

For a few years when our children were younger, we took vacations in North Myrtle Beach at a hotel called Dunes' Village. It was a simple layout. At the center of a two-story u-shaped arrangement of comfortable rooms, there was an in-ground swimming pool with a baby pool at one end for toddlers and parents. Around these pools were Palmetto trees, the state tree of South Carolina. Around the Palmetto trees was a wide u-shaped yard of rich green grass where families grilled out and played Whiffle ball and threw Frisbees. Most mornings, we would go with our children to the beach for an hour or two; then, we would return to the pool where we would play in the water under the trees until lunch time. It was a charming place where hotel guests could sit by a pool under a Palmetto tree and look at the Atlantic Ocean until they fell asleep. We loved this place and our times there. One day bad news finally came. The bad news everyone had dreaded was that our vacation paradise would be torn down so that a high rise could be built. In the early 1990s, Dunes' Village was flattened and they built a newer version that is now five or six stories tall. The pool and the Palmetto trees and the grass were exchanged for concrete and rooms. Today, there is a high-rise hotel that brings in far more people and makes far more money. This sounds pretty silly now. But I was 39, 40 years old when I remember asking this question. Does anything endure these days?

Perhaps you have asked the same question about friendships. Perhaps you have asked the same question about your work. Social scientists say these young people coming out of college will have at least seven or eight jobs before they retire. Perhaps you have asked the same question about your marriage staying together. You may have asked the same question about the church. Someone said to me recently, "It doesn't seem I will ever be able to find a church like the one I attended as a little girl." We may not want to admit it, but many of us are asking this question. Does anything endure these days?

The writer of the Hebrew letter has an answer. He is concerned about Christians in the first century who are ready to give up. They thought they were on to something enduring, something stronger and more powerful than Rome and injustice and violence and death. They thought Jesus was due to return and take them to paradise. So we read a heavy letter aimed at encouraging Christians who feel forsaken and forgotten.

He reminds the readers of the letter to the Hebrews **who and what we have come to**. We think we have come to hear someone lead us in worship and preach a sermon. We think we have come to hear musicians lead us with music that helps us worship God. We think we have come to fellowship with old friends. We think we have come to a familiar place where we can relax and be at peace. And we may have in our own minds come precisely to these things.

And what is here is something far greater than ministers and music and friends and fellowship. In reality, we have come into the presence of the Living God. We have come into the holy of holies. We have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to countless angels in brilliant garb, to God, the Maker of heaven and earth, to Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord. We have come to the Spirit applying the benefits of his grace and truth here and now. We think this is new carpet and fresh paint and a new wood floor. If this is all we see, we are missing the real stuff. This is about appearance and reality. Do you know who you are dealing with?

Do you hear to whom the psalmist came? In Psalm 71, he is afraid he has been put to shame. He needs rescuing. Wicked people, unjust and cruel people have been after him. He is afraid for his life. He cries out to God, to the One in whom he can take refuge. He cries out for God in righteousness to come and deliver him. He cries out for rescue. Read the psalm through and you get the angry plans of people bent on doing harm. "Pursue and seize that person whom God has forsaken for there is no one to deliver." (71:11) The psalmist makes some promises. Is he bargaining with God? Whatever he is doing, he is not letting go. He promises praise and witness when God delivers him from his foes.

Do you see to whom this woman comes in Luke 13? Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on Saturday afternoon. She has had a spirit for years that has bent her over; she comes to Jesus. He straightens her up. The leader of the synagogue gets all upset about what Jesus is doing. He is breaking the rules. The

story becomes a conversation about what happens on the Sabbath. It becomes a story about the meaning of religion. Are we here to do rituals that make us feel better or are we here to somehow touch peoples' lives and make the world a better place? Do you notice the crowds? They are excited about Jesus. Do you notice the leaders? They have been shamed.

This morning let us wake ourselves up if we are missing the picture here. Our God is a consuming fire. Our God is the living God and we are to wake ourselves and pay attention to what God is doing. Can you see it?

If you can't see it, do you know what to expect? This writer gives us not only a word about who and what we have come to. He also reminds the readers of the Hebrew letter **what we can expect**. We can expect God to speak to us. We should remember there were consequences when people forgot what Jesus said on earth. We should also remember there will be consequences when people forget what God is saying from heaven.

