and lunch. As with much of church life, some of the most enriching and encouraging activities are those where conversations are given the space to flow freely and relationships are strengthened. We are always so grateful for those who cater and provide hospitality for these times.

Over the past few months Saltbush teams have led Saltbush services in many part of the Synod from Junee to Guyra, Kyogle to Lockhart and Christian communities in between. We always enjoy the opportunity to connect with congregations whether we participate in worship or are just having a cuppa.

Our latest Cafés theme coincides with the season of Lent and four studies exploring Old Testament readings centring around Noah, Abram/Abraham, Moses and Jeremiah. In December our Advent café was how we are to be prepared for Christ to do a new thing in our lives. A special challenge over the four café's was to bake a cake. So many great stories of the traditions surrounding baking cakes at Christmas. Some really tasting looking cakes as well!!

As we continue journeying into 2024 we look forward to being with you in our cafés, gatherings, retreats, meetings and conversations as well as sharing with you through Word around the Bush, Ruminations, Saltbush publications of Talking About Salt, The Great Unravelling and Growing Intentional Christian Communities of Practice. May this time of Lent and Easter bring you closer to the Living God as you encounter Christ in your days.

Tim

Saltbush Relational Resources

Saltbush Cafés

In regular series of three or four nights the Saltbush team hold online cafés centred around diverse themes or readings. Saltbush cafés are easy to attend, relaxed and an encouraging way to meet other and explore life and faith together.

Scattered Community Gatherings

Three to four times a year in different rural or coastal location the Saltbush team hold Scattered Community Gatherings. You can also attend these online from wherever you are to wherever we are. These gatherings are centred around worship, encouragement, education and the practice of discipleship.

Word around the Bush

Each week of the year the Saltbush team present a visual message based on the lectionary reading for that week. You are free to watch and use in your own congregation this message. You can also print off the Saltbush liturgy that is provided each week to accompany the visual message.

Talking about Salt

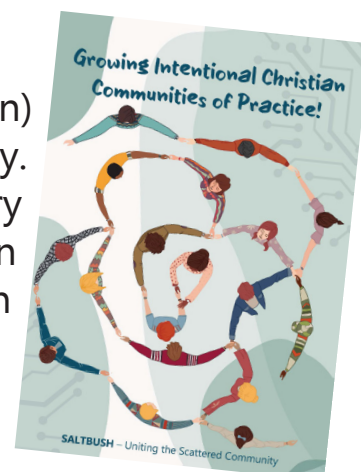
This is our publication available for any congregation or group who are willing to have some discussion around who you are, how you gather and how you live out your faith. Talking about Salt is five difficult conversations for congregations and can also be used to shape a life and witness discussion and consultation. Talking about Salt is available free to any congregation and is available both online and in post.



Intentional Christian Communities

This is our publication available for any congregation or group who are willing to think about the challenge of being intentional in how we gather as the Christian community.

Dive into any part of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John) and you will find Jesus intentionally going about his ministry. At times it looks like chaos and no doubt it was, but at every step Jesus acts with intention. Growing Intentional Christian Communities of Practice is available free to any congregation and is available both online and in post.



The Great Unravelling

The Saltbush team have prepared six conversations as part of our reading of the book:

Joining God in the Great Unravelling by Alan J. Roxburgh.

However, these conversations are not a study guide to the book, but an invitation to open ourselves to deeply consider who and how we, the church, our christian communities, are participating in the ways of God beyond ourselves.



Digital packages for congregations

If your congregation would like a Saltbush digital package so that you can use and connect with us and the wider church please simply get in touch. A digital package includes: smart tv, mobile stand for the tv, all connectors and cables, TV, camera and our support to set it all up.

Visits

The Saltbush team are always willing to visit your congregation or group to meet you, talk with you about how it is for you as a congregation or Christian community and how you seek to be part of the missional relationship with others. Simply get in touch and one of the Saltbush team will come to visit you.

Look on our website under **Word, Ruminations, Talking about Salt** or **Contact Us**.

Thanks for your donations to Saltbush!

Please consider financially supporting Saltbush; either as individuals or as a congregation.

Your donation will be directly used for the work of supporting Saltbush and the ways we are working to encourage congregations and people in scattered communities of faith.

You can donate generally towards Saltbush and this will include the cost of enabling the printing of Ruminations.

To donate please make a direct transfer:

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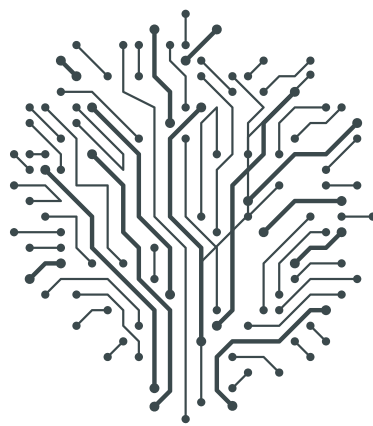
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UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY