

A reading from the book of Hebrews 12:18-29 for you have not come to what may be touched ablazing fire and darkness and gloom and attempt this, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them, for they could not endure the order that was given. If even a beast touches this mountain, it will be stoned indeed. So terrifying was the sight that Moses said I tremble with fear. But you have come to Mount Zion. And to the city of the living God. The heavenly Jerusalem. And to innumerable angels and festival gathering and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven and to God. The Judge of all and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect and to Jesus. The mediator of a new covenant. And to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.

At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised. Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven. This phrase yet once more indicates the removal of things that are shaken, that is, things that have been made, in order that things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. And thus let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire. The word of the Lord. Please stand for a reading of the word. This is a reading from Luke. He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying through Jerusalem, and someone said to him, lord, will those who are saved be few? And he said to them, strive to enter through the narrow door for the house. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. Then once the Master of the house has risen and shut the door and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, Lord, open to us. Then he will answer you, I do not know where you come from.

Then you will begin to say, we ate and drank in your presence and you taught in our streets. But he will say, I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourself cast out. And people will come from east and west and from north and south and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some who are last will be first, and some who are first will be last. A reading of the word of the Lord.

My kids, as we get ready to send you off to Kids Alive. Did any of you see lightning this morning and hear thunder? Was it awesome? Her dog probably barking at the lightning. Snoring that's louder than lightning and thunder. I love it, I love it. But lightning and thunder is pretty powerful, but God is more powerful still. And though we don't want to be out in the middle of a storm, when God shows up, he shows his power and his love for us. So you're going to learn more about that in Kids Alive. So, Father, I pray that you'll show the awesome power of your love to these young people in Jesus name, amen. All right. God bless you as you go. Yeah. So this morning, speaking of kind of awesome things, we're going to be in Hebrews twelve, where it talks about thunder and lightning and smoke and this mountain that is just being shaken. So much so that Moses and all the people are terrified. But then there's promises that are shared in this passage and it tells us that we are going to receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken. And yet in this life, we experience a shaking, don't we?

I want to invite Jolie Kilpatrick to come up and to share with you a story of ways that she's been shaken and yet that God has proved faithful. Thank you, Julie.

Good morning, everybody. So when Patrick asked me to speak, my first thought was I haven't had that much suffering. I've never felt very far from God. I've never felt abandoned by Him. I've never lost my entire home or my family. I haven't experienced war, famine or severe illness or persecution myself. I grew up without much in the way of material goods. But my dad always taught us we were rich and friends. Sorry, I've got to read this. Rich in friends and family. And that was all we needed and I believed it. He also taught me that God shows up when we follow his will and submit to his plan. The last season of my life has been a struggle. Many of you know and prayed fervently for my family as my father battled a very rare cancer that quickly took him from the future we had imagined. It was a whirlwind of looking for answers, grasping on the edge of hope, while knowing in the back of your mind it was most likely not the answer we wanted. It was long hours driving to and from New York, sitting in hospitals and was difficult navigating how to help my dad come to terms with his diagnosis.

He had 2% survival rate. I found I was more ready to accept it than he. And how do you start the grieving and mourning process of acceptance when the person this is happening to is unwilling to accept it. I don't think my dad was angry as much as he was confused. He felt he was doing such a good work here and had so much left to do. He couldn't understand why God was choosing this end and why now. But as a family, we had faith there was something more coming from it. I just prayed dad would be able to see the fruit of his illness before he left. And I believe he knows a lot more now than we do. There's a lot of suffering in this world. Sometimes so much I want to tune out and ignore it. I can understand the draw some to want to drown out the sadness and hurt with a simple phrase like smile, Jesus loves you. But I think in order to understand the love of Jesus, we have to understand the pain that comes with that love. Many friends who struggle to believe in a God who allow suffering have asked things like if he can stop it, why doesn't he?

