Name: Peter Howe
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Message: Hi Michael,

Pam Skelton asked me for the text of this talk. I thought I had her details but no. Can you forward this to Pam? I hope you can look past my stitches and see a man who made a mess of his life until he gave it to Jesus in 1977 and worshipped in this church ever since. I’m a guitarist, an elder and lay preacher, husband of Janet, father of five, all with wonderful spouses, which makes ten, and a grandfather of nine. I want to tell you a small personal story that has a universal theme. In 2018 I was dealing with two fires. One was the Tathra fire that destroyed 70 homes. The other was a fire inside me, a fire of anger that I found difficult to control. A large group of people were leaving our church, led by a few who were saying that the Uniting Church wasn’t Christian. I bottled the anger up. It’s not easy to keep smiling when smoke is coming out of your ears but I did pretty well. I lost it once in a Bible study. I couldn’t have lasted much longer. I would have burned up. My kids were worried about me. I think it was a blessing that Janet and I had planned to go walking in historic Christian places in England that year. We had four nights in Oxford and went to a Sunday service at New Road Baptist. The preacher had a wild shock of grey hair and a steel wool beard. He looked like a character out of Lord Of The Rings. I googled him later and found out he was Paul Fiddes, Emeritus Professor of Systematic Theology at Oxford University. I had a coffee with him after the service, and I opened up, in a way that I couldn’t back at home. “It depends how you read Scripture”, he said as he listened to me unload. Then in the middle of one of my sentences he looked through the door and across the square and said, “Jesus is doing something in that shopping mall. We have to listen to people to find out what it is.” As Janet and I walked over the next weeks I had the chance to reflect deeply on those two things. It depends how you read Scripture, and what is Jesus doing? I came back with a question that I will ask from now on in my life. It’s a question far more important than “What am I doing? More important than “What are we doing?” The main question for me has become “What is Jesus doing, here, now?” I’m very comfortable leading worship with a guitar.

Early in 2019 Richard Arbon got excited and told me we might be able to get a piano for church. I thought “What would we do with a piano?” I didn’t say it. I took the piano proposal into my prayer life, where I was often asking myself “What is Jesus doing here, now?” I was learning to let go of my preconceived ideas, to become more humble. We got the piano. (There it is.) Richard and his daughter Alisi played it beautifully, then Douglas Simper and Lorna Zhulan arrived and started a piano based ecumenical choir, singing theologically rich songs from Douglas’ songbook. Douglas’ books over there. We ran public concerts in this church. Douglas and Lorna became very involved in our worship services. Then late last year they had to move to Canberra quickly for Douglas’ health. Then what was Jesus doing? Lots. With the piano. Another Richard stepped up, a composer of beautiful piano music and an incredibly flexible accompanist. We soon realised we had in our congregation the makings of an old time gospel band with piano, bass, ukulele, harmonica, banjo and guitars. We played in a few services and the congregation loved the band. Last Saturday we played in Tathra Pub; old time favourites that people sang along with. People in the community keep telling me it was a wonderful night. I realised more and more that of course, Jesus is busy in Presbytery. Ross was coming down to preach for us, and he spent time with me on spiritual growth. **Andrew Smith introduced New Expressions to us and mentored us in Presbytery Zooms. Yes, I think Jesus is a Zoomer. I did a lay preaching course, then lectionary Bible studies on Zoom with Elizabeth Raine and John Squires wherein I learned a most exciting word, Exegesis. It opens the door to understanding how to read Scripture.** So much depends on how you read Scripture. So what is universal about this little story of mine? You would have stories like this. What is universal about them? They’re universal because they’re stories about how the universe works. They reveal how the designer of the universe is operating in the universe now. In Isaiah 43 God says: “See, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs up. Do you not perceive it?” You might be thinking**, “Yes, but how can we recognise what Jesus is doing?”** We could be wrong, couldn’t we? Yes, we could. I’ve seen churches get it wrong. That’s the great power of the **Lectionary.** Most Uniting churches I know work from the lectionary, not from their own biblical agendas. The lectionary presents us with a bigger picture of what God is like, so it’s easier to recognise what Jesus is doing, easier to understand how the Creator operates in Creation. Mostly it’s bigger than we thought, better than we could have conceived. It stretches our vision, stretches our capabilities. As we experience Scripture at a broader and deeper level we become more able to see what Jesus is doing around us, how the universe is operating, now. Reading the whole of Scripture using the Lectionary we find that the story of the universe is a beautiful love story with a beautiful ending. We’re a Bible based church. A Bible based church. We are. Yes, I’ve heard some others claim that, but in some cases it’s a false claim.

