

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16, Year C
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Shake Down! (Hebrews 12:18-29)
Howard Bruce Bowlin+

A little more than thirty-four years ago I had the opportunity to view one of the most interesting places I have ever visited. It was on Gail's and my honeymoon. And during our camping trip around the state of California we visited a place called Point Reyes. I don't know whether you've ever heard of it. Point Reyes was the epicenter of the 1906 earthquake that destroyed San Francisco.

Point Reyes was not what I had expected. First off, it's some distance from San Francisco—about fifty miles as I remember it. Also, I had assumed that the site of such a cataclysmic event would be a scene of intense devastation. But such was not the case.

Close to seventy years had passed by the time of our visit. Grass and other foliage had reclaimed much of the landscape. But there was still ample evidence of what had occurred. One could walk along an old fence row when suddenly the fence ended. Then you looked across a diagonal gap of some twenty or more feet and the remainder of the fence, once joined together, would take up again.

There was the foundation of a barn in one place while yards away, still standing, was the barn itself—tossed by the natural forces. Trees had been knocked down and, from the posture in which the trunks lay, the branches had grown up as trees themselves, ninety degrees to the fallen trunk.

All in all, the emotional impression that I was left with was one of eeriness. It was so quiet. And yet, the destruction of an entire city, miles away, had its roots in that bucolic place.

California, of course, remains no stranger to earthquakes. Gail can tell you as many stories of earthquake survival drills in elementary school as I can concerning nuclear attack survival training.

I can remember a phone call I received back in the 1980s from Gail's sister in a suburb of San Francisco. An earthquake was hitting at that very moment. As often happens during a quake, communication utilities go crazy. She couldn't call the person across the street but she could call long distance to Washington, D.C., three thousand miles away.

And, while I talked to a very anxious person, I could hear dishes crashing to the floor and other sounds of physical destruction. A very unsettling phone call, let me tell you!

Of course, earthquakes in the United States are not limited to far-off California. I was reminded of that fact every time I visited the aquarium in Chattanooga during my tenure as interim rector in Ooltewah. There was an exhibit about Reelfoot Lake. That lake was formed as a result of the great New Madrid Fault earthquake in the nineteenth century when the Mississippi River flowed backwards for many hours (or was it days), filling in the great crater formed by that very devastating quake.

Now we're all well-educated, sophisticated human beings living at the beginning of new millennium. We know that earthquakes are indeed mighty natural upheavals. We understand that they are caused by the shifting of unbelievably enormous plates standing in tremendous tension to each other. When the tension becomes too great, something has got to give and God help us if we are in the vicinity.

But the Bible understands earthquakes in another way. Throughout Holy Scripture earthquakes are the provenance of God. The ancient Hebrew people saw earthquakes as signs of the literal presence of God.

Think of those Mount Sinai experiences in the Book of Exodus. The roar of earthquakes on the holy mountain was heard as the voice of God. When Elijah hid out in the cave while escaping from the wrath of Ahab and Jezebel, he lived through a mighty earthquake and thought that God was present in it.

Today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews makes reference back to those ancient stories. Our reading from Hebrews is itself another instance in which an earthquake serves to call the people again to listen to what God is saying. It is an image that because of its reference to an event of immeasurable power and magnitude says, "Listen up! This is important. This is God's purpose being revealed to you."

I have to admit that, of all the books in the New Testament, I am least familiar with the Letter to the Hebrews. It is a difficult text to understand. Many of the images are foreign to gentiles. So I have spent a lot of time recently attempting to fill in this hole in my knowledge.

So, I have to tell you that practically every biblical authority that I have read concerning this particular section of the Letter to the Hebrews agrees on one thing. This is about God and how we are to worship him. One well-known scholar has written, ". . . it is important to be reminded that both Sinai and Zion, the earthly and the heavenly, the then and the now, the shakable and the unshakable, have their source in God."¹

All of this, the author of Hebrews reminds us, is why we worship God and his son, Christ Jesus. There is no other reason. (And that is why I am sometimes so resistant to introducing what seem to me to be trendy worship gimmicks so popular in many of the so-called "mega-churches.") Whom do we worship, God, or ourselves?

Have you ever heard the worship analogy put forth by the Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard? When we think of Sunday morning worship, we too often conceive of the church as a kind of theater. And, if you think about it, many (most?) churches, when you look at the physical layout of the worship space, do look like a theater. There is the audience (the congregation), and the stage. The congregation's job is to take their seats, to sit quietly, and to watch the actors (the clergy, choir, acolytes and lay servers) perform on the stage. God is somewhere offstage, giving cues to the actors.

Kierkegaard said that image gets Christian worship all wrong. Christian worship is active. It has as its goal not to make us into passive spectators, but rather to get us into the act. You, the congregation, are on stage with the clergy, choir, and other liturgical ministers. All of our singing, speaking, reading, and praying are done *for* God who is the "audience" for our acts of worship.

The clergy, at our best, are not the sole actors in worship. As a matter of fact Kierkegaard said, clergy are best thought of as the prompters who stand offstage, in the wings, giving the actors (the congregation) their cues.²

Think about it. And let's hope that it doesn't take an earthquake from time to time to remind us of who is the object of our prayer and praise.

¹Fred B. Craddock in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 160.

²Idea reminded by William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 29 No. 3, 38.