

“The Shaking of the Foundations”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for November 18th 2018 (26th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Mark 13: 1-8

When we turn, as we have this morning turned, to the 13th chapter of Mark’s Gospel...

...or in other years when we turn to the chapters in Matthew and in Luke that take their cue from Mark’s 13th chapter...

...when we turn to any of these Gospel chapters, we instantly find ourselves knee deep in some of the most challenging of New Testament texts. As Joel Marcus notes in his excellent Anchor Bible commentary on The Gospel According to Mark: with one possible exception Mark chapter 13 “has been subjected to more frequent and detailed [interpretation] than any other portion of Mark’s Gospel.” That’s hardly surprising given the undeniable fact that Jesus here looks and sounds nothing like the exalted teacher of ethics, the inspired teller of parables or the compassionate bringer of healing we think we are watching and hearing in other parts of the Gospel. On the contrary: in Mark 13 the voice we hear sounds suspiciously like that of an apocalyptic prophet: the sort of apocalyptic voice we hear in parts of the book Daniel in the Old Testament, the sort of apocalyptic voice we hear in chapter after chapter in the New Testament’s final book, Revelation. Indeed!

Had we read Mark chapter 13 from start to finish, we would encounter material in which Jesus—having predicted the destruction (the shaking of the foundations) of the Jerusalem Temple—appears to go even further, predicting the destruction and recreation (the shaking of the foundations) of the whole cosmic order. Given our reluctance to regard Jesus the way we might regard some raggedy street corner preacher—carrying a sign assuring us that the world is about to end—many of us instinctively bracket out this portion of Mark...and the portions of Matthew and Luke that echo this portion of Mark. That’s pretty much what many 19th century portraits of the “historical Jesus” tended to do: a tendency that Albert Schweizer eventually challenged, insisting that a true portrait of Jesus will want to capture not only those places where he appears to correspond most closely to our expectations of a teacher of wisdom and a bringer of healing, but also those places—such as Mark 13—in which Jesus appears to be most foreign, most different, most distant from us. And yes!

That has proven especially challenging in the liberal-Protestant tradition that has shaped this United Church of ours. From the outset, this is a tradition—to its credit!—that has sought to live within this world—**this** world—rightly and well, which is to say: a tradition that has attempted—if not to build the city of God here on earth—at a bare minimum to focus its energy on the creation of cultures and societies that embody the values of that Kingdom. In short, to build-up, through Christian labour and love, a world

that begins to conform to God's Kingdom, **Christ's** Kingdom: at least to the extent to which this fallen world, this broken, battered sin-sick world can ever hope to conform to the Kingdom of God. And yes: if that is your goal, the Jesus who is likely to be of least practical value, is **this** Jesus, the one who—in the midst of the glorious Jerusalem Temple courtyard—can promise with such seeming nonchalance, that all of it...all of it...all of it will be shaken...that the foundations will not hold through the shaking...that all these fine and pretty things are destined to come crashing down, that the cosmos itself is far less substantial, far less stable, than appearances might suggest. When you are seeking to build-up the Kingdom, that is not the message you will be eager to send to those you are hoping to recruit for that good work, the work of Kingdom building. And so, not at all surprisingly, we mainline Protestants have tended to struggle...have tended to struggle with the Jesus of Mark 13 whom many of us would be only too happy to consign to our evangelical sisters and brothers in the hope that they would be willing to hang on to him!

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Well. Suffice it to say that I have been struggling—over the past seven days—struggling with **this** Jesus. And I have done so...done so in light of the transitions taking place in a couple of institutions I cherish. Early last week I attended a meeting of the Co-ordinating Committee that is beginning the visioning process set in motion by my pending retirement: a process that will incorporate not only the search for my successor, but will also incorporate a timely wrestling with some of the big-picture questions Trinity United will likely always need to revisit as a Protestant congregation that has a rather unusual living arrangement, sharing its digs with a Roman Catholic parish. That is one of the most remarkable and one of the most wonderful things about this place...but it also presents its own set of challenges. And so as this institution—this congregational institution—undergoes a time of challenge and change, I wonder not so much...

...not so much, what would Jesus **do**?...

...but more basically, what would Jesus **think**? What would Jesus think...how would Jesus regard middling sized Protestant congregations in the year of our Lord 2018? And not just any old Jesus...but specifically **this** Jesus: the one who sits in the Temple courtyard and casually informs his disciples that the Temple's days are numbered. Impossible for me...impossible for me not to wonder how he might respond to the life of this very different institution—this Christian Ecumenical institution—on the outskirts of Nanaimo.

Nor was I capable, during yesterday's lengthy Presbytery function, to avoid making a similar comparison and asking myself some similar questions. In case you missed it, yesterday was an all-day farewell to Comox-Nanaimo Presbytery, a gathering which we had the privilege of hosting here at Trinity. It was a terrific day, with exhibits and finger food in the downstairs hall, a final Presbytery meeting in this sanctuary in the morning, followed by a final worship service in the afternoon, again in this sanctuary. A lovely afternoon: all of it occasioned by the significant structural changes on which the

United Church (ready or not) will embark on January 1st. Presbyteries will be gone! Conferences will be gone: and in their place, those two courts replaced by one solitary court, known as a Region. While the pace of change is too dramatic for some, and not dramatic enough for others, what is clear is that no one really knows how any of it is going to turn out: whether the right things are being changed in a denomination that continues to struggle to find its identity in a changed Canada. But here as well...

...in this matter also, as I ponder the life not of one congregation but of an entire denomination...

