

# “The Unshakable Christ”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

September 2, 2007

**Text: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28).**

A recent *Time Magazine* devoted its cover story to a remarkable article on Mother Teresa entitled “Her Agony.” The story revealed a side of Mother Teresa that most people found startling. In her letters and conversations with her spiritual confidant Michael van der Peet, Mother Teresa showed a different image than the one that the public saw. For decades she struggled with great doubt. She questioned the existence of God. She felt abandoned, alone, and forsaken by Christ.

There appeared to be two very distinct personas in this one woman. There was the public Mother Teresa, Nobel Prize winner, and always radiant as she moved among the poorest of the poor in the wretched slums of Calcutta. But there was another face to this remarkable woman filled with deep and abiding spiritual pain. Moreover, this was not just some moment of darkness. It was something that Mother Teresa dealt with for five decades.

## I.

This morning I want to deal with the struggle between faith and doubt that exists in each one of us. Now doubt is not something we talk about in the church very often. We like to speak of “faith” – “the assurance of things hoped for, the confidence of things not seen.” We proclaim the power of faith the size of a mustard seed to “move mountains”—and that is certainly not improper. But what about doubt? Is there a place for that as well? There are several things that I would like to say about doubt. The first is that it is one of the most important gifts that God has given us. The power of critical thinking is essential to all that we do. Without this capacity there would be no progress in the world.

Think of Copernicus, for example. For centuries people believed that the sun revolved around the earth. Scientists believed it. Religious leaders believed it. But Copernicus began to doubt. As he looked through his telescopes in Florence and as he calculated the distances between the planets and the sun, a different view of the universe began to emerge. He had the power to doubt. He was persecuted for it. But he brought an entirely new way of thinking about our universe. He completely turned upside down the world of astronomy and it would have never happened apart from his ability to doubt.

The second thing I would say about doubt that no authentic faith comes apart from the capacity to doubt, to struggle, and to disbelieve. Anyone who does not understand this does not understand the Bible. It is a book of faith, to be sure. But it is also a book of women and men wrestling with their doubts and unbelief.

Listen to Gideon, one of the early judges of Israel, crying, "If the Lord is with us, why then has all this befallen us? Listen to the Psalmist: "My tears have been my food day and night, While they continually say to me, 'Where is thy God?'" Listen to Job, saying, "I cry unto you, O God, and you do not answer me," or Jeremiah calling God a "deceitful brook," and "waters that fail."

As far as the New Testament is concerned, one has only to visit the words of Jesus on the cross, "My God, My God, