

STIRRED, NOT SHAKEN

Sermon, August 22, 2010

Text: Hebrews 12:18-29

Most of us probably think of the state of Tennessee as part of the “Bible Belt”, an area of the southern United States known for its religious fervor. However, it has not always been so. In his 1998 book *Secret History: Stories about Knoxville, Tennessee*, historian Jack Neely tells us that at the turn of the 19th century, Tennesseans were a largely unchurched people. What churches were there were few and teeny tiny, and missionaries made little impression on either the cotton growers on the west end of the state or the hillbillies on the eastern end. Then, on December 16th, 1811, at 2:15 AM, a massive earthquake rolled across the south. People were awakened by the shaking as far north as New York City, as far east as Washington, D.C. and Norfolk VA. The ground motions were described as most alarming and frightening in places around Nashville and Knoxville. Reports describe houses being severely shaken, sending their chimneys hurtling to the ground. In the epicentral area the surface of the ground was described as in convulsion, with sand and water ejected tens of feet into the air. Some of the most dramatic effects of the earthquakes occurred along rivers. Entire islands disappeared, banks caved into the rivers, and fissures opened and closed in the river beds. Water spouting from these fissures produced large waves in the rivers; many boats were capsized along the Mississippi and an unknown number of people drowned. The initial earthquake of December 16 was followed by two other principal shocks, one on January 23, 1812, and the other on February 7, 1812. In fact, the February 7 earthquake was judged to be the biggest of the three. Intermittent strong shaking continued through March 1812 and aftershocks strong enough to be felt occurred through the next five years, into 1817. And along with the increase in earthquakes came a great increase in church attendance. For some reason, people across Tennessee and the whole South became interested in learning how to pray! The Methodist Church alone, writes Neely, doubled membership in its southern churches in the year 1812. Apparently, nothing will make you religious any quicker than a good earthquake. (*Maybe New England needs a good earthquake ... just kidding. Sort of.*) When EVERYTHING around you is shaking, it is only human to seek that which is unshakable. Hear again Hebrews 12: 28: *“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe ...”*

This past January we saw in the news the horrific images of the terrible earthquake that shook the tiny, impoverished nation of Haiti. The shaking started on Tuesday, Jan. 12, at 4:53 p.m. EST about 10 miles southwest of Port-au-Prince. The shaking lasted just under one minute ... which may sound short, but it is a long time when the ground is shaking. The effect of this shaking was magnified by the shoddy infrastructure of this impoverished nation. The earthquake, the worst in the region in more than two centuries, left the country in a shambles and more than 200,000 dead. A month later a larger but far less destructive quake hit the South American country of Chile; many of you know Jerianne Berman’s daughter and family had just moved down there a month or so prior to the quake. Needless to say, Jerianne’s world was shaken, as well..

It borders on understatement to say we live in a world that all too easily can be shaken. Within the past couple of years we have figuratively seen the earth shake beneath some of our nation’s largest financial institutions and corporations. As this “ground” shook, experts tell us our country stood on the precipice of a financial collapse comparable to the Great Depression; many are convinced we *still* stand on that precipice. Some of our financial structures, especially the derivatives market, seem to have had all the stability of a Haitian high rise, which in turn took its toll on what have traditionally been more stable and secure investments. Those of you who own property know this all too well. One humor columnist writing in the LA Times said it has become so bad that parents in Beverly Hills have fired their nannies and are learning their children’s names. It has become so bad two truckloads of Americans were caught sneaking into Mexico. It has become so bad Motel Six won’t leave the light on anymore. It has become so bad you get a credit card in the mail and it’s already pre-declined. It has become so bad McDonald’s is now selling the 1/4 ounce. It has become so bad when the bank returns your check marked *“Insufficient Funds,”* it means them, not you. When Congress was looking into the Bernard Madoff scandal, one comedian quipped, “Oh, great! The guy who made \$50 billion disappear is being investigated by the people who made \$1.5 trillion disappear!”

