

Shaking the foundations¹

Luke 4:1-13

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St. Mark the Evangelist Anglican Church (Ottawa, ON)
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An earthquake, I am told, is a terrible thing to live through. The ground under your feet shakes; the earth rolls like the waves of the sea. You can't get your balance. The world around you comes crashing down. I'm told that the safest place to be in an earthquake is in a doorway, guarded by the frame of the door. But, good luck, if anything should fall behind or in front of you.

We often take for granted the fact that our earth is as stable as it is for the times that it is. We forget that underneath our feet the earth continues to shift and adjust millions of tons of material. You and I stand on what is only relatively stable but whose foundations are always changing, never fixed, unlike what some people in ancient times thought when they conceived our world as the stable centre of the universe. From the beginning, however, people have been reminded in a variety of ways that the world around them is anything but a stable centre.

An earthquake reveals buildings that are well built. We were told that in the recent earthquake in India, people died not primarily because of the upheaval of the ground, terrible as that was, but because of the poor construction of buildings that allowed even supposedly well built buildings to collapse, killing people in them and near them.

What John the Baptist proclaimed from the prophet Isaiah was that an earthquake was coming. It was coming to the jagged lands of Israel, marked by great hills and even mountains, overlooking deep valleys and wadis, a land so rough that only sheep can really graze there. But when that earthquake would come, Isaiah had said, it would shake the foundations of the world itself: those impenetrable hills and mountains with winding paths would be toppled, and when they were toppled they would fill the deep, jagged valleys. And so there would be a plain, a flat plain for the people to live on.

It is possible that John was proclaiming the kind of earthquake that had given shape to the Holy Land itself. When God created the heavens and the earth, and gave order to them, he carved a narrow spit of land off the great land mass that we now call Africa and pushed it like a needle, north into the Mediterranean Sea. This narrow spit of land, more Africa than Arabia or Europe or Asia, was perched precariously between the far-reaching Mediterranean sea on the one side and the scarred rift valley of the Jordan and the Dead Sea valley on the other. It was this land, this narrow, spit of land, that God had carved out for his future people to inhabit when God had shaken the earth's foundations once, twice, who knows how many times. There his people would find their home, perched on this precarious spit of land, between the sea and a valley with a profound and horrifying fault line running through it.

It was to this precarious land that God had called Abraham. What a gift! To Abraham, God gave this infertile, precarious, pile of rocks, perched between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea. What a gift! Surely Egypt would have been a gift or the mountains of Lebanon? This is a gift?

But, perhaps God did so so that Abraham would not rest in the land, or in the gift, but in the giver. For, to Abraham, God had given a greater gift than the land itself: a promise of God's presence with him and his family forever.

But, how quickly we forget. How quickly we begin to fashion for ourselves a story that the greatest gift that God could give us is this land. No matter how poor or small the land, we begin to make stories about how great that land is. How quickly we begin to praise the small and insignificant things that we do, as if they were great moments in history. No matter how insignificant, we begin to praise our own small deeds. How quickly, Abraham's descendants began to pride themselves in occupying the greatest land in the world and in being God's chosen people. They forgot that God had given them this land precisely so that they would have nothing in this world to rejoice in and would hope for a more beautiful land, a land that God would recreate in joy and thankfully give them.

And so, to bring them back to reality, at various times throughout the life of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God would shake the land on which they lived in the hope that they would return to him. One exile, followed by another. That should do it. Famine. War. Bad leadership. And for a time, each of these did drive the people back to God. But, never finally. So, God decided to open the floodgates and let all sorts of people into his family, people like you and me.

And the entry point will be through the fault-line that appears with the man the angel will call Jesus. An appearance that will be accompanied by shockwaves felt throughout the world and through time.²

These waves are first felt when Jesus enters the world. Matthew presents the shockwaves that are sent throughout the world as Magi come from Persia to see what they have only intuited from astronomical observation: a king of importance has been born in this little spit of land, and we must go and find out more. Herod feels the shockwaves and tries, by his kingly power, to stop them. But, you can't, and Herod will find out what happens to those who try to stand in the way of an earthquake.

The waves are felt as Jesus, slowly, almost imperceptibly, begins to change the rugged face of his landscape. One person at a time, one family at a time. Opening the doors to the sick, to sinners, to those who have failed in life, and finally, even to people like you and me, Gentiles. He starts in Galilee. There people's lives are shaken as Jesus opens his arms to those who are clearly unacceptable, that is, unlike them. And, then, on the road, Jesus moves toward Jerusalem, and the ground shakes as he walks. Not because he is carrying with him the might of military, not because he is changing governments and institutions along the way, but because along the way, he continues to welcome and minister to those who come to him, those who are unlike the people who claim him as their own.

Finally, Jesus comes to Jerusalem. Welcomed as a king he will be carried out of the city in the coffin of a criminal. He enters a Temple that is intended to purify the world, yet a place that has become so impure that it cannot possibly purify anyone, and at the end he will be shown to have been right when an earthquake shakes the Temple and tears the veil. He is challenged by those who have a stable and firm grasp on the ship of God and yet, He, the Son of God, will be mocked by these same, self-satisfied, religious leaders as he hangs there dying. And, at the centre of his time in Jerusalem, he will remind people of what John had said: an earthquake is coming and it will tear the world you know apart, so that only what is well built will stand.

And, when it is all over, when any little honour that he had through his life is stripped from him, so that in death, even in death, there is nothing, not even the name of a martyr, then God will shake the foundations of the earth itself and the earth will give back its dead. A new, living, never-to-die-again King, as much honoured by God with new life as he was dishonoured by men in death. He will lead his followers into all the world, on the road, not having places to rest their heads, having a place of rest, as George Herbert once wrote, only in God's breast.

And so God will shake the foundations of the earth and bring into being a new people, a people from every land and tongue, who will be God's people as God intended from the beginning. And it will always be good.

Right? No, you and I know that the people of God today, just as in the day of Moses, or David, or Elijah, or Judas Maccabee, tend to fall back into the very kinds of behaviour and culture. We tend to settle down and rather than living on the road with Jesus, we like the comfort of our homes and our bondages. Why, even the early church would not have moved out of the upper room had not the spirit of God driven them out like a mighty wind! They would not have left Jerusalem for the world had it not been for the death of Stephen and the repercussions of his death. But, that comfort not only causes us to turn our devotion from God to God's gifts to us; that comfort also causes us to exalt the very kind of attitudes and behaviour that killed Jesus. We tend to make of others the object of our control. We tend to revel in our own righteousness and goodness.

And, this is why God continues to bring our way, from time to time, an earthquake to shake our foundations. Sometimes it comes in the form of difficulties. Sometimes it comes in the form of tragedy. Sometimes these are individual. Sometimes they affect our families. Sometimes they are society-wide or world-wide, as with war, depression, famine, epidemics. They are earthquakes that the astute hearer, the one who has ears to hear, will hear and see for what they are: opportunities to see what really remains AFTER the earthquake.[3](#)

As you may know, Lent is a time of preparation and examination that began in the Middle Ages as people sought to understand the earthshaking events around them: war, natural disasters, plagues. They sought in the midst of the earthquake that was their life to find something solid to hold on to.

Lent is the perfect time for us to conclude our study of the Holy Land, a Land that was born out of the natural earthquakes that created the land itself, a Land that was continually molded by the earthquakes of armies raging across it from north to south. It is the perfect time to envision the earthshaking events of our Lord's birth, ministry, and death. And it is the perfect time to know how crucial it is that we not avert our faces from the earthshaking realities of our lives, but that we allow them to drive us into the world, with a message of solid hope for those who do not know hope.

It is the perfect time to prepare ourselves for the shaking that we shall experience in our lives. And, so, in our study together we will also look at (1) the solid foundation on which to build (for no matter how beautiful your building or how well built it may be, if it is built on sand or a swamp, it will fall), (2) building well (not earthquake proof, but earthquake sound), (3) preparing for the "big one", and (4) when earthquakes hit and shake loose what needs to be shaken loose, how do we re-build and build even better.

Thus we shall begin our study with Jesus' birth and we shall conclude our study with a reflection of our own being driven into the world. In doing so, I think that we shall learn more fully the truth behind the

words that Herbert O'Driscoll wrote: "From the aging shrines and structures, from the cloister and the aisle, let my people seek their freedom in the wilderness awhile": so the Son of God has spoken and the storm clouds are unfurled, for his people must be scattered to be servants in the world." Out of the ashes of what is destroyed by the earthquake, ashes of what cannot endure to the end, ashes that will be scattered by the earthquake and the wind, will arise true, new life that will last forever and that can never be moved by any earthquake, even if the whole world perish.

And now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, be all honour and glory, majesty and dominion, both now and forever more. AMEN.

1 It was strange feeling to have written this sermon some time before February 28, 2001, only to find out that same day about the earthquake that hit the Seattle area. My niece is a member of the disaster control coordination team for one of the counties affected.

2 If you don't think that shockwaves are felt around the world, ask people in California whether they are worried about the Seattle earthquake, hundreds of miles to the north of them, but whence their hydroelectric power comes!

3 One of the lines from the National Public Radio reports about the earthquake was this: "the facades of the older buildings were among the first things to go". The implications of that phrase clearly transcend engineering!