

Real Security

In the name of him who died for our sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, dear friends in Christ: When I was growing up way back in the 1960s, the toy manufacturer *Mattel* put out a game for children called *KerPlunk*. I'll bet a lot of you are familiar with it – especially if you're my age or older because then it's likely you either played it or watched your kids play it. I'm afraid it's probably too low tech for the kids of today since it has no integrated circuits. In fact, I couldn't remember what it was called so I had to look it up on the internet. I found it on a site that featured the toys and games of yesteryear, right there with the wooden blocks and rocking horses – and boy did that make me feel old. Anyway, for those who are not familiar with it, the game consists of a clear plastic cylinder, about eighteen inches high and three or four inches in diameter. The midsection of the cylinder has got all these little holes through which, when you're setting up the game, you insert lots of little sticks or rods that look like especially long toothpicks. The idea is to create a kind of nest in there because when that's done, you pour a few handfuls of marbles in the top that rest on the network of sticks you've made. At that point you're ready to play. Players take turns removing one of the rods. The goal is to do so without causing any of the marbles to fall because those that do (*KerPlunk*) count against you. And of course, that gets increasingly harder to do as the game goes on because there are fewer and fewer rods forming the nest supporting the marbles. Eventually it comes to the point when removing any rod gets the whole thing to collapse. The player that happens to lose.

Now, though it's a silly little thing, it's too bad they don't make it anymore because a game like that teaches valuable life skills and lessons; like, for instance, how to distinguish between what's essential and nonessential in holding things up, or this: when you're pretty sure that stuff is going to come falling down from on high, make sure it falls on somebody else. See? It was really an educational game. But the reason I mention it this morning is because I think it serves as a nice metaphor for the way we live our lives. You see, we all have our marbles: the things we value in life like family relationships, good health, our homes, our reputations, and our finances. And we seek security and stability for them. We're most comfortable when we feel that our foundation is solid, and the safety nets are all in place. And so, we spend a lot of our time building piece by piece the support structure that will keep us from losing our marbles. So, for example, we try to eat right and exercise to stay healthy, and at the same time we buy health insurance in case we don't. We do what's necessary to make sure we have enough money to live on by staying on top of our jobs, learning new skills and talents, taking ongoing education, investing for the future and what not. And again, we buy insurance to protect all the things we value. Hopefully you're getting the idea here – but I need to warn you that the analogy is not perfect because a lot of time our sticks and our marbles are the same things. Your spouse, for instance, can be both a marble you want to keep (at least I hope so) and a help and support for you.

Now, of course there's nothing wrong with having any or all of the things I just named. They are all blessings of God that he gives to us in love. He wants us to enjoy them. He wants us to use them as good stewards of his gifts. The problem is that not that we have them, or that we use them to enrich our lives; the problem is that we tend to rely on them for our security. We *trust* in them. Our present and future happiness is tied directly to whether or not we have them. And so we tend to trust the gifts rather than the God who gives the gifts. And when we do that, we are like the man Jeremiah describes in this morning's Old Testament lesson: *"Cursed is the man who trusts in man, who makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land."*

Unfortunately, it is in this dry desert wasteland described by Jeremiah that most of the world's people live, regardless of how much they have. Especially in our own country, blessed with a material prosperity that former generations couldn't even imagine, most people are trapped in a desert of anxiety and fear. They are trying to ensure that they won't lose the pieces that hold their fragile human security in place. And we sometimes take these efforts to ridiculous extremes. Just for example: Americans spend

billions of dollars every year buying lottery tickets in pursuit of the “one in a million” dream of not having to worry about having enough money. Advertisements designed to entice you to buy these tickets feature past winners who stress that they don’t have to worry any more. (Really? I’ll bet they still have plenty of worries—like how to *keep* all that money.) Americans spend another fortune calling “psychic hotlines” in the false hope of having some small glimpse into the future so they don’t have to worry so much about what tomorrow might bring. Another fortune is spent on vitamins and spurious remedies which promise to return youthful vitality because we are worried about growing old or getting sick. And here’s an idea: does anyone here want to write a best seller? Write something on an upcoming catastrophe. Political, moral, nuclear, environmental, it really doesn’t matter. Pepper your narrative with a couple of verses from the Book of Revelation or the prophecies of Nostradamus, and watch the sales soar. In America, the fear of the future sells.

Surrounded by plenty, blessed with the world’s best technology, highest educational levels, and most advanced medicines, we Americans are among the most worried people on earth. The question is this: if we have more than anybody ever had (and we do), what are we so worried about? It’s just like the prophet said, *“He will not see any good come.”* No, instead, the more we have, the more we trust in what we have and what we are, and the more uneasy we feel about it. Why is that? It’s because we know that our marbles are resting on pieces that can be removed at any time and without any warning. Jobs, reputations, health ... they can all vanish in a flash. The biblical character Job is a good example of that. His friend, Bildad, speaking of someone who trusts in the things of this earth observed, *“What he trusts in is fragile; what he relies on is a spider’s web.”* And we know it: that’s why we are consumed with this desperate sense of worry.

