

The Crippled Woman

Earlier this morning we heard the Gospel story about Jesus teaching in the synagogue, and healing a woman who had been bent over for eighteen long years. Imagine that – nearly two decades of walking through life staring at the ground, unable to look up into someone’s eyes, unable to stand tall. The text says she was crippled by a spirit – we might say a demon today. Jesus saw her. He called her over. He put His hands on her, and instantly she was straightened – made whole.

She stood tall for the first time in years. The people rejoiced – but not everyone was happy. The synagogue leader criticized Jesus, saying He had broken the Sabbath law by healing. Jesus responded with holy authority, “Shouldn’t this daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” (Luke 13:16).

In that moment, Jesus shook the assumptions of the religious leaders. He shook the structures of bondage. He shook the weight that had held the woman down. And He established something unshakable – God’s power to set people free.

That story prepares us to hear the epistolary lesson from Hebrews 12. It tells us there is a kingdom that cannot be shaken. We live in a world that trembles under fear, division, and uncertainty. But in Jesus Christ, we have a foundation that endures forever. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Hebrews 12:18-29. **Read Hebrews 12:18-29.**

Mount Sinai

The first few verses of our passage this morning paint a vivid picture. The writer states:

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.” But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the Church of the Firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel, (Heb. 12:18-24).

We’re given a description of two mountains here. Those are Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. In Exodus 19, at Mount Sinai, the ancient Israelites encountered God in

terrifying holiness. The mountain was covered in smoke. There was thunder, lightning, trumpet blasts.

The people trembled and were warned not to even touch the mountain – or they would die. God’s holiness was unapproachable. Even Moses, the leader who had spoken directly with God, said, “I tremble with fear,” (Heb. 12:21, Deut. 9:19). Mount Sinai represents the overwhelming majesty of God and our inability to draw near to Him on our own terms. You and I, left to our own devices cannot approach Almighty God.

Mount Zion

Only Jesus can do that. And so, the writer of Hebrews shifts to another mountain – Mount Zion – the city of the living God. Here the scene is completely different. There’s celebration, joy, and welcome. Angels are gathered in festive rejoicing. The Church of the Firstborn – those redeemed by Jesus Christ – are gathered together. The righteous are made perfect – see, they aren’t perfect, Jesus perfects them – He makes them righteous by His shed blood. And at the center of all this stands Jesus Christ, the Mediator of a new covenant, whose sprinkled blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

We know who Abel was – we talked about him two weeks ago. He was a shepherd, and gave offerings of the best of his flock to God. His brother Cain became jealous because God didn’t accept Cain’s grain offerings, so he murdered his brother. We’re told that Abel’s blood cried out to God from the ground (Gen. 4:10). Abel’s blood continues to cry out for justice – we are surrounded by injustice in the world – but the blood of Christ is an overflowing fountain where we receive grace upon grace!

Our understanding the difference between Sinai and Zion are critical. Sinai was about distance – God’s holiness and human fear. Zion is about nearness – God’s grace and human rejoicing and restoration. Sinai was about law – following the rules. Zion is about gospel. Sinai reveals our unworthiness. And Zion reveals the worthiness of Jesus Christ.

And the good news is this – we have come to Zion! Let’s look again at verse 22, “But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” It doesn’t say, “some day you’ll come.” Or “try harder, and you might get there one day.” It says, “you HAVE come...” Through faith in Jesus Christ, we already belong to God’s unshakable kingdom.

God Shakes Things Up

Next we read:

See to it that you do not refuse Him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused Him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from Him who warns us from heaven? At that time His voice shook the earth, but now He has promised, “Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be

shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain, (Heb. 12:25-27).

After describing the two mountains, we're given a warning, "See that you do not refuse Him who speaks," (verse 25). God shakes things up. He spoke at Sinai and the earth shook. But now God has spoken through His Son, and the shaking will be greater still – not only the earth, but the heavens also.

