



*The Black Box and the Mercy Seat*

By Laurel Moffatt

I went to Tasmania on what felt like a whim. I'd read about a building - Earth's Black Box - due to be built there. And I wanted to see it for myself. The landscape around it, that is, not the building.

*[onboard safety announcement]*

As they do before any flight, the attendants instructed us on what to do in an emergency...without ever saying the word 'crash'. Disaster became a to-do list. Count seat backs, check for the aisle lights, slip on a piece of floppy, yellow plastic that looked more like a pool toy than something that could save your life.

And then, we were off, over the sea. The plane's own black box, no doubt recording it all.

*[sounds of flight]*

Soon enough, I was there.

*[recorded intro - Earth's Black Box - outside Queenstown]*



Earth's Black Box is an idea similar to an aeroplane's in-flight recorder, present in the cockpit of every commercial or corporate aircraft, but for a ship the size of, well, earth.

The thinking is that our climate is no longer just changing, but headed for disaster. And if our planet's going to crash, perhaps we should have a black box 'onboard' before it does? Survivors will need to know what happened and why, and hold any responsible parties, persons, or leaders still living to account, if that's even possible. That's the idea anyway.

This black box will be much bigger than an in-flight recorder of course. It will be as big as a building, made of reinforced steel. They say it will be indestructible. The promotional materials are attractive. It looks like a contemporary ark, built for a modern-day Noah with a preference for minimalist design.

But unlike arks like Noah's, filled with animals, or Norway's doomsday seed vault, this box won't be filled with things necessary for the renewal of life after a disaster. It will be a box of memories. A repository of them. A massive hard drive that will keep a record of all the missteps and errors and wrongs leading to earth's 'crash'. The box will hold the record of wrongs, the errors of our ways, the evidence of our sins, at least where climate is concerned. Sin, to



use a word that's long fallen out of fashion. And all of it within the box. The box will listen to us. And remember.

*[speeches of lawmakers re climate]*

All of our wrongs laid out. Our tweets. Our misguided likes. Our rising temperatures. Our speeches and laws. Our military spending. Our accords and our missteps. All of the decisions and indecisions that will bring earth to its knees listed and known and in a broken, jagged confessional - laid out, a seemingly infinite scroll.

*[sound of mouse scrolling?]*

Are you getting nervous? Because I am. I find the idea terrifying, which, I think, is the point. The creators hope that perhaps if we all know that something is listening, watching, remembering what we do and say and decide about climate, we'll choose differently. Knowing that *something* is judging us, perhaps we'll change course and avert the disaster that seems to be so clearly looming.

There is something about a box, isn't there, that invites questioning. Curiosity. That feeds a desire to investigate. *[sound of Christmas music being played in a home and presents being given and unwrapped]* Look no further than a young child on Christmas morning to witness the excitement that a box may



bring. Every Christmas for many years, one of my grandmothers - the kind one - would give me a small box, a beautiful box. Each year the box was different. Wood, porcelain, tin, leather. Inside the box would be a gift of money. At the time, I was mostly interested in the money. But it's the boxes that have lasted through the years. I've packed and unpacked these boxes many times through many moves. In one of my moves, as I was unpacking, I found one and opened it. And as I lifted the lid, I remembered why this particular box was my favourite.

*[sound of the music box winding and playing music]*

For years the box had sat in my room silent, because I had forgotten that with a simple twist of a key, the box could play a song. How had I forgotten? All I needed to do was lift the cover to remember.

*[music box music continues]*

The best gifts reveal something about the giver and the receiver as well as the relationship between them.

The box held a song that I had played on the piano over and over again as a kid. My grandmother would have heard me play it. The true gift revealed itself to me, as clear as the musical notes that unwound from the box. The real gift was this: My grandmother knew me. And loved me.



All that from one small box.

[music box fades to the ambient sounds of the land outside Queenstown]

What stands out, as I stand just outside of Queenstown, is how impossible it is to fit all our environmental wrongs inside this box. The box will sit in a landscape scarred by mining, blighted hills of ochre and rust. The more I think about it, the more uneasy I grow...not by the thought of all our climate wrongs accruing within the walls of the box. It is the *limitations* of the box that worry me. The thought of all the wrongs that just won't fit. The box is limited in place, it's a certain size, on a particular hill, in a particular place.

