

## Sermon Archive 524

Sunday 23 February, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Caring for the planet - a living thing

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



**A Lesson:** Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

**A Reflection:** The appreciated, successful living thing

Overwhelmed by the "ordinary" of my coming and going, and sitting down and rising up, maybe I lose the capacity to behold those thoughts that are beyond me - if I ever had the capacity in the first place - counting the thoughts of God, like they're grains of sand on the sweep of the beach. But in rarest moments of reflection, the insight comes: that I am a living thing, fearfully and wonderfully made. It's like, as I came to be, it was a matter of intricate weaving, a careful, mysterious, holy process. I live . . .

Because I live, I grow. You see me today, and I'll be different from yesterday. See me tomorrow - who can tell! We grow, we change. We move, we breathe. We tire - goodness me, if we're not careful we tire. That's the thing with us living things - we have limits, and sometimes we need to rest - in the intricately woven depths of the earth, in the unformed substance, in the promises of God. You ought never to expect a living thing to be in two places at once. You ought never to expect a living thing always to be able to sing. Don't expect a living thing to be faster than that speeding bullet.

Our scientists express no surprise, of course. They know it's all about energy in / energy out - management of energy, carefulness over energy. A machine can grind along almost endlessly, and when it can't anymore, the factory can make a mass-produced missing part. Not so with the living thing - apart from hips, knees, teeth and heart valves, I suppose. But when the living thing misses what it needs, it's not just work failing to be done - it's also the experience of pain, of distress, of weariness - that's part of being a living thing. Intricate, yes; wonderful, yes - but also therefore must we confess "delicate"? A holy duty to care for the living thing - like the living thing can't just be replaced . . .

The psalm is the testimony of a living person who has discovered that she, that he is alive, and who has come to love their living-ness. "I am alive", they say, and it is almost too wonderful to consider. It is a song of delight in being among

the living. Caring for the delicacy of what God has made. Affirming the significance of being a living thing - a beautiful, wonderfully made living thing.

**Hymn:** Thou art before me Lord

**A Reflection:** Another kind of living thing

Captain Robert Walton, a one-time writer who'd hoped for fame and greatness as an author, but had failed miserably, shifted his focus to scientific discovery. While it's not clear what great scientific discovery he thought was waiting for him at the North Pole, off to the North Pole he went. Making up in ambition what he lacks in wisdom or planning, he's a picture of humanity having only one kind of compass - the compass in his ship, rather than the compass in his heart or mind.

On his journey to the North Pole, he comes across a stranger floating in the ocean. He gives sanctuary to the stranger, and records his conversations in a journal. The entry for 19 August 17-something, goes:

*"Yesterday the stranger said to me, 'You may easily perceive, Captain Walton, that I have suffered great and unparalleled misfortunes. I had determined at one time that the memory of these evils should die with me, but you have won me to alter my determination. You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been. I do not know that the relation of my disasters will be useful to you; yet, when I reflect that you are pursuing the same course, exposing yourself to the same dangers which have rendered me what I am, I imagine that you may deduce an apt moral from my tale, one that may direct you if you succeed in your undertaking and console you in case of failure.'"*

That reading is the setting of the scene, by Mary Shelley, for the story of Dr Victor Frankenstein and his creation of a quasi-living thing that becomes a "monster". Motivated by little other than naked ambition to be like God, Frankenstein succeeds in creating something that lives - but doesn't really. His living thing is a patchwork of stolen parts that never were meant to fit together. They are forced together not as an act of love for what is created, but from the creator's desire for fame - ambition. The act of creation is "out of kilter with proper desire" for the giving of life - the proper desire being "love". Indeed, if you create out of love, you love and nurture what is made. But from early on in his interacting with what he's made, this creator uses words like "wretch", "demon", "devil", "fiend", and "it". If he ever had any hope for his shot at fame, he certainly never had any sense of love for the creature through

which he sought that fame. In the hands of a non-caring person, the living thing becomes a monster.

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein became a classic not just because it features a monster, and we all love to be frightened by a monster. It became a classic because it explored the idea of there being some kind of incompatibility between the creation of life and ambition. There is a kind of ambition that ruins life.

### **Music for Reflection:**

#### **Segue:** The Larger Living Thing

These self-aware beings (the humans and the attempts at humanity) are not, of course, the only living things. There are the animals, and the plants. They too grow, change, become tired, need rest. That's shared by anything that lives. Some people think (more about this next week) that the whole created order should be considered to be one massive, unified, growing, changing, tiring, resting thing - a unity. Indeed, one of the key insights of recent theology and philosophy of ecology, is that larger systems can be considered to be living things - as living indeed as the living things of which they are composed. Not just the tree, but the forest has a life. Not just the fish, but the sea has a life. The planet has a life. Does the galaxy have one too?

Let's grant some slack to the idea that the environment has a life, and then, let's listen for echoes of paradise and Frankenstein.

#### **Lesson:** Genesis 3: 8-12, 17-19

#### **A Reflection:** Stealing from the larger living thing

Many readers of scripture have interpreted what's going on in the story of "creation (the larger living thing) and fall". The result of the fall was that the man and the woman no longer could rely on the "paradise model of creation" to provide them easily with what they needed. Do pomegranates just fall into our laps? Does milk and honey just flow from the land? No; the larger living thing called "the garden" no longer works in that way. Now, following the eating of the apple, humanity is only going to eat and live by the sweat of its brow, says God. The larger living thing has become a much less cooperative partner. What are the major factors in the change? Two things, I think.

The first is the quiet word spoken a bit earlier by the serpent. The suggestion is that if the man and woman eat the apple, then they will "become like god". Might you call that speaking into a latent ambition? Whether or not they are

interested in creating life for which they will care is moot. But wouldn't it be good to be like God?

While **his** self-loathing monster goes out into the world to kill and frighten, the regretful Victor Frankenstein says "You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been." While for their part, Adam and Eve turn a fertile creation into something that provides sustenance only begrudgingly, their monster is the death of the environment's cooperation.

How do they occasion it? They occasion it by taking more than they know they should. Reformed theologians like to dwell on their taking the fruit as an act of rebellion. Good on them! I'm treating it, though, quite simply as an act of taking more than they knew they should from the gift that sustains them. From the greater living thing, they take too much.

In recent times, environmentalists have spoken about planetary boundaries. The idea is that there are nine thresholds in the environment which, if not crossed, will keep the planet able to provide us all (the human greater living thing) with all that we need to live happily and well. Problems come to the planet when we move beyond those thresholds - when we take too much. Richard is going to speak about those nine thresholds after church, but for now I make the simple point: the transition from paradise to struggle comes when, from the living thing, too much is taken - it's a monster, you know!

**Lesson:** Matthew 6: 25-30

**Epilogue:** Enough for the birds

Jesus urges those who would follow him to live in a non-ambitious way. Do they need to grasp at everything? Do they need to gather things into larger and ever larger barns just because they can? No. They are to cultivate a sparrow's attitude - take what is needed, and only needed, for today. They are to nurture a belief that their God, who feeds birds and clothes lilies will give enough. For the sake of living things, and the larger living thing, Jesus puts forth a reassurance that there **is** enough. If we took upon ourselves a non-anxious conviction that there is enough for bird, for flower, for person, then how might our husbandry of the larger living thing evolve?

A moment of quiet.

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