The "shaking" language used here is both literal and figurative. We know the whole creation groans and quakes under God's power. But spiritually, the shaking means that everything temporary, fragile, and fleeting will one day pass away. What is eternal will remain.

Things Change

Think of all the things in life that can be shaken. Things change. Economies – they rise and collapse. Many of you remember the recession and bail out in 2008 or 2009. Job losses happen. Retirement funds shrink overnight. Money can be shaken.

Governments change. Leaders come and go. Political systems shift. Nations once thought invincible crumble into the pages of history. When I think of human political systems, I often think of the old poem we read in High School English class inspired by the Egyptian statue of Ramses II, written by British poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, in 1818:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said – "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert ... Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.¹

Ancient Egypt, in its day, was a world superpower. So was Rome. And the British Empire. Power can be shaken. Culture changes constantly. What's fashionable today is outdated tomorrow. What's praised today may be criticized tomorrow. Trends can be shaken.

¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias*, located at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46565/ozymandias>, last accessed on 8/22/2025.

Even in our own lives, we're shaken. Our health can fail in an instant. Friendships can fracture. Dreams can dissolve. These bodies are frail. They wear out, and eventually perish. In short, we live in a shaking world. But God's Word tells us that the things which cannot endure will fall away, so that what's eternal may remain. And the thing that remains is God's unshakable kingdom.

Receiving the Unshakable Kingdom

Verse 28 says, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe." There are two takeaways here. First, God's kingdom is a gift. We don't build it. Nothing we do can cause us to earn it. We receive it. It is God's gracious gift to us in and through Jesus Christ. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, and say, "Thy kingdom come," this is what we're praying for. We're recognizing that the kingdom belongs to God. It's His kingdom.

The second takeaway is this – God's kingdom is unshakable. Unlike earthly kingdoms, God's kingdom will never end. Ozymandias' statue was scattered across the desert sands – his reign ended when he died. But God's reign – the reign of Christ – will NEVER end. Unlike our fragile securities, God's promises will never fail. Unlike the powers of this world, Jesus Christ is eternal – He's the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, (Heb. 13:8).

So how do we respond? How should we respond? Through gratitude and worship. Gratitude, because we don't deserve to inherit the kingdom. Worship, because God is holy. The writer of Hebrews adds, "for our 'God is a consuming fire,'" (Heb. 12:29). That means God's holiness burns away everything false, everything impure – everything temporary.

Living Unshaken in a Shaking World

Our worship then, shouldn't be just a casual, passive time. It's supposed to be reverent, awe-filled, and should transform our lives into better representations of Jesus Christ to the world. So how does this look in terms of application? Let me give you four ways:

1. Stand firm in your identity. When voices around you tell you you're only as good as your grades, your job, your performance, your looks – mercy! Remember this – you belong to Zion! You are a beloved child of God. You are a citizen of His kingdom. That cannot be shaken.

2. Hold loosely to earthly things. Enjoy the gifts God gives you – things like family, friends, work, possessions – but do not cling to them as though they are eternal. Hold them with open hands, because your ultimate treasure is Jesus Christ.

3. Persevere in faith. The original audience of Hebrews was tired, discouraged, and were tempted to give up. But the message is clear – don't quit! Keep running the race with perseverance. Fix your eyes on Jesus, who endured the cross and is now seated at the right hand of God, interceding on our behalf (Heb. 7:25, 8:1-2).

4. Worship with reverence and awe. We live in a culture that treats worship casually. A lot of people view it as entertainment, background noise, or as one option among many. The writer of Hebrews calls us to worship God with seriousness and joy – with gratitude and awe. Because our God is a consuming fire.

Human Examples of the Living in the Unshakable Kingdom

Throughout history there have been men and women who stood firm in the unshakable kingdom while the world around them shook. The early Christians faced persecution from Rome. Many were imprisoned, beaten – even killed. Yet they sang hymns, prayed for their enemies, and held fast to Jesus Christ. Rome shook. The Church endured.

