

Sermon – “Being Moved”  
Sunday, March 1, 2020  
Scripture Readings: Psalm 125; Matthew 4:1-11  
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Today’s first scripture reading is Psalm 125. Hear God’s assurance to you in these ancient words of worship and prayer.

*Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,  
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.*

*<sup>2</sup> As the mountains surround Jerusalem,  
so the LORD surrounds his people, from this time on and forevermore.*

*<sup>3</sup> For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous,  
so that the righteous might not stretch out their hands to do wrong.*

*<sup>4</sup> Do good, O LORD, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts.*

*<sup>5</sup> But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways  
the Lord will lead away with evildoers.*

*Peace be upon Israel!*

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Today’s second reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew, in the fourth chapter, verses one through eleven. This is near the beginning, and immediately follows the baptism story of Jesus which concludes with a voice from heaven declaring, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Hear now God’s Word.

*<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” <sup>4</sup> But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*

*<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup> saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”*

*<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”*

*<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup> and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”*

*<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

Every so often, feeling in need of something and not sure what, I will open a Bible aimlessly, and spend a minute or two reading and contemplating whatever words I have landed upon. One day not long ago, I found myself absorbing the words of Psalm 125. “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,” the Psalm declares, “which cannot be moved, but abides for ever.”<sup>1</sup>

Some days this is exactly the sort of thing one needs to be reminded of. Daily life assails us with one thing and then another, but being in God means being held steadfast. “As the mountains are round about Jerusalem,” we are reassured, “so the Lord is round about [God’s] people, from this time forth and evermore.”<sup>2</sup>

There is imagery throughout the Bible about being unshaken when resting in the Lord. Psalm 16 announces, “I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.”<sup>3</sup> Psalm 55: “Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.”<sup>4</sup> Psalm 62: “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus in Matthew 7 told his followers “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house upon rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.”<sup>6</sup>

Passages declaring God to be our steadfast refuge are all over the Bible. I happened upon this one, the opening verses of Psalm 125, and was only a week or two later intrigued to hear Mary Ray tell us from this pulpit that she had had a meaningful encounter with those very lines of scripture in the context of her just-concluded overseas mission project.

I love the passages that reassure us we can be rooted in something firm, something unshakeable. For there is certainly nothing truly firm and unshakeable in ourselves or the world around us. The apostle Peter knew of this. Once after many followers abandoned Jesus because they found his teaching too hard, Jesus asked, “‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.’”<sup>7</sup> And Peter’s words ring true still. To whom else, to what else, *would* we turn? And yet the fact that so many did turn away also hints at something a little more difficult that we might prefer to overlook.

For there is a particular temptation we bring to passages like Psalm 125. “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved,” it declares. What we are tempted to hear there is an excuse to stand still. Does this mean that we can stand wherever we wish, and God will establish us there as long as we have faith? Is this really a divine promise to fulfill our human desire to remain unchanged?

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 125:1 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 125:2 (*NRSV*).

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 16:8 (*NRSV*).

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 55:22 (*NRSV*).

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 62:1-2 (*NRSV*).

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 7:24-25 (*NRSV*).

<sup>7</sup> From John 6:67-68 (*NRSV*), coming from an episode running from John 6:22 through the end of chapter 6.

Many a slaveholder in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century felt that an entire way of life was under assault by abolitionism. Surely they prayed for God to sustain them, to let the foundations of their lives never be shaken. Maybe they found this very Psalm and read its words as Union armies approached in the end.

I think the passage requires a deeper reading than that. The key phrase we don't always fully see is in the beginning. "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved." "Those who *trust in the Lord.*" What does it mean to "trust in" the Lord? To truly trust in something is not just to intellectually or verbally declare your trust. Sometimes we mistake the two, but they are not the same. If you are given a parachute and you know factually that it can safely bring you to the ground, but you cannot bring yourself to jump from the airplane, you have just illustrated the difference between intellectually believing in something and trusting in it. Trusting is an act: the act of truly putting your faith there, putting your eggs in that basket, as it were.

