

“Creation’s Song, Part 9: Providence”  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for October 11<sup>th</sup> 2015 (20<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost/Thanksgiving Sunday)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 6: 25-33  
Psalm 103

Permit me to begin by providing some context: context that may well be needed even by those who have been journeying with me these past eight weeks as we have explored the Bible’s first chapter, context that may especially be useful for anyone who has dropped in this morning looking to find a Thanksgiving service, only to discover that they have arrived just in time to experience the ninth sermon in what has been a two month long series of sermons celebrating the splendours of creation. From whence did this song of creation arise?

Well! Largely...largely from the fact that the United Church of Canada—along with a number of other Protestant denominations—has begun to observe a brief “season of creation” as a sort of interlude within the very long “season after Pentecost”, a season that stretches all the way from mid-spring to late Fall. Planted now in the middle of that season—occupying mainly the month of September—is a newish season, a brief opportunity to celebrate the created order and our responsibility as stewards of creation. That was my starting point: a starting point that led me back to the fascinating first chapter of Genesis with its poetic depiction of seven days of creation. From there, with the first chapter of Genesis in one hand, and Karl Barth’s indispensable commentary on that chapter in my other hand, into the breach I jumped, and you folks jumped with me, as we worked our way—one day at a time—through those six active days of creation, crowned by a seventh day in which God rested and thereby offered humanity the gift of Sabbath. And yes, technically... technically our song could have ended there and then! However!!

This morning, here in Canada, we come to celebrate what in many ways is the ultimate creation feast: Thanksgiving. An annual harvest festival, Thanksgiving—whatever else it entails—certainly entails a celebration of the endless creativity of the God whose abundance yields its fruit in good season.

*We plough the fields and scatter  
the good seed on the land,  
but it is fed and watered  
by God’s almighty hand...*

And that’s the key thing to remember when we as Christians sing “creation’s song”: when we as disciples celebrate the God who was not merely creative “in the beginning” but whose faithfulness meant a refusal to head for the exits as soon as creation was complete. In short, as a Jesus people, to celebrate God as Creator is also to celebrate the Providence of God....the Providential care of the God who continues to be involved in the life of the world.

Nor need we turn to any other source for that essential conviction than to the Lord Jesus himself. In the words of this morning's Gospel—a Gospel traditional for a harvest feast—Christ insists: *Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?* That insistent belief—that insistent faith in the Providential care of the Father—was central to the proclamation offered by Jesus! But is that belief credible? Given what we know about this world, is it even remotely believable?

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The doctrine of Providence, or so I have come to believe, is the defining challenge to distinctively Christian faith: which is to say, faith not only in the concept of a god...faith not only in the reality of a Creator...but faith in the God who remains actively engaged in our daily reality. Putting to one side those who leave the church out of sheer busyness, I suspect that those who leave the church out of active disillusionment fall pretty much in to one of two categories. On the one hand, there are the countless souls who have been turned off by the Church itself: we Christians have let them down—often a Christian minister has let them down—and while they may still have an active faith in God, they want nothing to do with us; such people will often describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious”. We all know folks like that; as a matter of fact, on a bad day many of us are tempted to follow their lead! However: the other hand in this matter, includes anyone for whom it's not a question of the Church having failed them, but rather those who have experienced what they would describe as “disappointment with God”. Disappointment with God! And oftentimes, such people will describe themselves as agnostic...or atheist...or, if they still think of themselves as spiritual, will be quick to insist that their spirituality has nothing whatsoever to do with the God who disappointed them...who failed to be there for them or for a loved one at some crucial juncture in their life: the God whose “providential care” was seen to have arrived a day late...and a dollar short.

And you know: for me, Thanksgiving, perhaps more than any other occasion is a time when I am most keenly aware of the challenge posed by the seemingly uneven way in which suffering is distributed in this world of ours. Notice the way I phrase that...because for me it's a biggie! To my mind, it's not just that there is such immense suffering in our world; it's that the total mass of the world's suffering seems to fall disproportionately on some people...and on some regions. And so, yes: whenever I try to focus upon **my** blessings, especially at this time of year....anytime I try to “count my blessings, name them one by one”...there's this tiny voice of protest that goes off in my wee brain. A voice of protest that refuses to let go of the ugly possibility that my offering of thanks is, in effect, my way of quietly rejoicing in the fact that I have—in a very real sense—led a charmed life: hedged round with so much for which to be grateful. While I am far from living the life of Riley, when I honestly compare my

circumstances to those of countless others in this world, I must confess that the words of thanksgiving have a way of raising some awkward, not easily answered questions.

