



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE

TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Finding meaning in life

by Jill Kayser

(part 2 in the
creation series)

22nd January, 2023

*This message is informed
and inspired by Brian
McLaren's book "We make
the Road by Walking."*

John 1:1-17 (NIV), **The Word Became Flesh**

In our little quiz earlier I suggested that you know the answers because you are paying attention to the pattern.

It becomes more obvious the longer you live that all life is full of patterns. There's lots of mystery out there, to be sure, and no shortage of chaos and unpredictability. But there's also lots of meaning ... messages trying to find expression, music inviting us to listen and sing, patterns attracting our attention and interpretation.

The chaos becomes a backdrop for the patterns and the mysteries seem to beckon us to try to understand.

Sometimes the universe feels like this: 71, 6, 2, -48, -213, 9 ... random numbers with no pattern.

Or....G, M, B, O, I, space, Q, H, Z, space, P . . . random letters No meaning.

Or....1,1,1,1,1,1,1,1,1 ... sameness or repetition going nowhere.

But above and behind and beyond the sometimes confusing randomness of life, most of us would agree that something is going on here. From a single molecule to a strand of DNA, from a bird in flight to an ocean current to a dancing galaxy, there's a logic, a meaning, an unfolding pattern to it all.

Like wood, reality has a grain. Like a river, it has a current. Like a story, it has characters and setting and conflict and resolution. Like poetry, it has syntax and structure, so letters are taken up in words, and words are taken up in phrases and sentences, and they're all taken up in a magnificent pattern of beauty and meaning that we can glimpse and savour, even if it's too big and deep to comprehend fully.

Of course, we often struggle to know how to interpret those patterns. For example, if a tornado destroys our house, an enemy drops bombs on our village, a disease takes away someone we love, we lose our job, someone we love breaks our heart, or our best friends betray us, what does that mean? Is the logic of the universe chaos or cruelty? Does might

make right? Do violence and chaos rule? Is the Creator heartless and evil? If we had only our worst experiences in life to guide us, that might be our conclusion.

I'm always intrigued when someone tells me they can't believe in a God after something tragic or deeply sad has happened to them. How often do you hear the question: If there is a God then why does he allow so much suffering to happen?

Jewish poet Roger Kamenetz suggests that God is in our human response to suffering, tragedy or disaster.

I think God is in our response, in the human hearts of those who are feeling and responding to the situation of suffering, the families and neighbors of the victims, and the rest of us, the bystanders, and us, too. The whole world is feeling it. The disaster is. It happened to a "dear one," someone's "dear one," many dear ones. I open my heart and feel it. The place it touches in me, touches God.

And the very Reverend Peter Beck, Dean of the Christchurch Cathedral at the time of the earthquakes said:

"This was not an act of God, it was the earth doing what the earth does. The act of God is us loving one another during this time of immense suffering and need."

Last week we reflected on two creation stories found in Genesis. In the first story we heard how God created the earth, the vegetation, mountains and rivers and sea, the sky and solar system and all the amazing and wonderful creatures that inhabit these places. And he pronounced it all to be very good. He then created humans – Adam and Eve – and pronounced that they too were very good and he loved them with all his heart, and together they lived in a paradise called Eden.

In the second creation story we hear that God informed Adam and Eve that there were two trees in their beautiful garden: the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He instructed them not to eat of the second tree. But of course, they were human and God had after all given them freedom of choice, so they disobeyed Him and ate from the second tree!

And then we all know what happens: Adam and Eve suddenly feel a change come over them, they become self-conscious of their nakedness, so they fashion crude clothing to hide their sexual differences. When God approaches, they no longer see God as a friend, but as a rival and threat. They hide from God in fear. When God asks what has happened, they blame one another and refuse to admit their mistake. Soon they face a harder life of pain, competition, sweat, labour, frustration and death - outside the beautiful garden that was their home - east of Eden.

Later, their two sons Cain and Abel repeat the pattern. The older brother becomes a successful agriculturalist. His life is wrapped up in fields, fences, ownership, barns and accumulated wealth, with all the moral complexity they bring. The younger brother who appears 'more vulnerable' is a nomadic herdsman. He can't own land or accumulate wealth, because he moves constantly with his herds to wherever the fresh grass is growing. Their different ways of life are expressed in different forms of religious sacrifice. They soon become religious rivals, competing for a higher degree of God's favour. Cain perceives his brother Abel to be the favoured one and resents him and starts to see him not as a brother but as a trespasser, an enemy. He plays God and judges his brother as

evil and therefore worthy of death. Abel becomes the first victim of violence, and Cain the first murderer.

The story of Adam and Eve doesn't need to be about literal historical figures to tell us something very true about us, our history and our world today.

Our life's experiences show us how humans can so quickly turn from reflecting the image of a creative, generous, life-giving God to graspers, hiders, blamers and shamers like Adam and Eve or rivals, resenters, murderers and destroyers - like Cain and Abel. Our choices too often result in us displaying destructive characteristics opposed to God's image embedded deep within us.

