

Reflection for April 26 2020: Hope in the Midst

1Peter 1:3-9

As I was preparing for this service, the day looked “perfect”. The sun was dazzlingly bright, the shadows sharply defined and the air clear. I watched a rosella parrot bathing in our birdbath in the garden. The spray of the water glistened with light.

We live on top of a hill here in Blacktown next door to the hospital. As I watched the rosella, the sound of a siren as an ambulance racing to the hospital reminded me that in the midst of this beautiful day someone was caught in a frightening emergency of life and death.

It has been said, we hold hope and despair in our two hands.

It certainly catches the way Easter has felt this year: Celebrations of hope and new life have tangled with feelings of anxiety and uncertainty and images of death across the world – we gathered Easter eggs yet wondered whether the hands who have also touched the eggs, was virus-free. Nature is awesome.



Phosphorescence is living light that glows from within creatures like glow-worms and fire flies and a whole array of amazing sea creatures. Over the past couple of weeks I have been reading the journalist Julia Baird’s new book called *Phosphorescence*.*

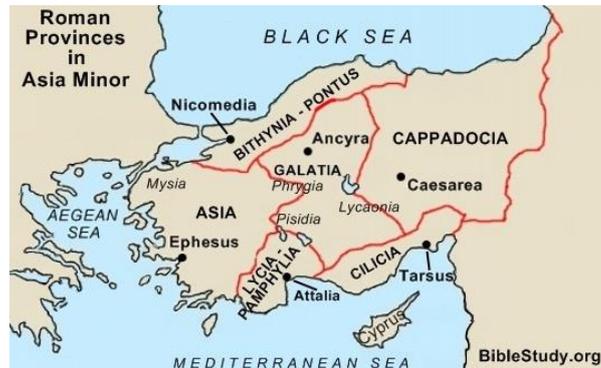
Julia Baird’s world imploded a few years back with heartbreak and cancer. She asks: How do you tend your “light within” when you suffer loss and illness? What sustains you when the world goes dark?

The Letter of Peter was written to people who were anxious and vulnerable - people who were living in situations which felt unsafe.

Their future was uncertain. Peter addressed them as exiles. But who were they?

Among those who heard Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost that Wendy spoke about last Sunday were Jews from Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia Minor in modern day Turkey. This letter was written for small communities of Jews who had become Christians and joined Gentile Christians to form churches in north eastern Asia Minor. They were living in scattered communities as alien exiles.

(2)



They paid their taxes and contributed to the local economy but they were not citizens. They couldn't inherit property and they were denied the legal protections that citizens have.

In fact they were like many migrants with working visas, undocumented workers and people seeking asylum are right now in Australia who have lost their jobs in this coronavirus pandemic but do not qualify for government help – Some have been told they should go home.

And more than that, these early Christians stood out because of their ethnic background and different religion. When times were bad in their adopted land, they were vulnerable to abuse as scapegoats – they were “not from here”. That's familiar right now too for some of our Asian friends.

How do you keep going in times of danger and anxiety and when your faith is shaken?

The people to whom Peter wrote were clearly needing reassurance in this alien land to hold onto their new faith.

And! ... what inspiring words to receive in that situation:

In God's great mercy God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

Peter's letter is about a hope we receive because of what God has done for us. We have not seen Jesus in the flesh but through his resurrection from the dead that first Easter, we are given an identity and a future as children of God.

He says to those early Christians who were not citizens in the land in which they lived, and to us that through faith we belong to God and whatever may be said of us and whatever may happen to us, that cannot be taken from us. The letter goes on:

This inheritance is kept in heaven for you until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

(3)

Peter's letter is reassuring: Our future with God is secure - God is protecting it - it waits for us even as we suffer illness and sadness and loss and anxiety - even though our trust in God may be tested.

⁶ In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷

And then more encouragement: through these trials our faith will be refined to shine from the inside out - phosphorescent - just as fire brings out the beauty of precious gold.

This faith we have that feels fragile some days is pure gold in the midst of our lives. With our questions and daily struggles, we are part of a bigger story. In the words of the Message *Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven – and the future starts now!*

The resurrection of Jesus assures us that death and futility and despair is not the end – we have life in this glorious future with God even now.