Or how can you believe a God is good if he can stop things from happening but doesn't? Often? I struggled with those questions myself and had to accept this was perhaps one of the mysteries of God that I would never understand. But seeing what can happen to a child when suffering is kept as far away from them as possible has opened my eyes. Throughout my years as a dance coach, working with hundreds of children, teens and young adults, and through my own constant learning as a parent, I have learned that bulldozer parents where a parent clears all strife and struggle from the path of their child. Where they make the bad grade go away with a call to the school, where they create perfect playmates through phone calls and editing of friends and neighbors, where they enroll and unenroll in schools, activities and sports based on the whim and will of their child. Where they make every interaction and experience one of excellence in success. These are the perfect conditions for anxiety. Issues of self confidence and depression is where they all festers. I'm not saying we as parents do not have a role in wisely choosing safe environments for our children, but a safe environment is not one without struggle.

As one who likes to dabble in gardening, I learned that starting seeds indoor is the key to a successful year round bounty for any bounty. If you live in upstate New York, where I come from, where it's always winter but never Christmas, however, one cannot simply grow a seed indoors in a controlled climate with the perfect amount of sun and water. After the seedlings begin to sprout, and before you can plant them in your garden outdoors, there's a time of hardening off. This is when you begin to set the seedlings outdoors. For short amounts of time, they must experience the heat of the sun and the wind. That may be harsh at times, as they strengthen and grow to be able to withstand the world in which they will soon live. Without this time of hardening off, a plant would be destroyed because it is too weak to handle life in the world without having struggled and strengthened. It would never get the opportunity to grow and bear fruit without this struggle. God is not a bulldozer parent. He knows in order for us to grow, we must suffer. But he does not wish us to walk our suffering alone.

And we are not to keep our suffering to ourselves. We are called to share in the suffering of others, to share the burden of it. I have felt the prayers of so many throughout the years and especially this season of life. My family has been blessed through food, care, gifts and communications. It has been awe inspiring to see the people who stopped their own lives to care for my family and my father. If anything, these struggles have bolstered my face. I was able to witness so many little miracles. The day of my father's going away party, we met at my parents'house. It isn't large, but the number of people that showed up to say goodbye would have made any health expert nervous in an age of COVID. So we prayed. God was merciful and we did not hear of any spread from that event. At one point, we planned a time of prayer and praise which was to be held outside so everyone could gather together. Around my dad there was a 100% chance of rain. We rushed to get everyone set up and started to get as much in as we could before the clouds opened up.

But as my dad sat in his chair, the clouds cleared away and the sun broke through. The first raindrop didn't fall until he rose to go inside. He was given three months in December. But by the sheer will and determination and the grace of God, he was given. For a neighbor who previously was a stranger became a dear, dear friend who joined us with her head bowed and on her knees as we prayed and sang through one of Dad's last nights on earth. By leaning into suffering, submitting our pain, grief and future to God and his will, our faith can grow stronger, we can be made more whole, and God can

be glorified through all things. Many of you may have noticed the tattoo on my arm. You may not know the story that goes with it. Each flower represents one of our children. You see, between every beautiful child that I have here with me today, I have at least one I never got to meet for a long time. I was told miscarriages were normal. And though they are, I have lost half of my children to them. I often had to get pregnant and lose one before I could have the hope of meeting one.

The normal joy of those first few weeks of knowing you're expecting were ones I lived with my breath held tight, worried that every day was the day I would begin losing my baby. And four separate times, that's exactly what happened. I have eight hot air balloons on my arm floating up to the heavens. Four of them are blooming flowers, and these represent my four children I've been blessed to watch grow and blossom. I also have four buds who I wait for now and hope that I will get to see them bloom someday. My second thought after speaking with Patrick became, God is so good to me, has been so good to me. He has given me the gift of faith. I've never doubted his love or goodness. I have never felt abandoned or forsaken. Jesus took all that on the cross. He was forsaken for me, so I would never have to be. He was abandoned and alone, so I will never have to be. He took it all the sin, the loneliness, the misunderstood, the forsaken, the utter devastation. So I will never have to go through that on my own. From Jesus death on.