Trusting in the Lord God, then, the same Lord who gave us the Commandments and Christ, might be more than simply declaring that God is our salvation and then going on as always. Indeed, let us remember the words of Jesus I just quoted: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house upon rock." What did he say there? Not "Everyone who hears these words of mine and says, 'Right on!'" will be like the wise man, but "Everyone who hears these words of mine *and acts on them*" will be like that wise man.

Here is what I am trying to say in short: Psalm 125 and many other passages tell us those who trust in the Lord will be established and protected so no matter what comes at them, they cannot be moved. But to "trust in the Lord" often involves a good deal of moving at the start, from where we are comfortable and toward the place where we are finally indeed trusting in God. I do not think it means just staking out our own place wherever we want to be and expecting God to come to us and allow us to remain unmoved there.

Jesus, our Lord himself, had to go on a trek through the wilderness, and to the cross after that. And what did he say to those who looked to him? "Come and follow me." We, too, have a sometimes arduous journey to make. Jill Duffield, of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, used a wonderful phrase in commenting on today's passage of Jesus undergoing hardship and temptation in the wilderness; she spoke of how this passage reminds her of what she calls "the perils of our baptismal calling."<sup>8</sup> We no longer can sit tight where we are, comfy and lazy; our baptism is an eternal, unmatched assurance...that opens our eyes to the calling to follow Jesus, even through the desert.

Lent is a time of desert seeking. We take a step back. We remember we have a beginning and an end. We remember we do not need everything in the world that we think we need. We remember we are sinful. Why do we remember these things? Because they move us somewhere we need to go.

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<sup>8</sup> Jill Duffield, from the 2/24/2020 (First Sunday in Lent) entry in an email commentary series entitled "Looking into the Lectionary," published by *The Presbyterian Outlook*.

One of the traditional themes of Lent is penitence. The work of contemplative contrition over an extended period—of examining our guilt—is...well, I guess I would say it is not in fashion to think deeply about what we do regret or should regret in an era which much prefers living with no regrets at all. But what is fashionable in any given era has never been a particularly good measure of what is necessary or important, so we will boldly forge ahead together, as I offer just a few brief things I propose we should consider about one of the most Lenten of subjects: guilt itself.

Guilt is an interesting feature of being human. It is universally shared, or nearly so, as a characteristic of our lives. There are many responses we make to it: we ignore it; we wallow in it; we become despondent over it; we brand ourselves with it and incorporate the burning feeling forever into our identity; we throw it away and refuse to allow it entrance into our thoughts; we carry it partly hidden, under a messy pile of other things in our hands, as a vague, anxious item we're not sure where to put and therefore which we can't really set aside, and which occasionally emerges unexpectedly to the top of the pile and leaves us bewildered or disheartened. We do all of this and more, for we are rarely sure of anything about it other than that we do not like it much.

But if we are going to walk through a season of penitence, then we need to be able to work with guilt, and if we are to do that, then I offer for our consideration—and I am by no means original in this idea—a fairly simple conceptual approach to guilt, surely not complete or perfect, but maybe helpful.

I think that guilt is a lot like pain. If I were to ask the question, “Is pain good?” the most obvious answer is, “No, of course not.” But it gets more complex; there is a second answer, too. Physical pain is the means by which your body tells you something is going wrong with it or something wrong being done to it. Pain is a warning. It tells you you need to eat; it tells you that you are setting your foot down on glass and had better stop. It tells you it is too cold to be out without protective clothing.

Because pain is so powerfully hard to ignore, it protects us. It is hard to imagine all the ways we would damage our bodies daily, or completely fail to become aware of things having gone wrong that need attention, if there were no such thing as pain. From that perspective, pain is not only good, it is essential. So there is this odd paradox of pain serving to our good and at the same time being one of the evils that befalls us in life.