We humans consistently choose the wrong tree. Instead of imitating and reflecting God as good image-bearers should do, we start competing with God, being led by our EGO - edging God out as Wayne Dyers suggests the word EGO means. We try to play God ourselves. We reject the Creator and choose another model instead: a snake (the story says), who represents a subtle and dangerous desire to choose rivalry and violence over harmony and well-being,

But there's another creation story. We heard it this morning. It's a story about a new creation. It's a story of hope. A story of second chances for God's beloved people. This story too starts with the words "In the beginning..." linking it back to the original creation stories.

However, John's creation story offers new insights into the creation stories we find in the book of Genesis. John had a special term for the pattern of meaning God has spoken or written into the universe. He called it Logos, which is often translated in English as 'Word'.

This Word or Logos, John said, was 'made flesh' in a man named Jesus. In other words, if we want to know what God is like and what the universe is about, we should pay attention to the logic, meaning, wisdom and patterns found in the life of Jesus.

Jesus communicated the logos, or logic, of God in his teachings. He lived the logos, or pattern, of God in his life. He showed the logos, or essence, of God in the way he treated others. From his birth to his death and beyond, John believes, Jesus translates the logic or meaning or pattern or heart of God into terms we humans can understand.

In John's Gospel, we are inspired to look for the pattern witnessed in a poor man travelling across the land with a band of students and friends, telling stories, confronting injustice, helping people in need. If we learn and trust the wisdom that comes in creation and in Jesus, we will live our lives in a new way, John says. We will discover God as our loving parent, and we will encounter all other creatures as our relations, in one family of creation.

Of course, we have other options. Because as we heard in the earlier creation story, God created us with freedom of choice.

Some of us choose to live by the logic of rivalry. Under this logic, the cosmos is a huge battlefield in which participants competing, defeating, deceiving, displacing or killing their rivals. In this universe the strongest survive, the ruthless are rewarded, the kind are killed and the meek are crushed. A mentality of "you'd better fight, or you'll be trampled" prevails.

Others of us choose to live by the logic of compliance. Under this logic, the cosmos is a big organisation ruled by powerful bosses, and your job is to learn the rules and comply.

These people believe that if you stay in your allotted place, do what you're told, curry favour in the 'inner circle' of power, then the logic of compliance will work in your favour. A mentality of "You'd better play it safe, or you'll get into a lot of trouble" prevails.

Still others of us choose to see the universe as a giant machine, and live by the logic of mechanism - action, reaction, cause, effect, stimulus, response. You can use the mechanisms of the universe to seek whatever pleasure, power and security you can during your short lives. But in the end, there is no meaning to the machine, so you'd better grab whatever moments of fleeting pleasure you can. That's all there is or ever will be.

Clearly, the creation stories of Genesis and John offer us a powerful alternative to the logic of rivalry, the logic of compliance and the logic of meaningless mechanism. They dare us to believe that the universe runs by the logic of creativity, goodness and love. The universe is God's creative project, filled with beauty, opportunity, challenge and meaning. It runs on the meaning or pattern we see embodied in the life of Jesus. In this story, newness multiplies. Freedom grows. Meaning expands. Wisdom flows. Healing happens. Goodness is abundant.

So here we are, alive in God. Good and wonderful creations made in the image of God. With a God-given freedom of choice.

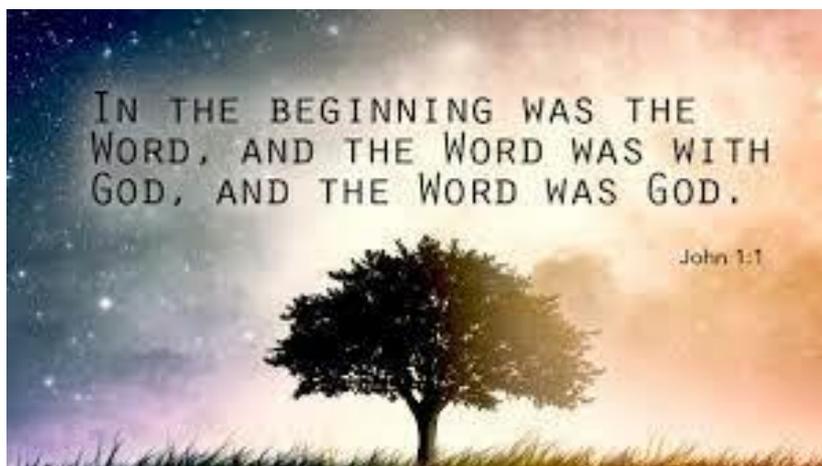
So, let's discern and choose the patterns of the good life intended for each of us.

Let's choose to eat from the Tree of Life, not the tree that feeds our pride and makes us think we can play God and judge between good and evil.

Let's commit every day to know Jesus more intimately and to follow his ways of being in the world.

Let's fully embrace our God-given destiny to be His image bearers on earth, empowered in His spirit to reflect His love, grace and wisdom this day and always.

Amen.



Reflection:

Think about the idea that we all live by a certain logos or logic.

Which logos do you think is most prevalent in today's world: rivalry, compliance, meaningless mechanism or love?

Imagine what your life would be like if you chose to live more by the logos of love that you do now.