

## The Unshakable Kingdom

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Crozet United Methodist Church

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost - August 22, 2010

Hebrews 12:18-29

*You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”) But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.*

In between college and seminary, I worked in the lawn and garden department of the Wal-Mart in Short Pump. I did not (and do not) know much about flowers and weed prevention, but I could load and unload trucks and that was enough. One day we sold a riding lawnmower to a man who informed us that he needed us to load his new purchase into his pickup, which he would go and get from the parking lot and drive to the front of the store.

When he arrived, he explained to us that this was not just any riding lawnmower-toting pickup truck. Not only was it brand new, he had, upon purchasing it, sent it to another state to have it customized with fancy running boards and flares for his wheel wells. The whole truck had been recently waxed, and it looked like it, all shiny, shimmering, and blue. It was important, he informed us, to be careful loading the riding mower into his new truck.

We got it, or at least I thought we did. I assumed that I had a pretty good handle on what being careful while loading something meant, what with my being a professional and all. I assumed incorrectly.

Two of us got on one side of the mower, and two of us got on the other side, and we lifted the riding mower and began to gently place it in the back of lovely, new, blue, freshly waxed Ford F-150 pickup truck when he suddenly stopped us:

“WHOA!” he yelled.

“What?” We replied, straining under the weight of the mower.

“You can’t put it in there like that!”

“Like what?”

“You can’t just put it in the back of the truck like that!”

It was hot, and the mower was heavy, and I could not imagine what Plan B was. Perhaps he planned for his wife to drive the mower home.

“I just waxed it!” he said.

“We know!” said we, “We are being careful!”

“No, he said, “I just waxed the *inside of the bed.*”

Now friends, I believe in taking care of my stuff, and I don't like for my stuff to get scratched either, but *come on*. Even I know that the bed is where the mulch, gravel, and stuff you take to the dump goes.

But not this guy.

He honestly had not thought this through before making this purchase. We were all a bit stuck, until he devised a solution.

“I want you to wrap the mower in bubble wrap.”

“Are you serious?”

He was serious. Here he had a powerful, commercial-grade riding mower and a well-made, powerful truck in which to haul it, yet everything had to be done daintily, with kid gloves, and bubble wrap.

We gather here on Sunday mornings quietly and obediently sitting in nice neat rows, standing when we are told, and sitting when we are told, singing and praying when we are instructed to do so, listening to what we confess to be the words of God at the appropriate times. We gather in a room we call a Sanctuary, most of us in solemn, conservative, apparel. As we approach the sacred, as we approach the living Divine in our midst, we do so often in a way that is safe and distant from the reality of the God-is-with-us Savior in our midst. We so often want, if not expect, familiar hymns, familiar liturgy, familiar sights, familiar symbols, and that lovely but false peace that comes from the familiar: believing that in the midst of the chaos and pain in the world, for an hour on Sunday, things are under our control.

I believe that if we are honest with ourselves and with one another, our faith life outside of the Sanctuary often resembles our expectations inside of it. If we are honest with ourselves and with one another, how many of our prayers could really be understood to mean, “Lord, just keep most everything *as it is?*” How often do we, from a practical standpoint, see faith and God and Jesus and the Bible as really nothing more than the bubble wrap that we hope will protect all of our little kingdoms?

Yet, in this sanctuary, in those songs, and in those prayers, and especially in those old texts we call God's word, is power that shakes the heavens and the earth. Annie Dillard writes in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*, “Does anyone have the foggiest idea of the power we so blithely invoke?...It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”<sup>1</sup>

This morning's text is found in the Letter to the Hebrews, a book of the Bible about which little is known. We do not know who the author is, and we do not know exactly what challenges

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*, quoted in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlett, editors, 2010, Westminster/John Knox Press, p. 379.

this community of the early church was facing. What we do know is this: if Jesus to you is simply a nice guy, a helpful moral example, or a good teacher, the Letter to the Hebrews will shock and surprise you. In fact, the Letter to the Hebrews opens with a poetic discourse in which the author makes clear that Jesus is far above the angels of heaven, saying “For to which of the angels did God ever say, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you’? Or again, ‘I will be his Father, and he will be my Son’? And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’ Of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.’ But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.” In the Letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is the Son of God. He is the great, powerful, cosmic, High Priest, and the struggles that those who dare claim his name face are cosmic struggles.

