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UNSHAKEN BY THE TUMULT

Psalm 104:1-9
Luke 6:46-49

Text: "Therefore we will not fear...though the mountains tremble with its tumult." (Psalm 46:2-3)

Most of us live with more than ample tumult. Simply coping can be "big time" effort! We come here to discover foundations, to nurture faith roots that will help us live "unshaken by the tumult."

The biblical writers built their foundations on certain assumptions. Above all else, they believed God intended order, not chaos. When God created the world, God created order that reached the very foundations of that creation.

Remember the world view that gave us that biblical creation story. According to Genesis, in the beginning was watery chaos, a primeval deep of raging water and searing darkness. God created earth by bringing order into that chaos. At God's command, darkness was contained in night by the gift of light.

Still, raging waters covered the earth and there was no place for life. So God created the firmament which ancients believed was something like a solid sheet of metal. And God placed that firmament to form the sphere of the sky, trapping some of the chaotic waters above and leaving some below. God rolled the waters of chaos back and dry land appeared, floating on the waters.

Then God gave foundations to the earth, anchoring it with pillars or mountains in the primeval oceans so that, despite the raging waters, it would not be moved. "You set the earth on its foundations, so it shall never be shaken." So went the ancient biblical view of creation.

Don't get hung up over geological accuracy. To the ancient mind, the story held rich symbolic, poetic meaning: raging water, darkness, and the chaotic deep all vividly symbolized evil in the world. When they claimed God had put limits on chaos, they meant not that evil was eliminated, but that God ultimately held its forces in check. Because God ruled over the earth, order *could* prevail over chaos in human life, not just in the natural world. Peace - shalom - was a possibility because God was sovereign over creation. Thus the psalmist could sing with those same word symbols:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult." (Psalm 46)

Such evil would never overwhelm the psalmist. *God* was his refuge and strength, even in the midst of deep trouble or pain. "You set the earth on its foundations, so that it should *never* be shaken." Thus spoke one who *knew* God was in charge!

Two things - among many - our world lacks: a firm conviction that God *is* in charge and we're ultimately accountable to God, not ourselves; and we lack order. The two are inseparably linked. At times it seems like we're heading to some primeval chaos ourselves! We dread the darkness where crime and violence abound. We distrust political leaders of all stripes. We feel out of control of our lives, powerless before institutions that seem all power-full. Moral values lack constancy as people value "doing their own thing." Chaos does seem to loom ominously, threatening to overwhelm us. Isn't this one of the fears that drives some from reason to the simplistic but comforting answers of extremism in religion and politics?

I make a parable of our lakeside cliff, battered by storm and waves and winter ice, inexorably eroding, a crumble here, a cascade of broken rock there. Soon it will take with it two cedars, still tenaciously clinging on, half their roots now hanging in open air. Do our lives, does our nation, our world, face such inevitable erosion? Will we one day fall to the rocky beach below, to be washed into the roaring tumult in the next no-reaster? If that were the bottom line, what hope would we have? What would be the point of our being here? None at all. But for the Christian, that's *not* the bottom line! We hold to the conviction that our end, our purpose is *not* to be swallowed by some primeval tumult, either literal or poetic. There's a better answer, a New Testament answer, *that our lives matter*: each one of us counts for something!

Then how do *we* respond? We hear *Trust in God!* How true, but is that all there is to it? Most of us are here today because we already *do* trust in God in some way. The essential *starting* point, those words too easily become just another faith slogan, somehow lacking in substance.

We hear *Believe in the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved!* True again, but is it enough just to believe? Does belief by itself bring peace to our lives, cure the ills of our land, resolve our economic inequities? In fact, a case could be made that mere doctrinal "belief" can cause as much trouble as it resolves: look only at Bosnia or Ireland, the KKK or the Christian militias. We need confess that though it may initiate changed lives, belief *alone* works no more wonders than trust alone.

Here Jesus himself speaks to us, painting that vivid picture of chaotic waters, awesome symbol of evil, rising as a flood to threaten our very survival. Jesus never denied life was free of trouble; he never wooed followers with sweetness and light. The flood *will* come, he warned. Evil powers of darkness and turmoil, of wrong and pain, even death itself will come - to him as to us all. They surely will beat upon our lives; there's no escape from the reality of the tumult!

But with me, Jesus said, you *can* withstand the waters. If you come to me, hear my words, *and live them out*, the forces of evil or hurt or suffering will beat upon your life, and you will withstand it. God is the ruler over chaos, after all. "In the world," Jesus once said, "you shall have tribulation. but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world."

However, his words reach far beyond such reassuring consolation. They call us to a certain life journey, with a stern warning about merely professing belief or discipleship, about giving, as we would say, lip-service. "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do *not* do as I tell you?"...[That] is like a man who built a house upon the ground without a foundation, against which the streams broke, and immediately it fell and great was its fall."

On the other hand, "Those who hear my words and *do* them" are like those who built upon the rock. They will remain unshaken by life's tumult. We, too, can find strength for the journey, living in his way. His life and teachings become our roadmap. Despite the tumult, God remains God, alone offering us strength through sometimes unexpected channels of caring to withstand the hurt and suffering, the wrong and evil that assail us. Here *we* know possibility and hope. Here *we* can be used by God to create a new world in perhaps surprising ways.

Friday evening's *Nightline*, often bearer of grim news, told the remarkable story of a group of some three dozen youth named *City of Peace*, living, of all places, in Washington, D.C. This improbable group came from all backgrounds, from wealthy white suburbia and black ghetto, from the most advantaged to the least of these. For several months as they were led to share their stories, their hopes and fears, they came to know and trust one another. Over that time these young people knit together in close friendship, crossing lines they had assumed were unbridgeable. The loneliness of a rich suburban kid with alcoholic parents and the loneliness of a desperate ghetto kid whose parents and siblings were all in prison, were overcome as they found in each other a trusted friend who would stand with him.

For this small but very real, very human group, amidst their life's tumult, as they prepared to sing a musical telling their stories, they found a place with foundations, with meaning, indeed, with the most precious commodity of all, one that had been so tragically lacking in their lives, friendship and love for one another. In ways they could never articulate, in truth they were discovering fundamental principles that were helping them endure life's tumults. God *does* move in mysterious ways!

Amidst the tumults of our time, we *can* live with joy - that the sun shines on this beautiful new day, that we are touched by persons who *do* care, who *do* value us. We *can* live with gratitude - for blessings seen and unseen, for daily bread and so much more, for enduring truths, for the love in which *we're* held. We *can* live with compassion, unfettered by "compassion fatigue," expressing our joy and gratitude by loving our neighbor as we would love ourselves.

By the grace of God, may we, too, live faithfully and well, unshaken by the tumult! A century ago Cecil Alexander, an English bishop's wife, wrote lines that would become a favorite hymn of Christians everywhere, lines of Jesus calling *us*, in the midst of our tumult:

"Jesus calls us, o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea;
Day by day his sweet voice soundeth, saying, 'Christian, follow me.'
Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store,
From each idol that would keep us, saying, 'Christian, love *me* more.'
Jesus calls us; by thy mercies, Savior may we hear thy call,
Give our hearts to thine obedience: serve and love *thee* best of all."

Amen. Now let us sing!