Guilt, I think, is something similar. The simplest way to think of guilt, too, is as a warning that there is something to pay attention to. Like our nervous system jolts us when we try to put weight on a broken leg, and memory and anticipation of pain make us wary of walking carelessly on ice or doing other foolish things, our conscience jolts us when we do wrong, and the memory or anticipation of guilt keeps us from repeating mistakes we have made in the past. It is surely something very pain-like that we experience when we recognize we have harmed somebody, is it not?

The simplest function guilt performs is to make us feel guilty when we *are* guilty. When we are guilty, just like when we are in physical pain, there is something gone wrong that needs to be fixed. And in this function, guilt is every bit as essential as pain is. People who lack it are not called happy; they are called psychopaths.

And yet, there are more levels to it as well. Our bodily systems can go awry, and so can our consciences. There are times our bodies give us pain for no good reason at all. There are times we still feel pain of an injury long after it is helpful or long after it is healed. Likewise, there are times we are pained by guilt for things which are not tied to fault on our part—guilt for our parents having divorced; guilt for being the victim of a crime; guilt for surviving a tragic accident when others did not. And we feel guilt for things of which we are genuinely guilty but for which the victims of our wrongs have long since forgiven us.

So it is a complicated matter to be faced by guilt. It is possible to allow guilt to own us so we cannot believe in forgiveness, for it to tear us down like an auto-immune disease using mechanisms meant for healing to destroy instead. But it is also possible to allow guilt to tell us something very important, if we let it. It might tell us we've been standing stubbornly over here when we know deep down that we need to go over there. It might tell us we need to set aside our pride and apologize. It might tell us we have responsibilities that we've been ignoring.

We don't know any of that unless we pay attention. Being attentive to our guilt is not the easiest thing to do with it—the easiest things are to fall down and let it take us into despair or to slam the door and refuse to acknowledge its presence at all; but I think the healthier way is to look at it head-on and consider it carefully and prayerfully. Is it, in this moment, telling us a true word, or a false one? (Or some muddled combination of both?) If it is false, only if we have truly examined it carefully and really know it to be false can we ever be truly comfortable taking steps to cast it aside. For surely when your hand is touching a hot stovetop, if you treat the problem with a painkiller instead of by moving your hand, you are not helping. And when we see that our guilt is saying something true, looking straight at it will help us become better persons and help those we have harmed—or, if it is about something we no longer can make right, it will help us recognize our need for God's final restoration and salvation to finally heal all things.

In other words, in our call to move from here to the place of faithful trust in the Lord, one of the things that moves us along sometimes is our unpleasant friend guilt.

One final point about that. There is an odd habit we sometimes have regarding movement of the self that is prompted by guilt. Most of us have probably once upon a time sensed some kind of obligation weighing on us and decided something like, "but I'm not going to be guilted into doing that." Or maybe we've said it to others: "I don't want you to do this out of guilt." I just want to take a second to ask: *why not?*

Guilty feelings, as we've discussed, are not a fully reliable indicator of actual guilt, but they *can* be exactly that: a reminder that we really do have a particular obligation hanging out there that remains unfulfilled. To refuse to do something specifically because it is guilt prompting us to do it essentially amounts to saying, "As long as I remain this aware of what I ought to do, I refuse to do it." If we took that sort of attitude consistently toward all our obligations, I think we'd be in a lot of trouble with our bill collectors. "Sorry, credit card issuer, I refuse to pay this bill now, because you made me feel that I owed it to you." Or, "Maybe I will take my hand from the hot stove someday, but I refuse to do it just out of pain."

There is a lot of this for us to sort out in life, which I suppose is why we do Lent every single year, and not just once. Where is our guilt prodding us with something we really need to hear? Where is it making us suffer needlessly and we can be helped by finally recognizing it as misplaced?

One day we will find ourselves fully arrived in the place where we can be unmoved. Until then, we have a lot of moving to do, but Jesus Christ has met us on the path, and in following him there is life. Even on the journey we can see it. For yes, guilt moves us, but that is not the only thing. Joy moves us. Compassion moves us. Beauty. Gratitude. The holy Word of God moves us, calling us with promise, beckoning us with reassurance. Let us, then, trust in the Lord. Amen.