God is always there in the suffering. There's no longer any imperfect suffering when his people are going through it because it has been covered by the blood of Christ. I have always had assurance that everything was working for my good and God's plan. As a child, that meant I would tell myself God had something better for me when things didn't go the way I had thought I wanted. As an adult, I've come to realize God has something better for his kingdom, and I am part of that. But the things I go through might not feel as if they are for my better. I leave with this quote from CS. Lewis the lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, which has always stuck with me. And this is where Mr. Beaver is talking to Susan, and he says, Aslan is a lion. The lion, the great lion. Oh, said Susan. I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion. Safe? Said Mr. Beaver. Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe, but he's good. He's the king, I tell you.

Thank you, Jolie. Let's pray for Jolie. Father, we give you so much thanks for Jolie and her faithfulness, for her family, for her presence among us in this church. We ask deep blessings upon them. We ask that you would continue to work healing and the grief that she feels over her dad and the children she will see in heaven, Lord. And we ask that you continue to use her to bless many people as you have, Lord. In Jesus name, amen. Thank you. Joey is also organizing our pizza today, so she's going to be running off to go get those. But I'm so grateful that she was willing to come up here and share. She shared that story with me about her children when I asked about her tattoos. And I thought of that when I thought of this promise of an unshakable kingdom. The writer of Hebrews wants the Hebrews to know that there's a kingdom coming that is unshakable. The ancient world was a very shakable place. Nothing was certain in the ancient world, whether it was famines or the sword or very bad economic times. People in the ancient world faced a lot, a lot that we often take for granted we might never have to face.

But in the midst of it, the word of God gives many encouragements. And the writer to the Hebrews said, I want you to know the kingdom is coming that is unshakeable. What does that mean for us who believe? I think we saw something of what it means for Jolie. What does it mean for us who believe that there is an unshakeable kingdom coming when we're in the midst of shaky times? There's a solidity, there's an unshakable quality available to God's, people that really can become part of our lives. In many ways. I know I would rather be someone who holds on to what is solid than who's always being shaken all the time. So how do you experience it? Well, to experience it you have to take the long view both backwards and forwards. And we see that in the book of Hebrews in the last two weeks, as we've been in chapter eleven and chapter twelve, we see there are saints who have gone before, who are people just like us, who had faults and flaws and foibles, and yet they had faith. To experience unshakable faith, we need to look backwards at God's faithfulness to his people throughout the ages and of the faith that they displayed in holding on to God even when they didn't see the promises that were given to them fulfilled.

But we also have to look forwards. And that's where the writer of Hebrews goes now to the angels

and the saints ahead. And so I want to help us do that. If you want to look in Hebrews, chapter twelve, in verse 18, the writer tells them you've not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire to darkness and gloom and storm. What he's speaking of there is when the old covenant was given, when Moses went up on the mountain and the Ten Commandments were carved out of stone and given to Moses by God, God had warned him and said, do not let anyone come up on this mountain, for this mountain is holy. Do not let anyone come up, not even an animal, or I will break out against them and they must be put to death. And the result of this gloom and the storm and lightning bolts and all these things was terror. Moses and the people were terrified. Moses, the man of God, who the Bible says spoke to God face to face as one speaks to a friend. Yet he was filled with terror. And the writer of Hebrews wants the people to know that that's not what's going on for you.

You've not come to that kind of mountain the mountain where the law of God was given where the awesomeness and the fierceness of God was made known where his purity and his truth and his beauty were so majestic they could literally undo you that to see God would be to know death. You've not come to that kind of mountain. No, he says. Instead, you've come to Mount Zion to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You've come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly to the church of the Firstborn whose names are written in heaven. I love this picture. We see it sometimes in some of the stories we read or the movies that we watch. If you've seen Star Wars, the very first one, the end of it there's this joyful assembly as they're cheering that the Death Star has been destroyed. And Luke and Han and Chewbacca got to do that that they've saved the universe, right? The galaxies. You see it in The Lord of the Rings. I think if you want to understand the Gospels sometimes you ought to read The Lord of the Rings because I think J-R-R.

