

“Cannot Be Shaken”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 21, 2022

11th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 103:1-8
Hebrews 12:14-15, 25-29

In her book, *The Great Emergence*, the late church historian Phyllis Tickle pointed out that the church undergoes something like a “rummage sale” about every five hundred years, in which the dominant forms of its spirituality are displaced from prominence by newer forms of spirituality. It’s similar to a purge one would have when decluttering a home or preparing for a move. The older forms of spirituality aren’t done away with; they simply no longer hold on to their dominant place. New things come to the forefront.¹

The last significant historical purge took place during the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Coinciding with the invention of the printing press and translations of the bible into multiple languages, it ushered in an era of rationalism and enlightenment upon which Western culture has stood in the centuries since. The Reformers’ discontent with what Christianity had become led them to disrupt its institutions and traditions, which, in turn, helped to usher in novel forms of not just religion, but also society, governance, and economy.

The Great Emergence describes another period of disruption in the church that has been slipping up on us for decades. In this “new season,” Tickle says, “When we become agitated – and agitate each other – about how we are drowning in information overload, in correspondence, and in the stress of unending ‘To-Do’ lists, we are talking about the Great Emergence, or at least about one small part of its presence in a new time in human history.”²

In this new season, we have been feeling the stress and agitation of information overload. We are perplexed about what is happening to our social structures, our institutions, and our planet. It all seems to be changing so fast; what we thought we knew is rapidly being shaken.

¹ T. Denise Anderson, “Like a Potter, God Can Reshape Us” in *Sojourners*, Sept-Oct, 2022

² Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, p. 15

This letter of Hebrews speaks to such a world where everything seems to be changing. As a result, the members of this early Christian church are questioning their beliefs; their worship participation is waning; their faith is being shaken.

Chapter 11 recounts the faith Hall of Fame, where the author lists a myriad of biblical heroes and heroines from Israel's history that the readers are to emulate in their own lives. These figures from their past lived "by faith," with the implication that we are to live by faith as well; surrounded as we are by such a cloud of witnesses, doing the seemingly impossible, with faith as our strength and motivation to press on.

In the beginning of chapter 12, we are encouraged to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Using this language of an athletic contest, the author pleads with his audience to not give up, but instead draw on the gift of faith that God provides through Jesus, the exemplar.

Don't give up; never lose hope. In today's text, we are told that though the world and all created things may be disrupted, the coming kingdom cannot be shaken. This is what we are to cling to amid all the chaos and agitation.

But how do we tell the difference between earthly and heavenly; between what is and is not unshakeable? The author of Hebrews invites the audience, and us, to see the gathering of those who worship with thanksgiving as the means of accessing God's promises. By continuing to gather together, Christians are incorporated into the kingdom of the living God, alongside a myriad of angels and saints from old. Gratitude is the key ingredient to an "acceptable worship" that is conducted with reverence and awe.³

I'm guessing that worship does not feel like this to you each and every time. Maybe the temperature is too warm or the pews are too hard. Perhaps the sound system is muffled or the shoes you have on are too tight. Possibly, your mind is occupied with making a grocery list or thinking about your appointment on Tuesday. Maybe the music is not your style or the sermon just won't end. With all this and more going on, it can be hard to focus on thanksgiving.

Of course, in this season of the Great Emergence, we also know that worship could be traditional or contemporary or seeker-sensitive, high church or low, in small chapels or super-size auditoriums, Roman Catholic, Orthodox or all kinds of Protestant – denominational or not. Worship can be in-person, remote, or

³ Christopher Holmes from *WorkingPreacher.com*

hybrid; on the radio, television or Metaverse; thus it may be with others, by yourself, or something in-between.

Like most things in our modern society, these seemingly endless worship options are framed by pervasive and persuasive advertising and media. With so many different opportunities out there, it can be nearly impossible to know what you'll find when you step – literally or figuratively – inside a particular Christian worship gathering. Will their values and beliefs be true; will their interpretation of scripture be relevant, thoughtful, and faithful; will the worship be based in thanksgiving and undertaken with reverence and awe?

Anybody who has spent time around teenagers knows the phenomenon called “selective hearing.” It’s what happens when adults open their mouths to convey important information. You know the drill – Teenager: “The teacher gave me a message and said it’s important.” Parent: “Okay, what is it?” Teenager: “I dunno. I forgot.” Parents know it’s not a matter of “I forgot.” They were exercising their “selective hearing.”

To some extent, this is a skill we all have to develop in order to navigate this world. We are bombarded with so much information from so many competing voices that we simply cannot process it all. We have to tune some of it out; that means we have to choose which of it we will pay attention to. In the midst of all the voices – of fear and anger, of hatred and violence – God calls us to a different way of life in the world; a life of faith.

“Selective hearing” is important if we want to make sense of our world, and to discern what the Bible teaches us about faith. In a very real sense, we must discern the principles within the Bible itself for this process of selective listening to come alive. They include:

- The Bible’s message is conveyed through the plain sense of the words. That means we don’t need to tie our minds into pretzels to find some hidden Bible Code.
- The Bible’s message must be sorted out from the setting in which it was spoken. The context matters; that means not every word of scripture reflects enduring truth.
- The Bible should be read under the guidance of the Spirit and in the context of the church community. This means that can’t just rely on “this is what it means to me.”

- The Bible teaches us that we are to live our lives with justice, mercy, and love. If our reading of scripture produces actions or attitudes that are not consistent with these values, we need to go back and read it again.
- The Bible's message is focused on the person of Jesus Christ, who is the living Word of God. If what we think is the truth of scripture is something we cannot envision Jesus endorsing, then we have missed something.⁴

Selective listening, in other words, can assist us in keeping from missing the forest for the trees. It helps us stay on track with our faith and our lives, if for no other reason than it reinforces the conviction that God is working to bring grace and mercy and peace into our lives. All things in creation might be shaken, but God is unshakeable. A good dose of selective listening helps us to tune out some of the confusing voices of mis-information and de-struction in our world and hear the voice of God speaking words of life instead.

Reading this passage from Hebrews may help us envision God as a housecleaner, shaking the dirt and dust from within God's community such that only that which is important remains. At times, a purge – a rummage sale – is just what is needed. In addition to finding places for us to drop anchor amid the shaking, how might we join in with God's act of shaking things up in our world, knocking the dust off the ways we worship, serve, and give witness in the world?

The goal of our worship is not entertainment, nor do we consume it as just another commodity. To worship is to encounter God, to hear God's voice, to be transformed in God's presence. A true gathering of worship does not leave us as we are, at ease with worldly illusions and distortions. Rather, it makes us aware of the transience and impermanence of every human tradition and institution before the mercy, might, and splendor of God. Amen.

⁴ Alan Brehm, "Selective Listening"