

SERMON: SHAKEN!

August 2, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Amid the shaking of the foundations of life, in the face of the fears that eat away at our souls, you speak to us your word of mighty comfort, assuring us that you are with us, our refuge and strength forever. By your Spirit silence now in us all voices but your own, that we may hear and take to heart that which you would speak to us this day, through the reading and preaching of your word; through Christ, the true and life-giving Word. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 46

New Testament Lesson: Rev. 22:1-5

I know, I shouldn't have done it. But at the time I just couldn't resist. Shortly after Wain Wesberry announced that he would be going to the Presbyterian Church in Clinton—where he is doing a wonderful job—they love Wain and his family—shortly after Wain's announcement, we got a letter from the Augusta National Golf Club with a check as a memorial gift for Wilson Wearn.

The nice green letterhead from the club and the signature at the bottom were just too good to waste. So I retyped the body of letter and pasted it over the original so that it now said, "In his will our esteemed member Mr. Wilson Wearn requested that the club extend privileges of the course to the pastor and associate pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church for a period of one year—from August, 2007, until July of 2008." I made a copy of the letter and put it in Wain's box.

According to Faith, when Wain opened the letter, he shouted, jumped up, twirled around, and started to call his father on his cell phone. Faith said, "Before you do that you need to talk to Allen." "No, Allen's in a meeting. I don't want to disturb him," Wain said. "You need to talk to Allen!" Faith insisted. She brought him into the meeting where I was. Wain was beaming. That's when "the devil made me do it." I said, "But Wain the letter says the pastor and associate pastor *on August, 2007*. You won't be our associate pastor then." Seeing the look on his face, I had to come clean. "Wain, it's not real. I wrote it myself." That's when he said... **"BE AFRAID, be very afraid!!!"**

And I am--not afraid of Wain, but of a whole lot else. These are scary times in which we live. The list of looming problems we face is long and daunting—as the national debt continues to soar, as the war in Afghanistan becomes more and more deadly, as the level of anger in our country becomes toxic. Recently Sims Propst sent me a column in the *Wall St. Journal* by Peggy Noonan, one of the best word-smiths in the business. She ended the column with these sobering, if not terrifying, words.

Here are a few examples of what we may face in the next 10 years: a profound and prolonged American crash, with the admission of bankruptcy and the spread of deep social unrest; one or more American cities getting hit with weapons of mass destruction from an unknown source; faint glimmers of actual secessionist movements as Americans for various reasons and in various areas decide the burdens and assumptions of the federal government are no longer attractive or legitimate.

The era we face, that is soon upon us, will require a great deal from our leaders. They had better be sturdy. They will have to be gifted.... It's not a time to be frivolous, or to feel the temptation of resentment, or the temptation of thinking next year will be more or less like last year, and the assumptions of our childhoods will more or less reign in our future. It won't be that way.

“Be afraid...be very afraid!” And we are. I know I am. There are dark storm clouds forming on the horizon of our world and our nation that threaten to leave us all shaken. These are deeply troubling times in which we live.

In such times the people of God, across the centuries, have often turned to Psalm 46--a psalm of hope and reassurance. The psalm is intended to call forth trust in the Lord who is with us, come what may. It does so remarkably well. That's why it is one of the most beloved of the psalms.

I often begin funeral services with the opening words of the psalm, **“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear...”** And Psalm 46 forms the basis for Martin Luther's great hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” which we sang together in Church School this morning. And it was Psalm 46 to which we, and so many other congregations, turned in worship on the Sunday after September 11, 2001. A psalm of profound hope and reassurance.

Psalm 46 opens with images of the whole created order being SHAKEN, as “the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,” as “its waters roar and foam,” and “the mountains tremble with its tumult.” Can you picture that in your mind? Picture earthquakes in the depths of the sea causing massive tsunamis whose waves break over the peaks of the Smoky Mountains in the east and the Grand Tetons in the west! As the psalm opens, it is as if “the perfect storm” of another primeval flood was threatening to wash away the foundations of life itself.

But not only is the order of nature shaken, so is the political order. **“The nations rage,”** says the psalmist, **“the kingdoms totter.”** Totter is another translation of the same word as tremble. Just as the mountains tremble with the tumult, so do the kingdoms of the world, as the foundations of order and security are shaken to their core.

Those images of the shaking of the foundations of nature and history recur throughout scripture. The prophet Jeremiah says,

“I looked on the earth...lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro.” Jeremiah 4:23-24)

Similar images of the shaking of all things run all the way down to the Revelation to John where he declares,

“I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and sun became black as sackcloth...and the stars in the sky fell to the earth...and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and everyone, slave and free, hid among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?’” (Rev. 6:12-17)

Who can stand when everything in heaven and on earth is SHAKEN!