Have you come across the word EISEGESIS? I discovered it myself by accident when I was looking up EXEGESIS. Dictionary .com says that eisegesis is “an interpretation, especially of Scripture that expresses the interpreter’s own ideas, bias, or the like, rather than the meaning of the text. Practically, (and content warning, this is a bit of a caricature) it could go like this: “I don’t like what those people are doing. I’ll search Scripture until I find a few words that suit me, and I say “Look! Here it is, in God’s very own words, God doesn’t like what these people are doing either!” Eisegesis.

 In the 1700s some Christians with investments in the slave trade searched the scriptures and found in Ephesians a little sentence “Slaves obey your masters.” It was a misreading of Paul’s intent, but it was useful in the fight to protect investments. Eisegesis. Since we started basing our services on the lectionary we have grown in our understanding of how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, this love that surpasses knowledge, this love that is infinitely larger than our own small minds, a love that takes us to new places. The world is a mess. These are troubled times, but so were the times when Rome occupied Palestine all those years ago. Out of the darkness and suffering of those days emerged a new force of love, peace, joy, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, a tender power that proved stronger than any army, a power that has lasted longer than any regime, any tyrant, any catastrophe. Leonard Cohen wrote, “There’s a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” There’s a crack in Christianity. Some churches are trying to patch the crack by retreating into fear, rigidity, judgement, and worship of doctrine rather than openness to the way of Jesus. I’ve come to know that the main question that Scripture answers is not who’s going to heaven, but “What is God doing here, now, and what is our part, as the body of Christ, in God’s healing of Creation?” “See, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs up. Do you not perceive it?” Isaiah 43:19. I think God longs to answer this prayer from the Church of Scotland. Let us pray. (Then put the Scottish prayer on the screen.)
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Praying through Isaiah 43:2

Loving Lord, as we face the storms and flames of life that appear to be so overwhelming, may we remember Your Words of truth. Help us to recall Who You are and what You have promised to all Your children. Help us to secure our hope, in You. Thank You that You have promised to be with us in all the scenes and circumstances of life, for You are the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-gracious God Who loves us with an everlasting love. Praise Your holy name., AMEN.

*(Isaiah 43:2)*

2When you pass through the waters,
    I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
    they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
    you will not be burned;
    the flames will not set you ablaze. Niv

Source: <https://prayer.knowing-jesus.com/Isaiah/43>

Or

**DISCIPLESHIP THOUGHT**

John speaks about how light has come into the world, and yet people loved darkness rather than light. Why do we refuse life? Why do we do evil and hate the light? **What are we frightened of? Part of being human is the genuine desire only to present our most shiny versions**. But we are all a mix. John knows this. Jesus knows this. You and I know this. And yet, **none of us want to show our dirt. Our struggles. Our wrongdoing and failures**. Our poverty. Our shadow. We fear that no one could love the whole mix. So, we hide. We pretend. And the shadowy parts within us have even more of a field day. What is it that might save us?

It’s always love – a love that embraces us, just as we are, without a hint of condemnation. That’s the true love that Jesus embraces us with. This is the freely given love that God has for the whole world. This is the love that liberates us. This is the love that heals us and makes us whole.