Do you hear what God is saying to this psalmist? We have not heard God's word yet. God has not moved yet, not acted yet. But our friend who writes these words is waiting. He hopes he is going to receive an encouragement and a security and a faith and a word of praise for the God who has rescued him.

Do you hear what God is saying to this bent over woman? Now she is standing up straight and is praising God. Jesus is speaking a prophetic word to indignant leaders who are far more concerned about rules than they are human beings. Do you hear what God is saying to these indignant religious leaders? They can't hear a thing. They are so stuck in their old way of doing everything. They can't hear.

We can expect God to speak to us and we can also expect God to shake us. There is going to be some shaking going on with what God does. God makes a promise to shake up everything. Perhaps the shaking has already started. The Presbyterian Church USA is losing members. And everywhere across the General Assembly church members are feeling the effects of something going on. Churches everywhere are trying to figure out what God is saying. Tony Robinson, the United Church of Christ minister is writing books to get people to stop and listen. So is Robert Schnase, the Methodist bishop, the officers learned from a year ago. Multiply this by one hundred and you might begin to get an accurate idea of how many people are trying to help the church understand what is going on. **God is speaking to the church**. All kinds of realities are shaking the church: the death of members, a sluggish economy, the loss and changing of jobs, poor attendance, people getting worn out and tired. We are wondering what is going on.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews offers a word about what to do. **Make sure you pay close attention when God is speaking to you**. Often people want spiritual experiences. We want to experience God. This is not the place to begin. We begin by paying attention. We begin with the words of scripture. We begin with a simple purple booklet and a plan to meet with other believers from our church. Together we are listening to what God is saying to us.

Do you remember the song, "It only takes a spark to get a fire going and soon all those around will warm up to its glowing. That's how it is with God's love, once you experience it, you spread his love to everyone; you want to pass it on." What God is doing begins with a spark. It begins with an idea in a conversation about the meaning of scripture. It begins with a look or a laugh or something we share as we think about what God is saying to us. I am telling you. These groups that are meeting as people read and talk about scripture are on something real and powerful.

God is building something that will endure: a kingdom of Word and Spirit and love among people who trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. What will endure is faith in the God who is our refuge and fortress. What will endure is not a God of rules and duty, but the One who heals on the Sabbath and makes all things, all people, new if we will appear before Jesus like this woman does.

Be careful you do not refuse to hear an important word. Be careful you only listen to what you want to hear. Be careful that you refuse to participate in these opportunities to hear what God

is saying through the body of this congregation. Here is an opportunity to hear what God is saying to all of us. Not through ministers, but through members.

Here is the truth about what is truly enduring. It is not the church from our childhood. It is not this minister or even this worship service. What is truly enduring is this kingdom that can never be shaken...for our God is a consuming fire. God is shaking and burning what will not last. So hold on and make sure you pay attention when God is speaking to you.

There will be hotels and favorite places that are changed and rearranged. We will lose and gain friendships. We will end and start new jobs. We may see bad marriages end and new, better marriages get going. We may never get the perfect church we want. But if we pay attention to what is being said to us, if we listen with open hearts and minds, we just may discover the kingdom of God alive and well among us here doing things we never thought possible.

Loving God, we come to this church for many reasons. We come here with faith. We believe help our unbelief. We come with a deep desire that our world and the world we create together would be a different one. We just don't always know how to do it. We have been disappointed and discouraged with what we have found in the past. Lord, we need your help to begin again. Put within each of us the desire to be open to your word. We hear the passion and conviction of the writer of the Hebrew letter. Help us to place whatever we hear today beside the strain and heartache and fear of this life. Give us a reason to simply do what you are asking us to do. Help us to be faithful to your simple commands, to your word expressed by the writer of this ancient letter.

We live in a world that is so broken and torn. We pray today for the hungry. We pray for those in Asia and South America and the Caribbean whose lives have been turned upside down by earthquakes and weather catastrophes. We pray for those everywhere who have been subjected to political tyranny and violence. Protect the innocent. Let there be strong human beings everywhere who stand for what is right and just and true. Give them the courage to do what is right.

We pray today for people we know who hurt. We pray for bereaving friends and families. We pray for those who wait for healing. We pray for those who live in despair or fear or brokenness. Let your church be filled with the Spirit of him who healed the sick and changed lives with his compassion and care. Let us be filled with his Spirit that we might continue living on this planet for good and not for evil. So we pray hoping and believing...Our Father who art in heaven...