...here, as well—as my denomination moves through this time of challenge and of change—I find myself wondering...

...find myself wondering not so much, what would Jesus **do?**...

...but more basically, what would Jesus **think?** What would Jesus think...how would Jesus regard a shrinking but far from disappeared mainline Protestant denomination in the year of our Lord 2018? And not just any old Jesus...but specifically **this** Jesus: the one who sits in the Temple courtyard and casually informs his disciples that the Temple's days are numbered. Impossible for me...impossible for me not to wonder how he might respond to the life of this very different institution, a church which has yet to celebrate its 100th birthday, but which already feels as if it has become a candidate for life-support.

And it is important, here, to avoid overly broad generalizations. Jesus' conflict not only with the establishment of the Jerusalem Temple but with the Temple itself, appears to have been a very specific conflict, rooted in theological issues specific to that time and place, specific to that particular institution. Neither Trinity United Nanaimo, nor the United Church of Canada, are to be equated with the Jerusalem Temple. And yet! The seeming nonchalance with which Jesus challenges his disciples not merely to "see" the Temple...but to "see through" the Temple, is something I find both illuminating and chastening. Because my gut tells me...my gut tells me that "institutions"—that the life of institutions such as Trinity United and the United Church of Canada—mean a great deal more to me than they did to my Lord. And yes...I find that illuminating...but also...but also...humbling and chastening.

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Permit me to point a light at the happy—at the potentially life-giving—dimension to all of this: by acknowledging the fact that this is likely a morning when those millions of Canadians who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious" would find themselves sitting-up, taking notice and perhaps even nodding in agreement: nodding in agreement with a Jesus who seems far more interested in what God is doing behind the scenes, than in the seemingly solid fortifications with which we surround ourselves in congregational and denominational life. I would be lying were I to pretend that the

“spiritual but not religious” siren-song does not, on occasion, sing to my soul. After a long meeting...of a committee, a congregation, a Presbytery, a Conference, a General Council (God help me)...

...after a long, drawn out meeting, of any or all of the above, were I immediately questioned as to whether I was “spiritual or religious”, I’m pretty sure I would come down on the “spiritual” side of that equation. And yes: when I view the struggles of congregations I admire...

...including this remarkable congregation that has refused to throw in the towel over a 40 year span that has included some pretty lean years...

...or when I consider the life of the United Church of Canada which can so often break my heart, but which remains the Church in which I first heard the Gospel...

...when I weigh all of that I cannot bring myself simply to shrug my shoulders and say: “Why does it matter? Why does it matter how things turn out with this church or that church, with this denomination or that denomination?” While I can’t go quite as far as one colleague, who cheekily insists that she is choosing to be “religious but not spiritual”...what I can say, as a person who understands our frustration with institutions including religious institutions...

...what I can say is that we human beings, in every facet of our lives, instinctively form institutions. From the instinct that causes us to form families, to the instinct that causes us to band together for mutual defence and protection, to the instinct that causes us to form trade and craft guilds, to the instinct that causes us to worship together: we human beings demonstrate, over and over again, that very few of us are called to be hermits. And so, ironically—despite the fact that Jesus could direct so much of his own venom toward the perversion of institutional life including the perversion of the life of religious institutions—the very fact that he, in turn, called disciples...

...called and **trained** followers...

...pretty much guaranteed that an institution would take shape upon his departure from this world. And that is precisely what **did** take place with the formation of the church. Whether or not Jesus himself would recognize in our life-together, anything of his original aspirations for those he would leave behind, the fact remains that the Jesus movement—flawed and fragile though it may well be—is a far more fitting legacy than any other: a living **community** to represent a living **Lord**. Trust me. As much as I will often say, when asked to share my story, that I **read** my way into the church...as much truth as there is in that statement...at the end of the day, had I not begun attending worship on a weekly basis, 38 years later I would still be doing nothing more than reading books about Christianity. Reading those books, in and of

themselves, would not have made me a Christian. I needed this institution! I needed to be institutionalized. I needed the Church. I needed you.

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Here's the thing; here's where I find myself landing when I ponder my own acknowledged need for this place...this congregation...this denomination...

...when I ponder that and then place that need in the presence of my iconoclastic Lord, with his shaking of this and every other human foundation...with his confidence that God can tear down that impressive Jerusalem Temple and raise it back up in the blink of an eye...

...when I hear all of that, what I know I need to take-away from all of that as I seek to play my role, as I seek to play my part in leaving behind healthy congregations and a healthy denomination...

...when I hear my Lord's voice in the midst of all of that human yearning and striving and hoping...

...what I am certain I need to hear in his voice, (beyond the important reminder that **we should not take ourselves too seriously**, coupled with the equally important reminder that **we should learn to laugh at ourselves at least some of the time**)...

...what I **also** need to hear, above all from Him, is Christ's assurance that behind the changing fabric of even the best and sturdiest of human institutions, is the presence of God: the **reality** of God, the God who truly can and will shake our foundations, and yet the God whose compassion and strength will emerge even in the midst of the chaos, even in the midst of the changes, even in the midst of the disappointments and heartbreaks. Long ago, friends....long ago I threw away my crystal ball. I have no idea what will happen tomorrow...let alone what the Church will look like 100 years from now. But this I do know; of this much I am certain. In the words of the psalmist:

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling.*

Or in the words of the Lord Jesus: *"Heaven and earth will pass away. But my words will never pass away."*

The Gospel of Jesus Christ. Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ.