

“In The Footsteps of the Lord, Part One: The Prophet”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for February 9th 2020 (Fifth Sunday after Epiphany)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 21: 1-17

The Apostle’s Creed is far from perfect! And yes, it goes without saying although I am now going to say it!

It goes without saying that the proposition “the Apostle’s Creed is far from perfect” may seem like a very odd statement to be coming from the lips of someone who has already inflicted upon this congregation a dozen sermons based on that Creed: a Creed for which I have a high regard. But a high regard is not the same thing as perfection...and there is, I suggest, at least one aspect of the Apostle’s Creed...

...to be precise, one critical omission from the Apostle’s Creed...

...which I, for one, would regard as fairly serious.

Consider. Consider that for the past six weeks, we have pondered the opening section of the Creed’s second paragraph, it’s central paragraph, the one that introduces us to the figure of Jesus Christ. However! Consider that this paragraph, having noted that “he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary” immediately goes on to state that he “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.” And yes: if you are anything like me, you will likely find yourself unsettled by the fact that the Creed jumps from his birth pretty much to his death. What about all the stuff that happens in between?

And, you know: I have colleagues for whom that gap—the gap between the “born of the Virgin Mary” and the “suffered under Pontius Pilate”—plays a key role as to why they have very little use for the Apostle’s Creed. But frankly...frankly I think that is terribly unfair. Why so?

It seems to me...seems to me that each era in the Church’s history has something to teach us about our shared faith: a faith which not only spans the globe but spans the past 20 centuries. Given the momentousness of the challenge the Church faced at the start of its existence—the twin challenge of coming to terms, on the one hand, with Christ’s essential identity as God’s Word made flesh and, on the other hand, coming to terms with the meaning of his death and resurrection—why should we find it surprising that the Creed attempts to provide a framework in which those things are settled. For that reason, it should not surprise us that classic concerns from the Reformation—such classic Reformation themes as “by faith alone”, “by grace alone”, “by scripture alone—don’t really make their way into the Apostle’s Creed since the shapers of that Creed, more than 1500 years ago, were not wrestling with such issues.

Nor, ought it surprise us that this ancient creed doesn't address the classic concerns we moderns tend to bring as we wrestle with our faith. And the fact is:

For over 200 years, there has been a keen interest in the life of Jesus including—though hardly limited to—the so-called quest for the historical Jesus. While I have neither the credentials—nor a particular interest, to be frank—in the results of the “academic” quest for Jesus...

...a quest which has undergone all kinds of shifts and changes over the past two centuries...

...what I do have—indeed what brought me into the Church in the first place—is a keen interest in the man Jesus as he is presented in the New Testament: an interest that goes way beyond (and in my case frankly preceded) curiosity about his birth and his death. For me, the main items which attracted me to the Gospel and eventually to the Church, were all the things that were said to have happened between his birth and death: things I had and still have no ability to analyze making use of sophisticated scholarly historical-critical techniques, but things which jump out to me from the four Gospels themselves, especially the first three Gospels: Mark, Matthew and Luke. And that, quite simply, is what I am proposing for us for this morning and for the next five Sundays. Letting go of the Apostle's Creed—which will be waiting for us in late March when I propose we return to it: directing our attention instead to a series of vignettes, all of them drawn from Matthew's Gospel, which when pondered side by side, provide what I regard as a compelling portrait of this Jesus. A compelling six-sided, six-dimensional portrait of the figure who continues to invite us to discipleship...who continues to invite us to walk in his footsteps, and as we do so, to ask: “What do you see?” “What do you observe?” And yes! “Who do you say I am?”

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First and foremost—or so I wish to argue, this morning—and foundational to all the rest is my belief that we would have no choice, were we one of Christ's contemporaries, but to see him—first and foremost—as a **prophet**. A prophet. A prophet very much cut from the mold of the great Old Testament prophets who preceded him.

The first clue, of course, that this is the case can be found in Jesus' emergence from within the circle of those who were part of the ministry of John the Baptist. When you consider the key “parties” that were part of the Jewish world at the time of Jesus—the Sadducees and the Pharisees, the Zealots and the monastics—it is obvious that the Baptist represents a way apart from the way found in any of those movements: with the Baptist calling for a personal and corporate spiritual renewal for the Jewish people—**all** of the people not only the monastics—a call for renewal that is entirely in line with the spiritual renewal the prophets sought at an earlier time in ancient Israel's history. As a matter of fact: when I first began to ponder this morning's time of worship, I considered making use of Matthew's depiction of the Baptist as our scripture reading. But then I

noticed something...something quite delightful that I had never noticed before in Matthew's telling of Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

And I realize...I realize full well, that there is something a wee bit odd about hearing this narrative in mid-February when we are far more accustomed to hearing it on Palm Sunday which, after all, is nearly 2 months away. But once I noticed that quirky little feature, I could not resist sharing it with you.

