Sunday, October 24, 1976
FUTURE SHOCK AND FUTURE CUSHIONS
Matthew 16:13-20

Many of us have the vague feeling that things are moving faster in this life, perhaps too fast! Physicians, executives, people in all kinds of jobs and vocations often complain that they cannot keep up with the latest developments in their fields. Hardly a meeting or a conference takes place without some ritualistic oratory about the "challenge of change." Among many there is an uneasy mood — a suspicion that change is out of control. Thus, we often talk of "future shock."

The rate of change in our world can be illustrated by a quick survey of the change in transportation. In 6000 B.C. the fastest transportation available to human beings over long distances was the camel caravan, averaging eight miles an hour. It was not until 1600 B.C. when the chariot was invented that the maximum speed was raised to roughly 20 miles per hour.

So impressive was this invention, so difficult was it to exceed this speed limit, that nearly 3500 years later when the first mail coach began operating in England, in 1784, it averaged a mere 10 mph. The first steam locomotive, introduced in 1825, could go at a top speed of only 13 mph and the great sailing ships of the time labored along at less than half that speed. It was probably not until the 1880s that human beings with the help of a more advanced steam locomotive managed to reach a speed of 100 mph. It took the human race millions of years to attain that record.

It took only 58 years, however, to quadruple that speed, so that by 1938, airborne human beings were going 400 mph and more. It took a mere 20-year period to double that speed again. Now of course persons in space capsules circle the earth at 18,000 mph and faster. And what's true of what's happened in the transportation field is true of almost all aspects of life.

Again, it's this rate of change in much of our living that causes us to speak of "future shock." At the same time, most of us have our own way of dealing with "future shock." We do our best to provide "future cushions" which will absorb or deal with the shock.

Some people, for example, try to fashion a future cushion by simply denying that change occurs. Others specialize. The specialist doesn't block all novel ideas or information. Instead, he energetically attempts to keep pace with change--but only in a specific narrow sector of life. So, we can see the spectacle of a physical or financier who makes use of all the latest innovations in his or her profession but remains rigidly closed to any suggestion for social, political, or economic innovation.

Some people seek simple and naive answers. "Police maintained order in the past; hence to maintain order in a changed society, we need only supply more police." Authoritarian treatment of children worked in the past; hence, the troubles of the present spring from permissiveness.

Another way of attempting to cushion future shock is that of the "super-simplifier." This kind of person seeks a single neat equation that will explain all the complex forces threatening to engulf him. Thus, the super-simplifier, groping desperately, invests every idea he comes

across with universal relevance. “Maximization of profit,” he says, “explains America.” The communist conspiracy explains riots and unrest everywhere and anywhere.

There are also people who handle the shock of change by establishing their own “personal stability zones,” areas of life where things remain stable. All of us have a few of our own personal stability zones. Some people collect antiques and thus keep a sense of the past. Others have early American furniture. As a society, we construct museums. And part of the attractiveness to tourists of cities like Rome, Athens, or Jerusalem, is that they have an atmosphere which is the result of a long past, and which is sensed intuitively by the visitor, even if he or she is not very cultured. To have a sense of our roots in the past helps us to deal with the present and the future.

There are also other kinds of future cushions that transcend all change and rate of change. Look at it this way--a 19th century businessman travelled to Chicago in two weeks by stagecoach. His 1976 counterpart gets there in two hours by plane. However, when each arrives, he faces the same basic questions. Do I remain honest in my business dealings? Do I remain faithful to my wife? Where do I find a good meal? Regardless of science and technology, we live with certain eternal truths, and these are kinds of future cushions. Thus, what is most important in our lives is precisely that which does not change down through the ages — our familiar quests for justice, friendship, comfort, love, truth, order, our search for integrity, nourishment, beauty, honesty, and family. These are human constants. They are and will continue to be the measure of all change.

And there’s no other institution in all the world that keeps alive these quests more than the church of Jesus Christ. In fact, it is based on the only eternal cushion there is — on the Living God!

In our scripture lesson read earlier, Jesus asked his disciples what people were saying about him. Who did they think he was? He got several different answers. But then he asked them personally, “But who do you say that I am?” It was Simon Peter who replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus said to Peter, “You are Peter, and, on this rock, I will build my church, and the powers of death and hell shall not prevail against it.”

Jesus was saying to Peter and to people down through the ages, “When this kind of faith is present; when you recognize the Christ as God’s Savior, when you put your faith in the Living God as revealed by Jesus Christ, then you have a cushion against any present or future shock-- a cushion that nothing can destroy. When the church is built on this kind of faith, it too is indestructible. There’s no present or future cushion like it!”

