

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, June 2, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“THE SHAKING OF THE FOUNDATIONS”

Acts 16:16-34

I have never experienced an earthquake. The places I’ve lived are not really prone to earthquakes, at least not large ones. But some places in North America are, especially on the West Coast where they are still expecting the “Big One.” People who have experienced an earthquake say that it’s an unsettling experience. The ground heaves and splits, furniture moves around and paintings fall off the wall. Foundations shake. Whole structures may collapse. And along with the outward shaking, an earthquake apparently causes a real feeling of fear and helplessness. While it’s going on there is absolutely nothing one can do about it.

Now one does not have to live through an earthquake to experience the shaking of the foundations. Sometimes the very foundations of our lives are shaken. But this can actually be for our good. The shaking of the foundations opens the door for God’s good work in us.

Today’s story from Acts 16 is set in the city of Philippi, a Roman colony. There Paul and Silas had delivered a slave girl from an evil spirit that allowed her to tell fortunes. Her owners had been making income from her strange gift. But when they saw that this source of income was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. A mob gathered to support the owners. The town magistrates ordered Paul and Silas to be stripped and severely flogged. Then they were thrown into prison. To keep them secure, the jailer put them in an inner cell and fastened their feet in stocks.

And how did they react to this unjust imprisonment? Were they angry about their situation, complaining about the unfairness of it all? Were they demanding their rights? Well, no, perhaps because the early Christians had learned to expect such treatment. We read in verse 25, “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.” We have to marvel at the deep faith which allowed those early believers to react in such a way. Then suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s chains were unfastened.

But it wasn’t just the foundations of the prison that were shaken. The very foundations of the jailer’s life were shaken. Verse 27. “When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped.” Failing to keep prisoners secure could be a capital offense. So the jailer was seeking to take the honorable way out. His life had been turned upside down to the point of ultimate despair.

Now most of us have known times when the very foundations of our lives were shaken. Maybe the earthquake hasn't been quite so severe, but it's happened. Rather than 8 on the Richter Scale it's been a 3 or 4. But that's still noticeable. It can cause us to do some real soul searching. It may lead us to question the assumptions we live by and to ask, "What am I here for? Am I living for the right things? Is my faith based on a secure foundation?"

Now the shaking of your foundation may be caused by many things – the diagnosis of a serious illness. Or the loss of a job. The bankruptcy of your business. Some large financial loss. Or maybe a financial windfall. I've known people whose lives have been turned upside down negatively by a big financial gain. The ending of your marriage. Or the loss of a dear one. A tragedy which happens somewhere in the world or closer to home, to someone you know and love. Or a real earthquake, which makes you aware of your helplessness in the face of powerful natural forces. Maybe it's your awareness that before holy God you've missed the mark, and fallen short. Or maybe the increasing awareness of your own mortality. These things can cause the shaking of our foundations we stand on. These things can set us shaking not just outwardly, but inwardly. You realize that you can't stand or make it on your own strength. Your self-sufficiency begins to crumble.

Now it's not that God causes the foundations to shake. But to some extent he may allow it. These things are part of his permissive will, not his directed will. These things are not good in and of themselves. But God can use even these things for his good and saving purposes. The shaking of the foundations can open the door for God's good work in us.

So it happened for the jailer as the very foundations of his life were shaken to the point of collapse. Paul shouted to him in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" This is the question that humans have been asking since the dawn of time, as we face the uncertainties of life and the crisis of death. Paul and Silas told him, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all in his household. I'm sure they told him about one dark Friday when a great earthquake shook the city of Jerusalem. On that day the innocent God-man died on a cross, and the gates to God's eternal Kingdom flung wide open for all who believe. Then the jailer took them and washed their wounds; and he and his entire family were baptized without delay.

The shaking of the foundations had made the jailer aware of his spiritual need. His heart was now open to God's work in his life. And so he received Christ's presence and his saving grace. He became a believer and a child of God through faith and baptism. He was now cleansed and forgiven, safe forever in God's eternal love. God had brought the man to new life in Christ. And his actions showed it. His job had been to keep people securely in prison, but he now served people in a whole new way. He healed and fed the apostles. The change was miraculous. And it all happened because both the foundations of the prison and his own life had been shaken by a severe earthquake. Now he was trusting in the foundation that can never be shaken, Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. It was because Christ was their foundation that Paul and Silas could pray and sing hymns at midnight even in prison.