Some may dismiss those images of the shaking of nature and history as poetic exaggeration, but increasingly those ancient metaphors of shaken mountains and tottering kingdoms are, if anything, understatement of the frightening realities we face. After September 11, 2001—after the Christmas tsunami of 2004 and Hurricane Katrina—it is hard to dismiss such images as poetic metaphors. The images of roaring waters and trembling mountains symbolize graphically the threats that shake the very foundation of our lives and our world. This, as Peggy Noonan writes, “is not a time to be frivolous.” It is not a time to think naively that “next year will be more or less like last year, and the assumptions of our childhoods will more or less reign in our future. It won't be that way.” And “sometimes that causes us to tremble, tremble, tremble.”

But over against images of the shaking of the foundations of nature and history, the psalmist sets two other images, and joins them together with the great theological affirmation that runs throughout scripture. The images are that of a river and a city—more specifically a **“river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.”** A river and a city.

For those who lived in or around Jerusalem, the only major city of the ancient world that was not founded beside a river, the image in both Psalm 46 and the Revelation to John of a river flowing into the city would be a powerful symbol of that which gives and sustains life, not just for individuals, but for communities, for cities joined in shared life and commerce. Both psalm and apocalypse set before us the images of the River of the Waters of Life flowing into the city in which the Most High dwells.

Those images of a river and a city are joined by one of the great theological affirmations that resounds throughout scripture. **“The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.”** When the foundations of nature and history are shaken, when nations are in an uproar and kingdoms totter, when everything we thought was secure is SHAKEN, the whole of biblical faith invites us to trust “the **Lord of hosts**” who is with us, “the **God of Jacob**” who is our refuge.

Look more closely at those depictions of God. **“The Lord of hosts”** is the Commander-in-Chief of the armies of heaven—the God who has at his command all the angels of heaven to accomplish his purposes. And **“the God of Jacob”** is the God of Israel’s ancestors, the God of covenant faithfulness who, across the generations, blesses and preserves his people. The God who is with us in the midst of all that shakes the foundations of our lives and our world is the God of power and protection--**“our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble.”**

“Therefore we will not fear...” “We will not fear,” not because we are so brave and fearless ourselves...few, if any, of us are. **“We will not fear,”** because **“the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.”** In the midst of that which shakes our lives and threatens our security, we are not alone. The God of powerful love and covenant faithfulness is with us, holding us in a love that will not let us go. As Luther’s great hymn puts it,

“Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing,
Were not the right man on our side, the man of God’s own choosing.”¹

Because **“the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge,”** throughout scripture the People of God are commanded, **“Fear not!”** “Fear not, for I am with you.” “Fear not, for I will help you.” “Fear not, for I have redeemed you.” “Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which shall come to all the peoples.”

That is a word we all need to hear—some more so than others just now. Late Thursday afternoon as I was working on this sermon I received a very disturbing email from the Rev. Maqsood Kamil from Pakistan whom some of you met when he was here last year. It said in part,

I am writing these words at very late at night. It is 2am and I am watching the live coverage of 45-50 Christian homes burning in village Korian ... Persecution of the Christian community is growing by the day in Pakistan. On July 5th 117 Christian families were attacked in (a near by) village. Their houses were also destroyed and belongings were looted while women and children trying to escape were attacked with acid. Situation is grave in Korian. Christian community has lost everything. They are desperate for help. As usual police and authorities have not acted in time.

¹ “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,”

Please pray for the people in Korian. Along with other pastors I am leaving at 5am to see the situation with my own eyes.”²

In this quiet, safe sanctuary I cannot say to him or the Christians of Pakistan, “Fear not,” without it sounding trite, but the Lord of hosts, the God of Jacob, can and does. Into the turmoil of their lives and ours, a river of grace flows with power to give hope and even gladness. The turmoil and violence that shake our lives do not and will not have the final word. “The Man of God’s own choosing” does. And *his* word is, **“Fear not, for I am with you, always!”**

He who stilled the winds and the waves on the Sea of Galilee has power to still the storms that beset us. Over against that which shakes the foundations of our lives and our world, he declares, **“Be still, and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”** The great assurance of our faith, made tangible in broken bread and poured out wine, is that **“the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.”** So, even though there is much of which to “be afraid...be very afraid,” by the power of God’s unrelenting love, and in defiance of all the forces of fear, we, too, can trust and not be afraid.

In just a moment, as we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table, we will sing a lovely old hymn that expresses well the faith of the psalmist and the assurance of the People of God across the ages.

“Be still my soul: thy God doth undertake
To guide the future as He has the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence, let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul; the waves and wind still know
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.”³

To him be all glory and honor, all dominion and power, now and forever more. Amen.

Allen C. McSween, Jr.
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Greenville, SC

² The Rev. Dr. Maqsood Kamil, email received Thursday, July30, maqsoodkamil@yahoo.com

³ “Be Still, My Soul,” Katharina von Schlegel, tune Finlandia, No. 374 in *The Hymnbook*, 1955