

Sermon Archive 170

Sunday 15 October 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 139: 7-12
1 John 1: 1-7

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Just before I begin the sermon, which today is more of a meditation than a sermon, I look at the photograph of Wendy's quilt. The quilt, of course, is hanging in our church. Many people over the last week have looked at it - and liked it. One man was confused by his liking it. He said "I shouldn't like it: it's abstract and I hate abstract." But, despite his long-adopted difficulty with abstract, the quilt was speaking to him - and he liked it. And I like that. It's always good when we find our attitudes and beliefs being moved about a bit. Despite ourselves, we find ourselves changing, or being changed. We move from this position to that. Things take on a different light.

A different light. In Wendy's quilt there's something that looks like light - something like a star - with rays shooting out from its centre. And have you noticed that one of those rays stretches right out, past the cross, all the way through to the darker bottom part of the quilt? Light being found even in the dark.

-ooOoo-

In the wee commentary on the making of her quilt, Wendy talks about not quite knowing where to start, how to start. She talks about having to push through her initial insecurity of feeling unsure about the process, coming out into her tentative first creative steps. She describes the pushing through as a crossing of several thresholds: moving through confusion, fear, courage, sense of trust in creativity. Moving through.

Her first steps ended up being the laying out before her view of the material she had - seeing how each piece sat around all the others. She describes the experience as "placing a puzzle together" - a process of moving things around.

Through the gradual process of moving things about, of beholding, feeling,

changing ideas, more moving about, she witnessed the lighter colours moving to the top of the quilt (light, day), the darker colours moving to the bottom (darkness, night) - and in between a kind of horizon forming - not a sharply demarcated line, but a kind of graduated zone with indistinct edges. Something like a dusk - neither day nor night, but a kind of transition - that vague place or time, a vague threshold in between. She writes "then through quilting and decorating to try and express the threshold crossing". Wendy's quilt quietly says something beautifully indistinct about thresholds, about moving from one state to another, about moving things about as we go through them, about fading and becoming. Yes, there may be clear areas of day, clear areas of night - but it's the zone in between that catches her eye and imagination. She creates a work about the challenges of negotiating the threshold.

-ooOoo-

Childhood was a happy time for me. My memories of it are all good. I suppose much of it must have been quite ordinary, but the memories that have stuck are ones of summer and light. Summer holidays on the Hibiscus Coast, climbing the silver dollar tree in the garden, the smell of new exercise books and pencil cases at the exciting start of the school year, the glow of really old lights on the Christmas tree, the excitement of finding that giant chocolate egg on Easter morning, the half-asleep sensation of being picked up by my parents from my baby-sitting grandmother's house, wrapped in a blanket and taken back home. Even the night time memories have a light to them. Light, day, warm. I give thanks to God for the light of my early life. I give thanks to God for the day.

There is also the night. One day the night will come, and I will sleep. And I think that that will be OK. My life will have had its chapters, its emerging and retreating themes. Those who look back on it hopefully will express some gratitude, and maybe even shed some tears for what was either a shorter or longer life, fuller or emptier of days. I do not know when, but night will come. Threshold, moving through, crossing, living now in a zone the edges of which I cannot certainly find. Light and dark. Day and night. Fading, becoming, not sure where we are between the past and the future - somewhere between the day and the night. Moving through, living on the threshold.

For me, right now, somewhere on the threshold, what do I receive as light? Is it the plants I grow in my garden? Is it the prayers I write for a Sunday

morning? Is the food I put on my table, duck and orange and really expensive watercress? Is it the giraffe eating the leaves I hold out to her? Is it the little pot of Chinese tea? Is the plan for Christmas dinner with friends? Is it the birthday greetings I received from many? Is it the thunder in the morning? Is it the growing capacity I have to feel comfortable in my skin? Is it the fading of the impatience I used to bring, my greater comfort with silence in my home? Is it a sense of grace I feel surrounds me - a deeper and more peaceful conviction than before that I'm living in holy presence - a mellowing of faith? I give thanks to God for the light in my life.

There is also the darkness. The anger of an American president. A humanitarian crisis of ridiculous proportions in South Sudan. Mental health statistics in Canterbury. Homeless people on our streets. The death of our young ones by suicide.

In the words of a poet:

“Do not go gentle into **that** good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

That rage is obvious. That is right.

Yet, between the obvious darkness and the obvious light, there is that zone (we're living in), where it's neither day nor night. A place where the quilter needs to place the puzzle together, to move things about, to look at indistinct things, to behold, to feel, to change ideas, to do some more moving about.

In this twilight, either a moving into darkness, or a moving into light (we're just not yet quite sure which direction), there are pieces we can't yet properly place. The “bad means” to the “good end”. The tough love we don't know yet whether is leading to hurting or healing. The lie told in kindness. The stealing of bread for the feeding of the children. Is this day or night? Is this light or darkness? How do we live in, negotiate our way through, this indistinct in-between? Do we stare down the darkness, or turn our backs to it? How do we position ourselves, orient ourselves, which direction do we even face, crossing the threshold?

A psalmist sings. The song is of the presence of God.

If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become

night', even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Faith sings of a God who is present whether it be light or dark. Faith sings of a God who is as present in the depths of Sheol as in the heights of heaven. Faith sings of a God who, even at the furthest limits of the sea, shall hold us fast. In the zone between our past and the future, in the zone where we don't know whether the light is growing or fading, in the zone where some pieces still need to be moved about (because we just know they're not yet properly placed), we ask "which direction do even face?"

Perhaps we face the God in whose presence the night is as bright as the day, the God who is present in the darkness as also in the light. In the presence of that God we put the puzzle together. We move things about, we behold, we feel, we change ideas, we move things about some more, until a better pattern is formed. The one who sews the quilt, who works the work, who is turning the chaos into order, smiles. "I am very grateful", she says, "to have gone through this process. Day and night, life and death, rhythms of fading and becoming." A good work is wrought.

-ooOoo-

We started this meditation with Wendy's quilt, and we can end there also. Shining in the brightest part of the quilt, like a star, is a wonderful light. In the light of which it speaks, I remember the light of my childhood. I identify the things in my current experience of life that come to mind when I think of "light". I acknowledge the darkness also, and acknowledge that one day, I will sleep. I think about the darkness of our world, and I wonder how to negotiate my standing in relation to it. Then a psalmist sings of One to whom neither light nor darkness is a barrier to healing presence. And I notice, in the quilt, that one ray of light stretches, right past the cross, even as far as the other side of the darkness. The light penetrates. Even there, at the furthest limits of the night, the light shines. Back to the very beginning – what we have seen: in Christ, a light has shone.

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