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I found myself this past week...found myself returning to some musings offered ten or so years ago by David Bentley Hart. Hart, a theologian from the Christian Orthodox tradition, was approached by the *Wall Street Journal* in the aftermath of the earth-quake and the resulting tsunami that swept through the eastern portions of the Indian Ocean on Boxing Day 2004. As the sheer scale of the horror became apparent—a death-toll in the hundreds of thousands, a significant percentage of them children—the *Wall Street Journal* approached Hart and asked him to respond to that most impossible of questions: where was God in all of this? The article Hart wrote for the *Journal* generated a huge response and was eventually expanded into a small book, *The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami?*

And one of that book's great strengths is that Hart refuses to provide neat and tidy answers to a question that evades both neatness and tidiness. On the contrary: Hart makes it clear that he has greater sympathy for the village atheist who—in response to such an event—cries out against belief in God, than he does for Christians who offer trite answers in which the attempt is made somehow to say that events such as the Boxing Day tsunami are all part of God's design for the world. Nor does he have any patience for Christian believers who argued that such an event is actually God's judgment on those swept up in its devastation. As he rightly insists: what had the large number of children swept away into the flood waters of the Indian Ocean have possibly done, to be deserving of such judgment? But then what **is** a Christian to say? What are we to say, in the aftermath of such horror? Hard enough to maintain faith in ours as a created world! Far harder to maintain faith in a God who—as Christ insists—has even numbered the hairs on our head. How do we maintain...and how do we even begin to articulate...what it means to trust in God's providential care...in the midst of a world that is so obviously battered and bruised: a world which at times presents itself as falling obscenely short of the “very good” God offers at creation's end. Yes: so much of the created realm is “very good”. But so much is battered and bruised: scarcely recognizable as the world God spoke forth in the beginning.

Well. Perhaps you will find it not at all surprising that Hart begins his response by reminding us of the ancient Christian insistence that there is most certainly a gulf between the world God envisions, and the fallen world we experience in our daily lives. That's the bitter-truth side to his response. Nor, given that he speaks from the notoriously Easter oriented tradition of the Orthodox Churches, will it come as a surprise that the glorious-truth side to his response points to that most central of Christian feasts. To put it somewhat simplistically—and this is my take, not David Bentley Hart's—the miracle of Easter, whatever else it tells us, tells us that God is far from finished with this

world of ours, just as God is far from finished with the likes of you and me. On the one hand, it is the unfinished nature of this world that makes it possible for the prophets still to decry injustice, and for the compassionate to offer love-in-action. On the other hand, it is the promise of Easter that makes it possible for us to celebrate a feast day such as Thanksgiving, not clinging to our own blessings, but seeking—as a hopeful people—to share our own bounty with others.

And you know: at the end of the day, it's possible that what we are really called to cultivate as an Easter people, is something that I think of as double-vision. There is, you see, no need for us to choose between seeing only the bright side of life, and hiding all the shadows from our delicate eyes. Nor need we reach for the opposite extreme, becoming world-weary cynics, or despairing idealists, or fanatical world-fixers because all we see is what's wrong with the world. No. We can, rather venture forth as those possessed with double vision: willing to see the world in all of its obvious brokenness...all of its anguish and need...but grounded deeply in the conviction that the final word has yet to be spoken over this world...any more than the final word had been spoken when they placed Christ's body in the ground. You see: to see Thanksgiving through an Easter lens, is to cultivate the ability to see how splendid this world really and truly is, without pretending that all is presently right with the world. And yes: to see our own lives through an Easter lens, is to cultivate the ability to give thanks for all of the things for which we should be thankful, without losing sight of the fact that a day does not go by, in which there is not someone in our life, who needs us to embody our thanksgiving by offering them our comfort, our concern, our care.

Friends in Christ! There is a sense in which the God who came to us in Jesus threw down the gauntlet at Easter. Issued a challenge! Issued a challenge to any power on earth or in heaven, that would dare convince us that death will have the final word...that destruction will be given pride of place...that the cries of the little ones will go unheard. The God of Easter morning has refused to settle for such a world: has refused to be resigned to such a world. How dare any of us resign ourselves to such a world?

Come! Come to this place of thanksgiving...and come to this season of thanksgiving...with the mind of Christ...with the mind of Easter. Through your laughter and your tears...through your sorrows and your triumphs...learn to see the preciousness of the world God made in the beginning, the preciousness of the life with which God has gifted you, the preciousness of the new life God is even now bringing forth within you. Take it all in! And then, yes: give thanks. With your lips! With your life! Give thanks! In Jesus' name! Amen.