

## Shaken and Stirred

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Jer. 31:7-9; Mark 10:46-52

Imagine that some Sunday morning, we're all here--and Jesus walks in. Would he recognize all of this as having anything to do with his teachings? The furnishings would be strange and the proceedings conducted in a language that didn't exist when he walked the earth. And what do you suppose he'd make of that stained glass window up there?

I also wonder what Jesus would make of some of the things we expend our collective energies on, like paying the heat bill, or patching the latest leak in the building, or dealing with interrupted Internet service. Surely he never envisioned real estate as a major focus for his followers.

Antonio Machado summarizes Jesus' teachings in a poem: "All your words were one word: *Wakeup*." Jesus was a fully awake human being who tried to get the rest of us to wake up, too. Founding an institution was not part of his agenda. Others did that. Over time, the church became the guardian of a great treasure, the Way, the knowledge of how to be awake. We might say that the church is at the most basic level a tool for holding and transmitting those teachings and practices that enable us to wake up.

Of course, every work of human hands needs adjustment and refurbishment from time to time if it is to keep on fulfilling its purpose, and the church is no exception. Phyllis Tickle says that about every five hundred years the church cleans out its closets and has a big rummage sale.<sup>1</sup> The last time that happened, Martin Luther and some others challenged certain church doctrines, such as the notion that only priests could read and interpret the scriptures or pray. They got rid of a major fundraising scheme, the sale of papal indulgences and pardons, which paid for things like the construction of St. Peter's Basilica. Thanks to the efforts of those bold and determined Reformers, we have Bibles and hymnals that allow us to worship and pray and read the scriptures in our own language. Thanks to the Reformation, we speak directly to God, without the mediation of a priest. Ironically, nearly all the things we think of as "normal" in the church came into being during that great shakeup of the church we call the Reformation.

Yet change is not the first thing that comes to mind when we think about the church. There is a light bulb joke that goes:

"How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb?"

"*Change* it? I'll have you know my grandmother gave the church that light bulb!"

It's not just Episcopalians, of course. We may know in our heads that God is Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of a dynamic, restless universe. But our hearts--ah, our hearts--bring us to church in the hope of getting *away* from the constant motion of life in the world. We come in search of comfort, familiarity, stability--something we can count on just to hold still for a little while, a place where we recognize most of the faces and know the words to the hymns.

One of my favorite stories concerns a young bride (in the days when women were the default cooks, whether they knew how to cook or not). Getting ready to bake a ham for the first time, she called her mother for advice. Her mother told her to heat the oven then get two pans, cut the ham in two pieces, and put half in each pan before baking.

"Why do you cut the ham in half?" she wanted to know.

"Because that's how my mother always did it," was the reply. Curious, the daughter called her grandmother.

"Grandma, Mom showed me how to cook a ham the way you always did it. But one question: why do you cut the ham in half?"

"Oh," the grandmother replied with a laugh. "It's because when I was first married, I didn't have a pan big enough to hold the whole ham."

In the church we are inclined to keep on doing the same thing, generation to generation, even if the light bulb burned out a long time ago. Now, none of us took a vote on this, but we happen to be living right in

the middle of one of those 500-year garage sales Phyllis Tickle talks about—in other words, another Reformation. The church is once more getting thoroughly shaken and stirred. Those of us of a certain age may wax nostalgic about the days when women wore hats and gloves to church, Sunday Schools were bursting with children, and pastors and deacons were all heterosexual men, but still we like some of the ways church has changed. The shaking process may not be comfortable for us, but it is allowing more truth to be brought to light.

Look around at churches of varying denominations and theological expressions and you'll see some that are trying to resist the winds of change, desperately clinging to the old order (that once was the *new* order). You'll also see some congregations re-inventing church through rediscovered spiritual practices, like meditation and labyrinth walks, and creating new ministries and forms of worship. There are exciting theological discussions breathing fresh life into these churches. (See Matthew Fox's 95 Theses to get a flavor of some of them.<sup>2</sup>)

These changes moving through churches indicate a fundamental shift in the way we think about our faith and how we practice it. Diana Butler Bass (who happens to be a native of Baltimore) has studied a number of these dynamic, growing congregations. An experience she relates in her book *Christianity for the Rest of Us*<sup>3</sup> becomes an analogy for the kinds of major changes that are taking place in the church.

She and her husband were traveling from Pennsylvania to Virginia when they got caught in a construction mess on the Baltimore Beltway. The MapQuest instructions they had printed from the computer became useless when they got stuck. So using a tattered paper atlas from the back seat, they followed surface street signs until they found a street with little traffic that soon had them on their way. Butler Bass writes:

Some Christians think that faith is like a set of MapQuest directions—that there is only a single highway to God. After all, Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” . . . Like computer-generated directions, this road is predetermined, distant, and authoritative. You cannot exit this freeway or deviate from the route without peril. Taking a creative risk . . . leads directly to hell or destruction. . . . Better stick to the map. Follow the plan.

But what if Jesus is not a MapQuest sort of map, a superhighway to salvation? What if Jesus is more like old-fashioned street signs in a Baltimore neighborhood, navigated by imagination and intuition? . . . When Jesus said “Follow me,” he did not say “Follow the map.” Rather he invited people to . . . walk with him on a pilgrimage toward God.

How, then do we get there? How do we follow the Jesus Way?

You have to exit the highway, risk getting lost, and follow the signposts on the ground.

Risk getting lost? Yikes! Where's the good news in that?

It is important to understand that the pastoral transition that this congregation is undergoing coincides with this new Reformation that is sweeping through the church. You can't help feeling loss and dislocation at a time like this, and maybe feeling anxious, too, wondering what will become of you now.

The church may often be risk-averse, but sometimes the Spirit brings us to newness in spite of ourselves.

Regardless of what you may be feeling right now, this interim time is a wonderful opportunity for this congregation to look at who you are and to take a fresh look at the environment in which you are called to ministry. The “signposts on the ground” out there in the world as well as the spirit here in this gathered community lead me to believe that God has plans for this church, and that you are going to be stirred in ways that will lead to a new infusion of energy and purpose.

A few minutes ago we listened to the words of Jeremiah describing the tenderness of God leading the people home from captivity to a life of joy and abundance. That same God is even now shaking and stirring the church universal to new life and vitality. That same God walks with you even now and in days to come, will lead you into a vibrant future in the service of justice and love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Great Emergence*, Baker Books, 2008, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/spiritual-uprising/1326#>

<sup>3</sup> HarperCollins, 2006.