

IN THE BEGINNING

November 18, 2018

Pentecost 26

[1st Samuel 1:10-18](#)

[Mark 13:1-8](#)

(prayer)

In Hebrew, the book of Genesis is known as *b'reishit*. It is the first word of verse one. It means “in [the] beginning”.

The late first century author of the gospel of John intentionally echoed this tradition [*en archē* in Greek] to start that Jesus narrative... *in the beginning is the word*.

In both of these texts, it is referencing a *time before time*: back in the endless reaches of the past... that eternal instant before and when God created.

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I think that I am like most people who don't find it all that difficult to imagine time progressing forward into an endless infinity. But, in reverse, it is hard to get my head around an infinite past. I mean, I can kind of accept the concept that God has always existed. But doesn't everything else... even time itself have to have a starting point.

Although, the dominate theory of the universe begins with a *big bang*, it doesn't preclude there being some pre-big-bang reality. How far back does your mind allow things to go back?

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The authors of Genesis and John simply summed up all of

that pre-existence history as *b'reishit/en archē*... in the beginning.

In other old testament contexts, *b'reishit* is used to indicate the start of a new king's reign: the start of a new era. Years were usually marked in relation to the ruler. For example, 2nd Kings 23:23 says *In the eighteenth year of King Josiah the passover was kept to the Lord in Jerusalem.*

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Time may be eternal, but we are always coming up on new beginnings: times when our context shifts.

Both of today's scripture readings speak about such times.

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Hannah welcome motherhood into her life after assuming that she would never have children.

Now, in the fullness of the Samuel story, Hannah's motivations to be a mother is kind of a sad commentary of the cultural expectations of her time. She was one of two wives of Elkanah, and there was an atmosphere of competition between Peninnah and Hannah. The author of First Samuel called them *rivals*.

Penninah (who had children) relentlessly tried to irritate and provoke Hannah because of her barrenness.

Elkanah didn't help with this rivalry because he clearly played favorites: giving Hannah extra things here and there.

We might lament that - in her world - Hannah saw her personal worthiness and the health of her married as a direct

function of her ability to bear children.

This is sadder still when we realize that after she finally has Samuel, as soon as he was weaned off her breast milk, Hannah sent him away from their home in Ramah to live with Eli to be a priest's assistant. It seems that she wanted to give birth more than to raise a child.

Nevertheless, with the birth of Hannah's child, a new era began that affected the history of Israel. Samuel grew to be one of Hebrew history's most influential prophets. Samuel was central to determining who would be the first kings of Israel.

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The Mark scripture brings to mind changing eras in the context of some of Jesus' disciples assuming that the grand stone buildings of Jerusalem were built to last. Even they knew their own history. That the magnificent temple they visited was a recently renovated version of the second temple built to replace Solomon's temple that was left in ruins after a siege by the Babylonian Empire six centuries earlier.

Some day, all this will be thrown down!

A new time, very different from now, is coming.

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In my line of work, I get to visit a lot of cemeteries. Old

head stones eventually succumb to decades of wind and rain, smoothing out the edges of the etched letters. Modern granite markers are designed to be a bit more enduring, but given enough time, their voice will go silent too.

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This is normal. It is how our world works.

No one and no thing lives in isolation of others.

We are affected by changing contexts... even if it takes a long time for that change to be noticeable.

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Jesus reminds his disciples that changes (good and less-good; life enhancing and energy-draining) are part of the normal course of the world.

It was a reality-check for the followers. There will be wars - there will be famines - there will be all kinds of difficulties along with the good news you are proclaiming and experiencing with me.

But, don't let that discourage you beyond hope.

It is like the experience of child birth, Jesus says, *labour pains are followed by new life.*

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Earlier this month, your church council organized a gathering of various community groups, so that we could hear about others are doing within their spheres of influence. The goal of this *community dialogue* is for St. David's to think

about how we might be part of things bigger than ourselves.

I believe that churches are healthier when they are continuously exploring how they are fitting into their wider contexts.

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This past Friday, I braved the icy roads and joined others to mark the winding up of Yellowhead Presbytery with a roast beef dinner and memory sharing.

The context for that gathering is that, on January 1st, the United Church of Canada will begin living into its new three level wider church governance structure. The 94 Presbyteries and 13 Conferences are being replaced by 16 Regions.

Over the past year, there has been lots of story telling and nostalgizing (is that a word?). Recently, at what might have been my last meeting of the YHP executive, I read a report on the current state of some United Church *communities of faith* that are currently between ministers or have no plans to have a regular minister. So many of these small, struggling churches have had to admit that they have likely waited too long to respond to the realities of their changing contexts.

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I heard about one small town congregation whose main purpose of being seems to be to stay open long enough to celebrate its one hundredth anniversary.

Another congregation has spent decades ignoring the state of their building to the point that when they offered it to

the town council, the politicians and bureaucrats declined because the retrofit needs are prohibitive.

Another church had its minister retire last year. The normal procedure in the UCCan would be for the congregation to go through a process of assessing their church ministry needs and capacities. This is one of the areas of church life, when the Presbytery and Congregations work together. The report I read simply said, *This Pastoral Charge does not wish to be in a [joint needs assessment process] at this time.*

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2018 is not as easy as 1958 to be *The Church*.

The church is not persecuted. There is no movement afoot to systematically discourage people from being part of faith communities. But...

Gone are the days when secular governments forced businesses to stay closed on Sundays.

Gone is the cultural shaming of people who didn't go to church.

Church becomes part of a person's life and routine not out of a reluctant sense of obligation, but because church has value in their life. It adds something to our existence.

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Communities of Faith that want to be relevant and healthy today and have hope in a relevant and healthy future **must** be aware of their evolving contexts. It must be work that excites the church more than they are stressed about old

programs and practices that are trying to fade away.

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To be relevant followers of Jesus on the cusp on 2019, we must be open, flexible. We must avoid complacency and embrace the change and newness that the Spirit is injecting into our lives.

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In a letter to the Corinthian Christians, the apostle Paul reminded the church that *anyone in Christ is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* (2Cor5:17)

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Jesus invited the people mending fishing nets: *Come, follow me and I will have you fish for people.*

From the beginning, a walk with Jesus was an invitation to embark on the new opportunities ahead of us.

Why, oh why, are churches afraid of changing contexts?

“Following” Jesus implies movement and progress, not stagnation.

Followers embrace the new.

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Don't be afraid, our Christ says, *my love is stronger than your fear.* (c.f. #90MV)

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Let us pray:

Eternal God, help us to live with hope, love and courage as

we travel Jesus' way. Amen.

#703VU “In the Bulb There is a Flower”