And the box is limited in time. It will record onto its hard drives for somewhere between 30 to 50 years, with some mining of past data as well. In terms of the history of all time, this is as brief as a blink.

And what's more, this box is specifically about our climate sins, which means we'll need other boxes for all our other wrongs such as domestic violence, child abuse, human trafficking, racism, discrimination, not to mention the harsh tones, raised voices, cruel thoughts, jealousy, impatience, dismissiveness, all the secret sins we carry and hide, as destructive to our lives and relationships as environmental wrongs are to the climate.



The dialogue between the proposed black box and its surrounding environment makes me think of how the effects of sin - an unfashionable word, I know - are so pervasive. How they elude our attempts to contain them all. They are too high, too wide, too deep, too long. The parameters of our own boxes are too limited, too finite to hold it all. We need arms to stretch past it, legs to brace beneath it, fingers and toes to grip and grasp it all and take it all in.

The Black Box holds a tension between an acknowledgement of wrongdoing - repentance - with a desire for things to be made right - justice. But if justice, and the judgement it carries is the only thing we have, would any of us survive? I don't think I would. We need something more than judgement and justice alone to right the wrongs that have been done. A harddrive alone can't repair anything. We need mercy. I don't think we can live without it.

There are plans in Queenstown to remove the toxic metals from the water. Not just filter them, but extract them for use, redeem them. And there are plants that can do the same with land, hyperaccumulators, that absorb and remove toxins from the earth with their roots, storing it in their shoots in order to be harvested. Plants such as barley, goldenrod, water hyacinth, sunflower, hyssop. This is the work of environmental mercy. Forgiveness. Redemption.



There are many strange things about the Christian faith, including truly perplexing things like the virgin birth of Christ and his resurrection, two simultaneously essential, and puzzling paradoxes.

And here is another - that all the wrongs in the world could be addressed, and justice done, and at the same time, in the same moment, mercy offered.

*[what would it have sounded like in the temple? In the holy of holies?]*

In the Jewish Scriptures, there is a specific place where this would happen, where God would show up, take all the wrong things, subsume them in his justice and simultaneously offer mercy and forgiveness to his people. It was a finite location, in space and time, in the temple, on the top of a box. A specific box. The contents of the box were important, but the real wonder was what happened on top of the box, on the lid, a place called *the mercy seat*.

[Johnny Cash 'Mercy Seat']

In the biblical scriptures, Christ is known by a number of names: some of them regal and grand, others of them strangely common. God with Us, the Beginning and the End, the Son of God, as well as Bread, Door, Lamb. And also this: Mercy Seat.

According to the biblical accounts of Christ's death, His were the arms and legs, the fingers and toes that held all the wrongs and subsumed them in his



justice. He is the place where the wonder happens, where our desire for justice and our need for mercy meet. At a certain time, in a certain place, on top of a certain hill outside Jerusalem.

This is the gift. He hears us, he knows us, and he loves us. Enough to take all the wrongs and absorb them in himself. Enough to renew lives with mercy, like water purified from poison, like land redeemed from toxins. Enough to redeem any disaster and land a person safely home.

[*sound of aeroplane landing*]

Links:

Earth's Black Box

Australian Government, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, *Final report: Mount Lyell Remediation Research and Demonstration Program*

<https://www.awe.gov.au/science-research/supervising-scientist/publications/ssr/final-report-mount-lyell-remediation-research-and-demonstration-program>

Tish Harrison Warren, 'We're All Sinners, and Accepting That Is Actually a Good Thing

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/06/opinion/sin-lent-grace-forgiveness.html>

<https://www.awe.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/ssr118.pdf>

Small Wonders Podcast - Season 1 – Episode 5



Johnny Cash, 'Mercy Seat'

Romans, mercy seat reference

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/28/climate/climate-change-ipcc-report.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>