The shaking of the foundations opens the door for God's good work in us. When the foundations are shaken, we become much more open to what God wants to do in us and through us. I have seen it in people. They've put up resistance to God for a long time, for years. But then some crisis comes and they become more open to receiving what God has done for them in Jesus. The walls start to come down. And it is God's desire that all of us build our hopes not on shifting sands which can be washed away by the floods but on the solid foundation which God has put in place. The only way you can really be safe in life and in death is by trusting the one who is our rock and our refuge, Jesus Christ, the One whose living presence meets us and strengthens us at this table. To come to faith in Christ, to really rely on him, is God's good work in our lives.

Now it doesn't stop there. In fact, that's just the start. God has much to do in our lives, making us more like Jesus, leading us into the real purpose of life, teaching us to be humble servants of the Lord. But it starts with this. "What must I do to be saved?" "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." It's not by our actions that we are saved but by an act of faith – putting all your trust in the Saviour, leaning on his everlasting arms.

The shaking of the foundations opens us the door for God's good work in us. I probably wouldn't a minister without some shaking of my relatively comfortable life. Things were going just fine, but one year some unwelcome tremors hit my workplace. And it brought to mind some seeds God had planted in me years earlier about ministry. For a while I was quite uncertain and troubled but one day I heard an inner voice saying to me, "It's time. Do it now." And right then I knew what would I would do. uncertainly disappeared and I was at peace. I hope the seeds that God planted in me have borne some good fruit. When the foundations were shaken God opened a door to move me from where I was to where he wanted me to be.

Now it is not God's intention that we all become ordained ministers. But God's good work in our lives gives everyone of us some ministry in Jesus' name. The jailer discovered a new purpose as he washed washing the wounds and fed the apostles. He allowed his new found faith to influence his family, as well. And we can believe that was just the start of his new life of service.

Sometimes we wonder how we can spread the Gospel and invite people to faith. Well this story gives us a clue. We simply need to be ready to share with people when their foundations are being shaken. That's when they are most open to being prayed for and hearing the Bible's message of God's love for them. It's when they are most open to hearing the story of Jesus or your personal story of how God helped you through a crisis. It's when they are most likely to turn from the shaky foundation of their own self-sufficiency and build on God's unshakable foundation. Evangelism is not about pushing something on people when they are not open or ready. Evangelism means being open to people when their foundations are being shaken. It means being ready to respond when people ask spiritual questions or when they ask the big question, "What must I do to be saved?" It means trusting in the Holy Spirit to guide us and give us the words to say.

John Wesley was the spiritual father of Methodism, the prime founding denomination of the United Church of Canada. This church was Streetsville Methodist Church before it became Streetsville United Church in 1925. When Wesley was a young Church of England clergyman he

was sent on a mission to America, to preach the Gospel and minister to natives and settlers in Georgia. His ministry there was not very successful and he went home, very discouraged. On the ship heading for England, a great storm hit, and Wesley was not only sick but terribly frightened. But he noticed a small group of Moravian Christians, at peace and singing hymns during the storm. He asked them how they could be so calm when everything was crashing down around them. One of them answered, "We know Christ." Then he asked Wesley, "Do you know Christ?" That question haunted Wesley, and one night in Aldersgate Church in London, as he listened to Paul's letter to the Romans, his heart was strangely warmed, and he knew that he did indeed trust in Christ, and Christ alone for his salvation. Wesley's ministry was renewed and subsequently bore much fruit.

We shouldn't think that such a heart-warming experience of Christ's presence is unusual. It's open to everyone of us, and it often happens when the foundations of our lives are being shaken. Maybe someone has come here today because you sense the foundations shaking. But don't despair as you feel the tremors. It means that the God who loves you is very near. The shaking of the foundations is opening the door for God's good work in you. So be ready and open to receive his gift.