And we in the Christian church are not immune to this desperation in the midst of plenty. Though we sit in a virtual flood of God’s blessings, we often fail to see it. We breathe a periodic sigh of relief when we can insert another stick into the support structure that holds up our little congregation; but just as soon as it’s in place, we’re back to worrying about what will happen next. To use Jeremiah’s imagery, we can be like a dried-up bush in the desert. Our sense of security is enhanced momentarily when a shower falls; but every ounce of our effort is dedicated to saving each drop of water that comes our way. And because of this, like desert plants, we are thorny and unproductive. Desert plants spend all their effort just trying to stay alive. They produce no fruit for anyone to eat. They don’t cast a shadow to shelter anyone from the heat. It’s a “survival of the fittest” attitude that looks at each blessing that comes to the church and asks, “How can we use this to improve our security?” rather than “How can we use this for the advancement of the kingdom of God?”

And when we get together and bring this worldly way of seeking security into the church, we end up with a church that is unproductive because spend our time worrying about our own stability and survival. We hang our hopes on figures that have to do with budgets, and programs, and attendance – all of which are looked upon as sticks in the foundation but are really more like an occasional desert shower for a tumbleweed. We focus on ourselves and miss the opportunities to serve others, which are the very things that lead to greatness in the kingdom of God. And it all comes of trusting in human measures of security rather than on the one thing that gives us real security.

Real security is not a foundation that can be removed a piece at time or all at once, it’s solid bedrock. Real security is not like an occasional desert shower, it’s a mighty flowing stream. The Rock of which I speak is Christ, and the stream is his Word. When our trust is built on Christ we have nothing to worry about. Take a worst-case scenario: you lose your job, your house, your health, your loved ones, your reputation ... everything you value in this life. You’re losing all your marbles at the same time. Panic time, right? No! Of course not. As St. Paul says, *“If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”* Even if you lose all you have in this life, you lose nothing, because in Christ you have the resurrection from the dead. In him you have eternal life. *That’s* real security, and it cannot be taken away from you.

And this real security makes a difference in the way we live our lives. Jeremiah says it’s like being a tree planted by the stream. When our roots are deep in God’s word and the hope of our salvation in Christ,

then the changing seasons of fortune come and go hardly noticed. Sure, we feel the heat. We know when the drought comes. We feel the pain and disappointment of the losses of this life. But the droughts of life are on the surface level, our roots run deep into the water of God's Word. We are unshaken by these external circumstances: they cannot affect our real security. And to help build this unshakable faith, God often deliberately sends a drought, not to hurt or punish us, but to encourage us to sink the roots deeper still into the source of our true security. It's in the times when he starts removing those rods and sticks that we think hold our lives in place that we learn where our real security is.

I think I've told this story before, but there was a construction worker who left his lunch box up on the roof of an eight-story building project. He decided to go back up and get it. It was late at night, and the crew had been working under floodlights, but these were all turned off now because everyone was going home. As he looked for his box in the darkness, he tripped over some tools and fell towards the edge of the roof. He just managed to catch the edge as the momentum of his falling body carried him over the side. So, there he was, left hanging by his fingertips on the side of the building in the dark. He screamed for help, but everyone had left. He couldn't manage to pull himself back up. But he was a Christian, so he pleaded to God for rescue; but nothing happened. After long minutes, he realized that this was the end. He realized there was nothing to do but place his trust completely in the Lord. And a certain calm came over him as he thought about his hope in the resurrection. Finally, his strength failing, he lost his grip and fell—about four inches onto the safety scaffolding which had been there all along. Our hope in the resurrection is like that scaffolding, always there, but just out of sight. Now, few of us have ever faced such a trial; but the story illustrates how God directs us to our true security by removing all the human means of support. These "droughts" push the roots deeper into the water.

But there is another reason God sends droughts. I've lived in several places that have very arid climates, like the southwest United States and northeastern Brazil. From the air as you fly over such places, even the smallest stream bed stands out boldly because it's they're only place you can see green. All around is sun scorched earth and mangy shrubs, but in the stream beds are luxuriously green trees. In the times of drought, during disasters, sickness, and loss, that's the way the people of the world see Christians who have their roots deep in God's word. They remain hopeful and confident in the midst of the worse problems. And when people see us this way they have to ask, "How can you stay so calm? I'd be falling to pieces if that happened to me, where do you get your strength to carry on?"

And so God uses the droughts to give us the opportunity to present the hope we have in Christ to the lost. And what is true of each of us individually is here multiplied in the church where we gather to drink deeply of his Word and Spirit. The church stands like an oasis of hope and confidence in the desert of worry and despair. It is this confidence that will attract desert travelers and make the church grow and prosper, not the various human measures of stability: not bulging budgets, or entertaining worship, or any of those other things the "experts" tell us will be necessary to ensure the survival of the church in the years to come.

Here we proclaim Christ crucified for the sins of the world. Here we proclaim his resurrection for our justification, and the certainty of our resurrection in him. *This* is our sure foundation and flowing stream of security. Standing firm on this Rock and with roots deep in this stream, may God continue to strengthen in us this blessed trust, and use us to bear fruit for the kingdom of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!