Yes, we live in a world that can be all too easily shaken: financial meltdowns, terrorism, public disasters, and any number of personal tragedies that can happen at any time to you or those you love: automobile accidents, sickness, loss of a job, breakup of a marriage, random violence and crime. The really disturbing thing is that some of the most important events in life are beyond our control. We like to think we are in control of our lives, and when we’re young, it may seem that way. But you soon learn your limits. As life goes on we learn that control really is an

illusion. Life happens ... to paraphrase a rather crude bumper sticker ... and sometimes there is nothing you can do about it. For example, next month will be the ninth anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center. Did you know approximately forty-five widows gave birth to babies following Sept 11 who were conceived prior to September 11, the day their husbands died in the towers? That is the last thing these women could have anticipated as they awaited the birth of their child that they would have to raise these children alone. Closer to home, the young father of one of my oldest daughter's former classmates was electrocuted and killed in a work accident on that very same day ... September 11, 2001 ... right here in Warwick. Some things are out of our control. We do the best we can. We try to be responsible, but we never know what tomorrow may bring. We live in an imperfect world when everything that really matters can be shaken in the blink of an eye. Many of these events are things over which we have no control. We want to live joyfully, confidently, calmly ... but we also need to live prepared that some day when we least expect it, our world can be shaken.

That is why it is Good News when we read we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. *"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe . . ."* In the midst of upheaval, chaos, change, we can have stability because our trust and our hope and our grip is on a God who is beyond this world of shakable things. If we are solidly rooted in what cannot be shaken, then we may be stirred, but not shaken (*with apologies to James Bond, who preferred his drinks shaken, not stirred ... yes, I was reaching for a sermon title this week*). One writer likens it to a bird perched on the branch of a large tree. He asks, "Have you ever watched a bird sleeping on its perch and never falling off? How does it manage to do this? The secret is the tendons of the bird's legs. They are so constructed that when the leg is bent at the knee, the claws contract and grip like a steel trap. The claws refuse to let go until the knees are unbent again. The *bended knee* gives the bird the ability to hold on to his perch so tightly [through wind, rain, storm]." "From sleeping birds," this author continues, "we can learn the secret of hanging on to a life with God. That secret is the knee bent in prayer. It is only when we bend our knees before God in prayer that we can hang on to a life with Him."

"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe . . ." That is the proper attitude and posture for the follower of Jesus ... knees bent in reverent thankfulness, in awe before God.

In the time remaining I'd like to quickly point out four things the Bible tells us cannot be shaken, four things to which we should cling. *The first is the throne of God.* No matter what happens on the earth, no matter what happens in our lives, there is one thing that is secure. God's place of authority will never crumble and fall. We read in Psalm 45:6: "Your throne, O God, endures for ever and ever ..." and in Lamentations 5:19: "But you, O Lord, reign for ever; your throne endures to all generations." When the Bible talks about God's throne, it is not talking about some piece of furniture. It speaks of God and his place as the supreme sovereign over His creation. In essence, the Bible tells us, "No matter what happens in your life, you can rest assured God will not be overturned. He will remain strong and in control." If God's authority is an unshakeable foundation, then His word will also be unshakable. *His word does not change. That's the second unshakeable.* In Mark 13:31 Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Peter echoes this in his first epistle when he tells us that, "the word of the Lord endures forever" (1 Peter 1:25). Cling to it, hold onto it, live it ... His word can be trusted.

The third unshakable is the church. In Matthew 16:18 we read "... I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Now over the years, and it seems especially in recent years, rather than *being* a rock, it seems churches have *been* rocked, rocked by scandals, financial woes, doctrinal debates. The church has always struggled over doctrinal issues. The church has been pushed aside by secular society as being irrelevant. Ministries and ministers may come and go. Church buildings will be raised up and torn down again, persecutions come and go, but ultimately, the church of Jesus Christ will endure; we have our Lord's promise on that. Ultimately, it will not be shaken, because the church is the body of Christ. God's throne, God's word, God's church and finally, *we cling to the unshakeable promise of eternal life.* 1 John 2:17 says, "... the world and its desires are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever." In John 10:28 He says, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." Paul writes in Romans 8:38-39, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The throne of God, the word of God, the church of God, and the gift of God of eternal life. When all that can be shaken is removed, the unshakeable will remain. Cling to that, hold onto that, trust that. We may be stirred, but not shaken ... because we are citizens of that solid city whose architect and builder and foundation is God ... a hope and promise and guarantee that should stir us to gratitude.