Martin Luther, standing before the German Emperor at the Diet of Worms, declared, “Here I stand, I can do no other,” when they asked him to recant – to admit he was wrong – about writing the *Ninety-Five Theses*. The Empire – and the Roman Catholic Church – shook. God’s Word endured. Harriet Tubman, a woman born into slavery, risked her life again and again to lead others to freedom because she believed in a greater kingdom. The system of slavery shook. God’s kingdom prevailed.

A humble black Methodist seamstress clung to the seat of a bus in December, 1955. The driver ordered her to the back, but on that particular day, Rosa Parks was tired – of giving in, or just tired and wanting to go home. So she didn’t move. The police came and threw her in jail in Montgomery, Alabama. Prejudice and racism shook. God’s justice marched on.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German priest imprisoned by the Nazis, wrote letters of faith and hope. He was adamant that Christ is Lord – not the popular politician who was ruling his country at the time. Hitler’s regime shook – it collapsed. The Gospel endured.

Oscar Romero was the government’s favorite to be appointed as the archbishop of El Salvador. He held to the government line on most issues. Three weeks after he was installed, his friend was brutally murdered by the government – and Romero became an outspoken critic of the government, an advocate for his poverty-stricken people, and a marked man. Before he died, he told a reporter, “My life has been threatened many times. I have to confess that as a Christian I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadorian people.” Two weeks later, during a worship service, with the bread and cup held in his hands, Romero was gunned down by government agents.² That government shook. The love of Christ remained.

And closer to home. Maybe you’ve known a grandmother, grandfather, parent, or a spouse whose faith never wavered, even as their health failed. Maybe you’ve seen a family who lost everything in a storm, a fire, or a flood – yet they still gathered to pray and sing God’s praises. It’s hard, but that’s the unshakable kingdom at work.

²

Will Willimon, “God Calling (Proper 16, Ordinary/Lectionary 21),” *Will Willimon’s Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year C Part 2*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), pages 129-130.

Friends, today our world is shaking. Political tensions rise. Natural disasters devastate communities. Economic uncertainty rattles families. Cultural confusion leaves people searching for identity. And on a personal level, many of us feel shaken by health struggles, grief, loneliness, or change. The Bible – and Hebrews, specifically – tells us that in Christ, we are part of a kingdom that cannot be shaken. That is our hope. It's our anchor in life's storms. That is our good news!

Back to School Blessing

Right now I'd like to have any kids, teenagers, and adult students who are going back – or are already back – to school come up here with me. Just hang out up here with me for awhile. I have some stuff I want to say, and other people are going to be coming up here with us. You kids, and young people, are walking into classrooms filled with both opportunity and challenge. You'll face academic pressures, peer influences – both good and bad – shifting values, and a rapidly changing world.

Now let's have any teachers, school staff, bus drivers, cooks, educational aides, custodians – adults working in any capacity in the schools and colleges come up here. Friends, these adults also face the weight of expectations, the stress of balancing responsibilities – so do the parents with us this morning – and the call to nurture young hearts and minds.

Here's what we have to remember. In Christ, we are part of a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Grades may rise and fall, but God's love remains steady. Friends and colleagues may come and go, but Christ's presence abides. The culture may shift, but God's Word endures forever.

So today we bless our students, and all the adults working with them. We pray that they'll stand firm in their identity as beloved children of God, that they'll hold fast to Christ when the world trembles, and that they'll be lights of His kingdom in their schools and the wider community.

Prayer: Almighty God, We're thankful that in Christ You have brought us not to a mountain of fear, but to a kingdom of joy. We're thankful that Your kingdom cannot be shaken, even when the world trembles. Teach us to let go of what is passing away, and to hold fast to what is eternal. Strengthen our children, our youth, all of our adults working in the field of education, and our families as we begin a new school year. May they know that their foundation is in Christ alone. And may our lives, filled with gratitude and awe, bring You glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.