

Shaking Earth and Rolling Seas
August 29, 2010
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An earthquake is one of the most frightening experiences ever. There is a fundamental assumption in our DNA that tells us to believe the ground is reliable, stable and secure. When it is not- we experience a primal panic- no matter how brave we are in the face of other experiences.

In a metaphorical sense, when all the stabilities we depend upon in our lives are in upheaval, we feel like we are about to crumble like a house of cards. You know the shaking: we learn someone we love is very sick, our friends, whose marriage we admire, tell us they are divorcing, a business closes and several hundred jobs are lost- including those of our children. We hear Carol King singing in our memories, "I feel the earth move under my feet." It seems that everyday there is another report of bad news, scary news or information that creates doubt, mistrust, and hatred and makes the ground we stand on feel unsubstantial.

One Sunday morning at Kirkwood Baptist church in St. Louis, a deacon interrupted the worship service with a frightening message. A member of our church was in a hostage situation. The note said that a woman was in the Missouri Baptist hospital emergency room with a shotgun and was holding the staff at gunpoint. We stopped everything we were doing that morning and prayed for everyone involved. Fortunately the situation was resolved without injury but the shock waves were felt throughout the community.

As the congregation was leaving, someone said, "It seems to me that the whole world is going through one collective, gigantic nervous breakdown." She was naming her sense of breaking-down madness, emotional and cultural upheaval and shaking.

How much can we stand? The American poet Mary Ann Moore wrote that in American life, when the door bell rings we secretly cry, "What fresh hell is this?" It used to be that bad news came by a Western Union. Now the shaking news is at the door, on the computer, on the blackberry. We have the sickening feeling the real upheaval is only beginning and our world and our culture are caught in a moral, political, spiritual madness. In our fear and uncertainty we ask God why?

One day a successful contractor told his chief carpenter that he was going to give the carpenter all the profit he made from building a new house. The carpenter decided that he would cut corners to increase his profit. When the plans called for 10 nailed joints he only did 6. When the plans called for expensive materials he used the cheapest. He shaved off a little here and a little there. The profit margin was looking good. When the house was finished the contractor toured the home and then gave his carpenter the keys to the house. "This is the house you built. It's yours."

When we build our lives with shoddy ideas, materialistic stucco and cheap, faddish girders, and the shaking comes, we don't have much to hold onto. In the play Green Pastures, the Angel Gabriel says to the Lord while looking at the earth, "Everything we nail down is coming loose."

Is there a word from the Lord for such a time as this? Scripture speaks again and again of what it means to live in a shaken time. The Bible tells us that our world will become shaken because we have constructed out of our selfishness and selfish structures are always unstable structures. And the hand that shakes the foundation of it all is the hand of God. The prophet Isaiah says, The earth and foundation of the earth is broken up, the earth is split asunder, the earth is thoroughly shaken. The earth reels like a drunken man under the weight of his transgressions....The earth falls-never to rise again. ISA 24.19,20

To what do we cling? If we hold on to our possessions- they will not hold us. Our work and careers cannot sustain us. If we are holding on to human desire, ambition, pleasure, pride, physical health and happiness there will come a day when we will be holding on to nothing at all, for these will all be shaken away. They will not remain.

And here is the most painful one of all. If our attachment is to another person, no matter how good or loving they are, no matter how much comfort and delight we find in them, if our real attachment is to them, we will come to a day of having nothing at all. For one by one they will all be torn away from us and we will be torn from them. It is the hardness of life and the reality of living. Every person, no matter how precious, is temporary and will not remain.

But the Bible also says that the shaking of our world is for the greater purpose of showing us the things that cannot be shaken. When God spoke from Mount Sinai his voice shook the earth. Now he makes another promise: "Once again I will shake not only the earth but the heavens also." All of creation will be shaken and removed, so that only unshakable things will remain. (Hebrews 12.26, 27)

The highest use of a shaken time is to discover the unshakable. When everything is shaken it is the time to look around and see what is not shaken and cling to that, and take hope.

"We are in this world as a ship at sea, liable to be tossed up and down, and in danger of being cast away. Our souls are the vessels. The comforts, expectations, graces, and happiness of our souls are the precious cargo with which these vessels are loaded. Heaven is the harbour to which we sail. The temptations, persecutions, and afflictions that we encounter, are the winds and waves that threaten our shipwreck. We have need of an anchor to keep us sure and steady, or we are in continual danger." (Matthew Henry Commentary on Hebrews 12.26)

What cannot be shaken? Again from Hebrews 12th chapter, Since we are receiving a Kingdom that is unshakable, let us be thankful and please God by worshiping him with holy fear and awe. (Hebrews 12.28)

Only the kingdom of God is unshakable. The work of God, reclaiming creation for his glory, the presence of God in Christ, who is the same yesterday- today- tomorrow and the peace of God, which is beyond all human understanding. If we are searching for a solid center where we can stand, be rooted, and be held firm no matter what else forsakes us, it can only be in the unseen, eternal and forever lasting hand of Christ, for he does not change. His compassion never fluctuates, his righteousness never wavers, and his faithful love is the center point on which all else revolves. Who is Christ? He is humble and lowly, gentle and gracious with all who knew they had sinned. He was fierce with the self-righteous who loved to break the weak to build their own shaky worlds. He is graceful with a loving welcome to all- to come, follow him into the kingdom of God.

It is by this holding on to Christ that we learn to hold each other. This is how we get our loving right. We know that we need each other. We want to hold onto each other. What grieves us most in a mortal world is that we will eventually lose each other. There is this hope. If we stop clinging to each other and cling instead to the one who holds us all, we will have each other- through Him. We need not fear separation. For he holds us, even when we are separated, in hands that are unshakable. All love that is in Christ remains forever. These three remain: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love." (1 Cor 13.13)

Christ is the same yesterday- today and forever. Count on it, cling to it, be rooted in it. And when the day comes when everything around you is shaken, and notices, I said, "When the day comes," not if, fall to your knees and hold dear to one who does not change in faithfulness.

In the early 17 century in England there were two great poets, John Donne and George Herbert, with Donne the older of the two. When Donne ceased to be a worldly man and entered into the service of Christ, he stopped using his old family seal and designed a new one. The seal was how they closed letters and certified documents. The seal he created was the figure of Christ, crucified on an anchor. The meaning for him was, "In a tempest world- to hope in the love of the crucified Christ, is all that holds us firme and secure."

When George Herbert was 3 years old his father died leaving Herbert and his nine siblings. John Donne became young George's godfather. Donne had a powerful impact on Herbert, who was a brilliant young man. He was a poet, served as a Member of Parliament and later an ordained minister. Herbert was assigned to his first Anglican parish when he was 36 years old. He only served 3 years before his death.

John Donne continued as a mentor to Herbert. Donne had a ring formed with his cross/anchor seal on it. He sent the ring to his young friend with a poem that included these words:

The cross, my seal of baptism spread below,
 does by that form into an anchor grow
Crosses grow anchors, bear, as thou shouldst do,
 thy cross. And that grows into an anchor too.

Crosses grow anchors. If your world is shaking and crashing down around you and the winds are blowing hard and you cannot imagine your future. You could do nothing better than find the ancient, secure place of humility and redemption, kneeling at the foot of the cross. It is an anchor. And if you will hold it....it will hold you. Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." (John 10.20 NIV)

An older man once said, "I have lived long enough to know that everything I have loved and known has been shaken. And, I have learned that what is unshaken is enough. It is more than enough. The anchor holds."

You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Isaiah 26.3

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