1. Note first that this does not mean that faith in the Living God as revealed by Christ opposes all change or that it is a cushion that provides our lives with ease and comfort. The Living God often comforts the afflicted but afflicts the comfortable.

In fact, God is present and working in some of the change that occurs in our world. As the Bible reminds us — “God scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts. God puts down the mighty from their thrones and exalts those of low degree.” God is working in any change that promotes justice and community.

2. Note secondly, that when we are a part of the church and have the faith that Simon Peter professed, we have an eternal cushion which frees us from the false comforts and cushions by which we try to make our lives secure. God makes an uncomfortably exclusive claim upon us.

We are to give primary allegiance to God and that means we can only give secondary allegiance to anyone or anything else. Too often we give our ultimate loyalties to causes which turn out to be inadequate and false, to cushions which do not free but destroy.

If I seek my security in my whiteness, I discover that God does not love us according to our skin color and that skin color confers no special privileges in God's sight. To claim that it does creates barriers and is destructive in society. If I seek security in my maleness, telling myself that this is a man's world, I discover that in Christ there is neither male nor female and that sexist domination has no place in God's creation. If I seek security in my class situation, I discover that that too is a false cushion. The gates of death and hell can and do prevail against these.

3. Note thirdly, however, that when we place our faith in the Living God, we are freed to see the world in a new way. This is what it means to be converted! Again, this is the ultimate future cushion because then we know that if God is for us, who can be against us.

With this kind of faith, we can face any change and any threat because we have our roots much deeper than just in race or being male or female or in being rich or in being American.

4. But note in the fourth place, it is not enough to "see" something in a new v1ay, we are also to act upon what we see and know. Among other things for us today in this world, it means the support of the church of Jesus Christ, and for those of us who are members of this congregation, it means the monetary support of First-Plymouth Church. If as the Bible says, the church. is the one institution that is eternal and indestructible, then we are investing our money in the most important thing in the world.

This week, this church officially begins its annual every member canvass for money so that this congregation can continue to proclaim and live the truth that God so loved the world that God came to us in Jesus Christ.

This year in our Every Member Canvass we are emphasizing the fact of your need to give as a Christian, not so much because of what it will do for this church, but also because of what giving does for you. The only truly happy people I know are giving people.

"But how much should I give?" a person asked me the other day. "Make a pledge that you are not ashamed of or embarrassed about — a pledge that you would be willing to post on the bulletin board of this church for all to see, not because you wanted to brag about it, but because you were happy about it and not ashamed of it.

"But how do I begin to figure out what my pledge should be?" This year the Canvass Committee is asking that each one of us begin by asking ourselves — "What would my pledge to the church look like if I gave $1.00 per week for each $1,000 of my annual income. Thus, if my annual income is $20,000 per year, I should consider a pledge of $20 per week to the church or $1040 for the year." Some of our members pledge a lot more than this. Others will not be able to attain this standard at this time. The Canvass Committee does suggest that this is how to begin your decision making.

There is an ancient legend in Hebrew literature. It is a story about 36 righteous people by whose merit the world survives. The folklore of Judaism teaches that in every generation there are these 36 righteous people — saints. Nobody knows who they are, but were it not for their lonely example, the world would crumble.

One day, one of these 36 persons came to the sinful city of Sodom, determined to save its inhabitants from destruction. Night and day he walked the streets and markets preaching against greed and theft, falsehood and indifference. In the beginning, people listened and smiled ironically. Then they stopped listening. He no longer amused them. The killers went on killing, the corruption throughout the city remained the same, the people who knew better kept silent, as if there were no just person in their midst.

One day a child, moved by compassion for the unfortunate preacher approached him. with the words, “Poor stranger, you shout, you expend your body and soul; don’t you see that it is hopeless?” “Yes, I see” answered the righteous person. “Then, why do you go on?” asked the child. “I’ll tell you why,” answered the righteous one. “In the beginning I thought I could change human beings in this city. Today, I know I cannot. If I still shout today; if I still scream, it is to prevent the people of this city from changing me.”

Friends, few of us are saints. But we are living in a society of future shock, as well as a society where greed and theft and falsehood and callous indifference are not uncommon. I ask you to give and to give generously for the support of this church, first because of what giving generously will do for you. Like the righteous man in the story, it will keep reminding you that there is only one adequate present and future cushion for our lives and that is faith in the living God. Your giving is a concrete expression of your faith.

Secondly, I ask you to give generously, not only because of what it will do for you but also because the church is one of the few institutions which like the man in the story keeps reminding us that God cares, that there are eternal values, there is a Living God which transcends all the changes that constantly go on around us. Your giving to the church is an investment in eternity and there is no better future cushion anywhere. Amen.