For starters, recall that there were three great "offices" which emerged in ancient Israel, "offices" which were eventually deeply woven into the fabric of the life of the Jewish people: the "office" of the prophet, the "office" of the Priest and that of the King. And yes: I realize that subsequent Christian theology has come to see something of **each** office in the person and work of Jesus Christ who is our great Prophet, our great High Priest, our Messiah King. I get that! But remember that my hope, this morning, is that we will try (using Matthew's Gospel as our lens) to see Jesus as his contemporaries might have seen him. And what makes Matthew's telling of the Palm Sunday story so wonderfully delightful is that it involves the use of symbols and props which would have clearly suggested to a knowledgeable onlooker that Jesus, as he enters the city of Jerusalem on the week before his death, is entering that city as the Messiah **King**. And yet...here's the real punchline:

When the entire city of Jerusalem finds itself in an uproar as he enters through its gates, and when they ask "Who is this?", the crowds don't answer by saying: "Here comes Jesus the Messiah King!". No! Despite all of the royal pageantry and symbolism, the crowd answers the question "Who is this?" with the most straightforward and revealing of answers: "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee." This is the prophet! The prophet Jesus.

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It is at this juncture, I think, that we will be well served if we pause briefly, to recall just what it is that the Hebraic tradition is referring to, when it speaks of a "prophet". The key expression runs as follows: "Thus saith the Lord." That, in a nutshell, is the best quick-and-dirty definition of what scripture means when it speaks of the prophets: those who are entitled to take upon their human lips that weighty expression: "Thus saith the Lord." In short: those who are entitled to speak on behalf of God, indeed: to speak God's very words and to express God's very thoughts.

Please note! Implicit here is a very peculiar world-view, one that tends to see something of a gulf between God and the world, something of a gulf between humanity and its Creator, something of a vast chasm between the human and the divine. In a very real sense, the job of the prophet—better still, the **vocation** of the prophet since that isn't a job one can simply take upon oneself—the vocation of the prophet is to be, within the world of humanity, something of the spokesperson for the world of God....so vast and strange and in so many ways...so utterly alien from our world. No wonder the prophetic word so often takes the form of a word of judgment: judgment meant to be

heard not as one well-meaning human busybody commenting on the affairs of other human busybodies, rather words spoken by a chosen one, chosen to represent God in the midst of our fragmented, fallen world.

Nor is it surprising that the prophet's words are often accompanied by prophetic actions: like the action taken by Christ when he cleanses the Temple. Far too much ink has been spilled, I suspect, debating whether Jesus was angry when he cleansed the Temple, over-turning the tables of those doing business in its courtyards. Frankly, Jesus' emotions at that moment in time are no more relevant than Ezekiel's emotions when he undertook to bring God's word to bear on ancient Israel with prophetic actions (some fairly weird prophetic actions!) to accompany his prophetic words. What matters is the action itself: a prophetic action—in the case of Christ's—in which the tables are literally turned, not only on those doing business upon them, but upon the Temple itself: a Temple which would be overturned—destroyed—within a few short decades, a Temple which has yet to be rebuilt nearly 20 centuries later.

And it is worth noting...worth noting that the office of prophet grew up in ancient Israel around the same time as the office of the Kings. If you know your Old Testament, you may recall that God was highly reluctant to give Israel a King...and only did so with great reluctance. When you read that portion of the Old Testament carefully, it's hard to shake the impression that God—in effect—is saying to the Israelites: "Okay, kids! Well and good. If you really want kings, I'll give you kings. But I'll give the kings the prophets....to keep them in check every step of the way." But, of course, it isn't only the kings who are given a hard time by the prophets. Indeed! What is likely the earliest book of prophecy in the Bible—the book Amos—includes a famous encounter between the prophet, and the Priest Amaziah who (after consulting with the King) tells Amos to hit the road "Jack": which Amos does but only after sharing a few choice thoughts of his own. Always prepared to speak God's word....always ready to shine the light of God on our personal and institutional failures...the prophets are an indispensable part of our life of faith....which doesn't mean that they are always fun to have around...which doesn't mean it isn't tempting to show them the door....or in extreme circumstances: to place them on a cross.

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A final thought.

I did the basic legwork on this morning's service a number of weeks ago: selecting the text, finding the prayers, choosing the hymns. But I didn't get to this sermon until Friday: which, in truth, is a day earlier than I normally get to my sermons. When I began gathering my thoughts on Friday, I began by doing what I normally do, which is to remind myself of the other elements that would be part of our worship here this morning. And I must say: I was especially struck by my choice of the hymn we will shortly sing. (**More Voices, #137: "Welcome Jesus, You are Welcome"**) Frankly I have no idea why I chose it back in January....

...but what I do know, in the aftermath of pondering **this** Jesus—Jesus the prophet...

....what I do know is that this is the Jesus that it would be very tempting to show the door...this is the Jesus on whose behalf it would be tempting to change the lock and throw away the key...indeed, this is the Jesus on whose behalf we need especially to be diligent so that he truly is welcomed here: welcomed here where he is entirely capable of turning the tables on our comfortable arrangements with no more regard for our tender sensibilities than for the sensibilities of those who stood behind the tables in the Temple courtyard on the momentous occasion when he erupted in their midst. That's true on a deeply personal level, where the prophet Jesus is more than capable of asking all of the tough questions I would just as soon duck...and it's certainly true at the level of the Church: where we can always find ourselves creating programs that manufacture busyness and processes that keep us even busier, and yet manage to yield a world of religious busyness that actually has nothing to with the One who has called us to be here. And yes...to **that** One, as a first critical step, surely we must always find the wherewithal to say: "Welcome Jesus, You are Welcome Here." Shake us as you please. Stir us as you see fit. Turn over the tables of our cherished assumptions and procedures. But despite it all...in fear and trembling...for us to find the wherewithal to say: Jesus you are welcome here!

...the whole city was stirred up, saying "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

Thanks be to God!