

Sermon Archive 552

Sunday 7 September, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on the Axolotl

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



An Introduction: The axolotl grows new parts

As a youngster, Jessica Whited felt for her grandfather as he dealt with the results of a peripheral circulation condition. The condition meant that his limbs, especially in the extremities of fingers and toes would go gangrenous. In those days, the main treatment was to amputate the gangrenous parts before they spread infection to the rest of the body. Perhaps there was something about watching her granddad suffer multiple amputations (and struggle with prosthetic limbs that weren't very good) that drove her into her current work. She's an Associate Professor at Harvard University - researching limb regeneration.

Recently, she's been working with Axolotl salamanders - which have limbs of similar structure and function to human limbs, but also have the capacity, when a limb is severed, to grow a new one. And not just limbs, but ovaries, parts of the heart, brain, lungs.

Jessica notes that human beings have limited capacity to grow new parts to replace injured or lost small parts. We replace our fingertips. The problem with humans is that our wounds tend to stop growing once scar tissue forms. Jessica says that regeneration and scarring are "antithetical". You tend to do one or the other. Axolotls grow new parts, because they tend not to scar. She speaks of a sad experiment where scarring did occur for an axolotl after it had lost a limb something like seven times. There are limits, it would seem, even for the axolotl.

Jessica gives her time to working out why scars form, whether the prevention of the formation of scarring would necessarily result in limb or organ regeneration, and how the turning on or off of various genes could help us to a good space for those needing new organs or limbs. Can she help us towards a human experience of life without scarring?

I think my oldest scar was from an accident I had when, maybe around the age of ten, I decided to saw a piece of wood in half. Two little scars on my left hand between my thumb and index finger. Next oldest, the scar on my left big toe - at the age of twelve, falling off a skateboard owned by someone called Steve Gurney (my mother wouldn't let me have a skateboard). Most significant scar - the one on

my back showing where the melanoma was. Most recent one, on my stomach, showing where we removed something that turned out only to be a freckle. (\$350 for that scar!)

There are other scars, of course - scars that cannot be seen, because they're not physical. It seems that both outside, and inside, I'm no axolotl. None of us is. We do form scars.

Is there, however, in some realm of the imagination, a kind of life where injury doesn't follow us - where we suffer no hurt? And if we lived a life where we couldn't be hurt, what bold and wonderful things might we feel free to try to do? I mean, how much of what we never dare to do is because of our fear of being hurt? If we could take a magic potion, such that we never again need form a scar, **would** we, **should** we, take it?

The axolotl is cute - but puts to us a series of exposing questions . . .

The Gospel Lesson: John 20: 19-20, 24-27

Reflection: He showed them his hands and side

It's the early days following Easter. No one quite yet knows what Easter means. There's still fear in the house - locked doors, people being careful about who they're letting in. More fear than clarity.

At the heart of the early stages of clarity, though, is this idea that the death he's suffered has been overcome. Whatever sentence was declared by Pilate is overturned. The effects of the whipping and nailing are turned around. He shall not be the dead One. He shall be the One who lives. Well, how does "the One who lives" present himself? (Life and light to all he brings? Risen with healing in his wings?) He appears among his own, greets them with peace, and shows them his scars.

I suppose, if God can raise the dead, then God might also have been able to remove some scars. But the risen One presents himself to his people in the drawing of their eyes to his scars. As if, somehow, we know one another, identify one another, receive one another as authentic, by the scars we have picked up along the way.

A woman told a story the other day. She told it as a survivor, I guess. At the age of thirteen, a chronic condition came into her life without knocking or receiving permission. It just showed up. At a time of her life, when most of her friends were exploring aspects of identity and intimacy, her body couldn't do that. The condition caused her to need many surgeries, some of which left her in a state of "touch and go". One particular surgical procedure left her with a long, long scar from breast to bowel - something (as she's navigated intimacy) she's

had to own, to hide, to share only after explaining and hoping that love can see scars differently. O, to be an axolotl! As she told her story, she said she doesn't want to be defined by her scars. But she knows they're there - they do get noticed. They are part of who she is, how she has come to this day, how she grieves, how she has needed to overcome. If there was a potion we could drink, would we? Should we?

Jesus comes to his people, showing them his scars.

Meditation: The wounds of Takapuna



Hey Jesus. There you were in Takapuna, lifted high in Pat Hanly stained glass above the poor efforts I was making in your name to conduct public worship. Well, the efforts weren't really poor - just naive. A function of my place along the life-story time-line. The people of St George's, as seems to happen in churches where I serve, sat on Sundays with their backs to the art - I having the best seat in the house with respect to views of stained glass. So you and I were "Sunday morning face to face" in that place for ten years.

My overall impression of you, as you were there in your glass, was your gentle sense of welcome. You had a loving kind of face, and your hands were opened

towards me, like maybe you were willing to hug to yourself everything I was and didn't yet know I'd be. (Funny days.) Your face was calm and kind; your hands . . . There it is . . . your hands are hurt, bearing marks where nails hurt you. Every Sunday morning, you welcomed me, but only as someone scarred - a wounded person.

If God could raise you, do away with death, why didn't God just wipe away the scars? The way of the axolotl . . .

Takapuna Jesus; it's been twenty years since you watched me on a Sunday morning. I went away from our regular meeting place, on an adventure to a parish Sydney - full of excitement and hope. I left Sydney five years later, broken, convinced I'd never minister again. Is that a scar? (If so, what has it stopped me growing?) I pursued someone for another five years, hoping that he would finally realise that he loved me. He didn't. Is that a scar? (If so, what has it stopped me growing?) My father died. He lived a long time, had a good life. No need to catastrophise - but we miss him. Is that a scar? Maybe they're only real scars if they stop other things from growing - new limbs, new capacities, new engagement with the world that might hurt us . . .

Takapuna Jesus, our God sees fit to send you to me not hiding your scars, but presenting them - as some kind of demonstration that you are the One who lived on earth, where we . . . "suffered under Pontius Pilate".

To trust another person with the scars we have is a deed of vulnerability, of trust and of love. So, God comes to us in trust-seeking love. Not an axolotl - but trust-seeking love.

-ooOoo-

Back to the start now. Jessica is a scientist, captivated by the capacity the axolotl has not to scar, but to grow new limbs again.

I don't feel that God calls us to hide our scars, or to seek a life unmarked by risk or damage. But I **do** wonder whether God might be calling us to consider what we can do with our scars - how perhaps for every scar, we might grow a new limb - a new capacity for our engagement with the world (wisdom, empathy, fortitude, calm; the capacity to say to the other "be careful"; a gentleness borne of our understanding of the fragility of those among whom we live; a desire to care more lovingly for the scars of others. Rather than form scars - how about we seek to grow these new limbs instead . . . Do you think?

A moment of quiet.

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