

23 March 2011
Lent 2 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Miraculous Earthquake”

Text: Matthew 27:51b

(Hebrews 12:25-29; Matthew 26:36-56)

This Lenten season we have been considering the miraculous event that surrounded Jesus’ crucifixion. So far we have considered the darkness that covered the earth and the tearing of the Temple curtain in two from top to bottom. Tonight, we will think about the fact that when Jesus died, “the earth shook” (Matthew 27:51b).

Which is quite a timely thing for us to consider, given the recent events in Japan. It seems that every day there is more bad news, and estimates about how long it is going to take Japan to recover from this disaster keep going up. One thing is for certain: earthquakes are great disruptions in peoples lives.

And so it was, we could say, for the Jewish leaders who wanted to get rid of Jesus. They wanted to get rid of Jesus quickly and quietly, but with the earthquake and the other miraculous events that surrounded Jesus’ crucifixion, God made sure that didn’t happen! And worst of all (for them), the miracles kept on happening, beginning with the resurrection of Jesus from the grave, and then with the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and beyond. Word of the crucifixion would not stay quiet, but would spread and fill all the world. That all people may know what God has done for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. That, as we heard on Sunday, *God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16).

But what is important for us to remember tonight is that the earthquake that accompanied Jesus’ death was not just an historical event - but an event filled with *theological* meaning and importance. For in the Scriptures, earthquakes are mentioned quite a lot, and largely in two ways: first, as a sign of God’s judgment; and then second, as a sign of the end times.

The earthquake at Jesus’ death, therefore, is telling us something very important: that God’s judgment has ended, and the end times have begun. God’s judgment has ended, for the judgment of God upon the sin of the world was poured out upon Jesus as our substitute. And the end times have begun because with Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, He could return at any time.

Now, talk of the end times is often accompanied with fear and very scary stories of

apocalypse and armageddon! But what the earthquake at the cross is teaching us is that we need not fear the end or the judgment, but can look forward to that day with trust and joy. For since Jesus took the judgment of God against our sin on the cross and there is now for us the forgiveness of our sins, we don't have to worry about the judgment. We know what it will be. In fact, we hear it every Sunday in the Absolution: *you are forgiven; your guilt has been taken away*. And so when Jesus returns, it will be for you as a bridegroom returning for His bride; it will be to come and take you home. *For whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life*.

To do that for you was not easy for Jesus. We heard tonight of His prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane: ***Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me***. The judgment of God and His wrath against sin is no small thing. But how great is Jesus' love for His Father and for you! He will drink this cup of suffering, shame, and death. He will not call legions of angels from heaven to defend Him. No, He will go to the cross for you. He will fulfill the Scriptures. *And the earthquake is a sign that He has*.

And so the earthquake that happened at the cross, while a frightening thing, is also a comforting thing. Which is quite a different way of thinking about earthquakes, for when they happen in your life, they *are* quite frightening. Whether they be real earthquakes, like in Japan, or Haiti, or Chile, or New Zealand; or whether they be *figurative earthquakes* - the things that happen in your life that shake you up, disrupt your plans, and cause you great fear. They are hard.

But let the earthquake at Jesus' cross be your comfort at just such times. To know that these earthquakes in your life are not the judgment or punishment of God against you - that was finished, completed at the cross. God is now able to use these things for good. And He is not only able, He has promised to: *for all things work together for good, for those who love God, for those who are called according to His purpose* (Romans 8:28).

And should these earthquakes in your life bring an end to your life - as they will for all of us one day, unless Jesus returns first! - know that the cross of Jesus means that death is just the first step in your resurrection to eternal life. Because of Jesus, not even death can separate us from the love of God. This enemy, too, has been destroyed.

Apart from Jesus, all these things are powerful and frightening things, out-of-control things, things that shake the earth and shake our hearts. And we are often times shaken. Our faith isn't perfect, and it never will be. And that's okay. Okay, because your faith doesn't have to be perfect; Jesus was perfect. And He who gave you your faith is working in you to perfect and strengthen that faith, and He will see too it

that it is strong enough to face whatever comes your way. You may be shaken, but you will not be defeated.

For as we heard tonight, while you and I can be shaken, ***we have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken.*** A firm foundation that will never let us down. And so when the earthquakes come - and they always come! - the foundation of Christ and His cross, of His Word and Sacraments, cannot be shaken. On them, you are safe. On them, you are secure. Thanks be to God!

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.