Tolkien somehow understood so much of the depth of the Bible and what salvation is all about. And when Frodo and Samwise managed to destroy the Ring the one Ring that Lord Sauron wants and Lord Sauron disintegrates and Mordor is defeated and the enemies of all that is good go fleeing for their lives a great celebration is held in the city of Gondor and thousands upon thousands gather. And there was a tree in the center and that tree had been lifeless. But the tree comes to life and the people are rejoicing and the hobbits are honored. It's taken right out of here. That's our destiny, that we've come through something. And the struggle has been worth it. In The Lord of the Rings, as they're contemplating what they have to do Samwise is speaking and he's trying to speak of the worth of what they're going through. And he says, it's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened?

But in the end, it's only a passing thing this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come and when the sun shines it will shine out the clear. Those were the stories that stayed with you that meant something even if you were too small to understand why. But I think Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now, folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going because they were holding on to something. And Frodo said to Sam what was that, Sam? They were holding on to? There's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo, and it's worth fighting for. See, the writer of Hebrews wanted the people to know there's good in this world. That's being shown even now. The kingdom that's unshakable is breaking in even now, and we see it. The ancient world was a terror, and the Gospel broke through into it. And the Gospel, since that time has been establishing beach heads of light and goodness, of learning, of medicine, of healing, of blessing, of safety, of the ending of wars. If you think our wars are something, the tribes in the ancient world were constantly at each other's throat.

And everywhere where peace is making way, it's because the gospel has broken forward. There's some good in this world, and it's worth fighting for. And there's a good kingdom that's coming that will ultimately bring forth all that is good and put to death all that is evil. And so he says, we're coming to that kingdom, to the Church of the Firstborn. And I love that because you know what it means to be first born. How many first born children are there in this room right now that's good? You've been kind of ripped off, I got to say. You've been kind of ripped off because to be first born in our day and age usually means that more expectations are put on you, greater pressure from your parents without any of the rewards. Maybe there's some, maybe they give you some. But in the old days, if you were first

born, maybe some of those expectations were put on you. But you were going to receive the lion's share of the inheritance in the family. You are going to receive the status of being first born in the family and thus would be responsible for the carrying on of the family, for your brothers and your sisters, and they would look to you.

And we're called the Church of the Firstborn. It's not just that Jesus is first born, but actually this firstborn is plural, that you and I are now considered first born, that you and I received the lion's share of the inheritance, that you and I are sons and daughters of God. Does that mean that we should be arrogant? No, it means we should be the most humble of all people. For when you're first born, there's nothing you've done to deserve it. You simply receive it. He's saying everyone in the Kingdom of God will be treated equally. Everyone in the Kingdom of God will receive the lion's share because we belong to the lion, the first born Jesus Christ who wanted all for us. It's such a beautiful picture, but I realized that if you're trying to share that with people, that sometimes they might say, well, isn't that a cop out, right? You Christians, isn't it? Just a cop out? You don't really deal with life as it is because you're saying, oh, there's a better life that's coming. That it's all pie in the sky, in the sweet buy and buy. There's probably something to that.

And people have reacted against that. My wife and I are watching a series of Western on TV called 1883 and it presents some of the incredible harsh realities of the west. It shows this family that is on a wagon train that's leading a bunch of immigrants across country, and they go through all kinds of brutalities. There are bandits, there are storms, there are crossings of rivers where people drown. There are rattlesnakes that bite and kill, and all this kind of stuff happens. And this young lady, it's kind of a coming of age story. Her name is Elsa, and she's something of a cowgirl. And she is taken by the beauty of the west, of everything that she sees and of all the potential and the possibilities. But as she's facing these tragedies and these deaths, she's also dealing with the dark side of things. And so she's coming of age. She's trying to work out what's it mean to have all this potential and all this possibility and all this beauty, and yet it can all kill you. And so Elsa says this the world doesn't care if you die. It won't listen to your screams.