As I reflected upon this passage, the words that stood out most for me today were “new birth” and “living hope”.

Here is hope that lives in us through a *new birth*. Birth talks about new beginnings - of labour pains as a mother gives birth to a child – The Greek word translated as new birth also means being “regenerated” or being renewed.**

A “living hope” talks about hope that grows and is worked out in the midst of the good things and the bad things that happen to us. These are ongoing processes.

When we record this video worship for each Sunday we have all been nervous. Speaking for myself when I stand in front of the camera I've launched into the opening welcome or my reflection - and my mouth has not got the words out right – I've become tongued-tied and lost my place. I think almost all of us have stopped – put up our hands and said, “Let's start again!”

And then deep breaths and a prayer and sometimes a few more false starts we have got it right.

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And this reminds me that along our journeys in the midst of the messiness of life, especially in stressful times, we may need to say “Let’s start again.” And our hope grows and is strengthened and renewed even in the most anxious and challenging times.



Jim Stockdale was a commander of a Fighter Squadron - an American pilot in the Vietnam War which also involved many Australians veterans we remembered yesterday on Anzac Day. In a bombing mission into North Vietnam he was shot down.

Stockdale ejected. Parachuting above the treetops he had time to watch his plane crash and burn in a rice paddy and to see what he described as a ‘thundering herd of men’ running towards him.

He was lynched and beaten until a policeman intervened. For the next 8 years he was a prisoner of war in what became known as the infamous Hanoi Hilton. He suffered terrible tortures designed to break his spirit.

Many of his fellow prisoners did not survive: Stockdale said later that it was the unrealistic optimists who thought they would be freed and the war would be over soon who died: Their hearts were broken. Stockdale had intentionally prepared for this time from before the war and it was all about hope in dark times. For Stockdale what was important for survival was to be able to distinguish between what he had control over and what he had no control over. He could control what he believes, his goals, his griefs, his joys, his judgments, his attitudes towards what was going on, “his own good and evil”. Everything else was external - he could not control how long he would be in that hell-hole of a prison and those who broke his body and held his life in their hands.

Stockdale said, “I never lost faith in the end of the story, I never doubted not only that I would get out...”^{***} But he did not kid himself either. It’s now known as the Stockdale Paradox: Stockdale could not afford to lose his faith that he would prevail in the end: he needed that long-range story of hope but he also needed the discipline to focus and deal with every excruciating moment using what he could control to endure that which was beyond his control. **And so do we.**

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Friends we are offered a living hope – a hope that is held in a story much bigger than ourselves but a hope that needs to be deliberately tended and refined and renewed constantly in our every day lives.

Knowing that faith, hope and love endure and that death is conquered releases us to get on with our daily lives in dangerous places and in anxious uncertain times of illness and sadness and unemployment – whatever it is that life throws at us.

It frees us to care for each other especially those who left vulnerable in our community and to advocate for justice and peace whatever the personal cost. And yes! there will be moments when we will say “Let’s start again”.



There’s an old Gospel song which goes

*I don’t know about tomorrow, I just live for day to day;
I don’t borrow from the sunshine, for its skies may turn to gray.*

*I don’t worry about the future, for I know what Jesus said;
And today I’ll walk beside him, for he knows what lies ahead.*

*Many things about tomorrow, I don’t seem to understand;
But I know who holds tomorrow and I know who holds my hand. ****

Anxiety and hope – uncertainty and faith! We hold them in our two hands.

The crucified Jesus risen from the dead has given us a future, and when we choose to walk day by day with him our light within is tended and whatever happens we will know glorious joy. Amen.

* Julia Baird, *Phosphorescence: On awe, wonder and things that sustain you when the world goes dark*, Fourth Estate, 2020.

* Jennifer Kaalund, *Commentary on 1 Peter 1:3-9*

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4438

** in Julia Baird, *Phosphorescence* p. 240-1

*** Ira F. Stanphill I Know Who Holds Tomorrow lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc, Capitol Christian Music Group