The author invokes the collective religious memory of these people. He or she begins with the story of Exodus 19, where God, speaking from a dense cloud, from atop Mount Sinai, the mountain that no one, human or animal, in this story may touch and live. God appears in the midst of smoke, thunder and lightning, and the mountain trembled violently. Yet then, the author says this: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” and continues, saying, “At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven”... Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

We once approached God in fear and trembling, yet now we approach God as the God incarnate in Jesus, whipped and dying on a Friday afternoon, just outside of Mt. Zion, and resurrected on Sunday morning, and we approach this God, not with fear and trembling of death by stoning, but we approach God in the midst of “innumerable angels,” in “festal gathering,” with the saints of God, God, and Christ himself.

Can there be any better antidote to the bubble wrap life that believes that it is the duty of faith to preserve all of the little treasures in all of our little, shakable kingdoms, that to claim the power of God into which we are invited as disciples of Jesus Christ? Is there any hope that is greater than knowing that when all of those things in our lives have been shaken, and have fallen, that our God, the God of power, blazing fire, smoke, lightning, thunder, and tempest has, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ built for us, for you and me, a kingdom that cannot be shaken, a kingdom that will stand after everything else in our lives has collapsed around us.

Desmond Tutu was speaking in a packed cathedral in apartheid-era Cape Town while policemen were standing, lining the walls, eager to arrest and beat those who were in attendance. Yet, pointing his finger at the police who were recording his words, Tutu said, “You may be powerful, indeed very powerful, but you are not God! And the God whom we serve cannot be

mocked! You have already lost!” Then he smiled and said. “We are inviting you to come and join the winning side!”<sup>2</sup>

“Does anyone have the foggiest idea of the power we so blithely invoke?...It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”

The Christian faith and life is not about keeping the world at bay. It is not about ease, and probably not as often about comfort as we would like to think. Inasmuch as the Christian faith and life is about these things, it is about growing in our awareness of the power of the gospel, realizing that God does not call us to lives of timidity and fear, but that God invites us, calls us, into the presence of the angels and of God. God does not call us to run, but to overcome. God does not call us to fear, but to faith. God does not call us to lives limited by our weakness, but defined by God’s strength. God calls us out of our fragile little shakable kingdoms, and into a new Kingdom more powerful and permanent than anything the world has to offer.

In our Hymnal, on page 106, there is a litany based on a sermon by the same name by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called *God is Able*. I invite you to join with me in it:

Pastor: Is someone here moving toward the twilight of life and fearful of that which we call death?

People: Why be afraid? God is able.

Pastor: Is there someone here on the brink of despair because of the death of a loved one, the breaking of a marriage, or the waywardness of a child?

People: Why despair? God is able to give us the power to endure that which cannot be changed.

Pastor: Is there someone here anxious because of bad health?

People: Why be anxious? Come what may, God is able.

All: Surely God is able!"

And sisters and brothers, this is a promise from God. It is a promise that God is bigger, stronger, more powerful, and more eternal than anything else we can cling to, than any place else to which we can run. So when you get down to your last straw, when you get down to the end of your rope, when you feel like your hope is gone and your world is shaken, remember that our God is able, our God is willing, our God is a mighty God, that our God is an awesome God, and that our God is the unshakable God of life, who wins the battle against impossible odds, who parts the sea, makes dry bones live, who stands up to Pharaoh and Herod, who can take the whip and the cross, who rose from the grave, and who lives and reigns in the New Jerusalem, a kingdom not made by hands but eternal in the heavens, and that God is the God who promises you a place in that Kingdom with the saints in glory, with the angels in festal procession, and with the Lamb of God.

When life oppresses you, press back and proclaim “My God is able,” to the glory of his name. Hallelujah!

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Loeb, “‘Soul Of A Citizen’: The Redeemable Spark: Reaching Out To People Whose Actions May Appall Us,” at [Huffingpost.com](http://Huffingpost.com), July 9, 2010.