If you bleed on the ground, the ground will drink it. It doesn't care that you're cut. There is no heaven to go to because we're in it already. We're in hell too. They coexist right beside each other. And God is the land. You see, Elsa shows herself to be a person of resilience because she's able to see the good and the bad, to see the horrors, and yet still see the beauty. And I suppose I'd rather know a person like that than one who thinks that everything is just all sunshine and roses because Jesus loves you. Everything's good, right? But I'd also rather know someone like her who not only sees the dark but the beauty, than someone who sees only the dark. As many people kind of give up in life, and they say life stinks some even to the point of taking their lives. See, there's something about a person like that. But we who believe in the beauty of the gospel precisely because at its heart, we see a good and beautiful God who enters into a world of beauty and mayhem, of possibilities and the robbing of those possibilities. The God who enters so fully that he experiences the worst that life can give rejection and betrayal and mockery and torture and death.

Of course, we know the gospel says that Jesus rose from the dead to promise a new heaven and a new earth and this unshakable kingdom. So that's why the writer of Hebrew says you've come to God the judge of all. So the spirits of the righteous made perfect by this Jesus who entered in to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. And of course we know in the ancient world that Adam and Eve gave birth to Cain and to Abel and that Cain and jealousy killed his brother Abel. And the Bible said that his blood cried out from the ground. Blood crying out for justice, crying out for vengeance. But now we are sprinkled with the blood that speaks a better word. The blood of Jesus from the cross that speaks forgiveness and transformation and light. The blood that tells us that though these kingdoms of the world are shakable christ is unshakable. And he belongs to you and to me now. And so the writer of Hebrews gives a warning. But it's not like the warning that was given to the people at the mountain in Moses time.

He says, See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape where they refused him who warned them on earth. How much less will we if we turn away from him who warns us from

heaven. At that time, his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens. The words once more indicate the removing of what can be shaken that has created things so that what cannot be shaken may remain. See, the warning that's given is saying look, a word of mercy has been spoken to you. A word of grace and of beauty. How can you reject it? How could you walk away from it? How terrible it will be for those who do, but for those who believe there's an unshakable kingdom coming and it's given to you through our Lord Jesus Christ. And he's shaking the heavens. So that literally everything that's impermanent right, the stuff that we think is going to make our lives right, the stuff we pour money into, the stuff we pour our hopes into, those things are all impermanent.

But faith in Jesus Christ and everything that stokes that faith is unshakeable. That's why we worship. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken let us be thankful. And so worship God except with reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire. That's why we gather to remind ourselves in this shakeable world that the one we worship is unshakable to tune our lives to him. That what we do. That how we live. What we give in life might be those things deemed by the Lord as unshakable. Might be those treasures that the Lord said you could build up in heaven. And so this table demands that we examine our hearts. Lord, are we living into what's unshakable? Are our lives developing an inward solidity that though the world around us. Shakes we know that. We know that we belong to you and that everything we give to you all reverence, all thanks is unshakable because you are unshakable. Terry Glenar Bishop likes to say that personal pain robs us of perspective. Isn't that true? The moment we're going through pain, we can't see straight. We need others to come alongside us, to steady us.

We're in trouble when we're in the midst of pain. Personal pain robs us of perspective. But worship restores that perspective. Why? Because when we worship God, we worship that which is unshakable. When we come together, a solidity is being given to the people of God. When we take, eat and drink that which we consume from our God who's a consuming fire consumes us and the result is peace and goodness and joy and everything that cannot be shaken. Father God, we pray that we would live into your unshakable kingdom. We pray that the words of the prophets, those who have gone before and the angels who await us in the kingdom that we would come to that joyful assembly full of the goodness of the Lord full of testimony and story of what you have done. Though we don't understand at all, Lord that we be a solid people pool in the midst of a world that is shaking it's. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.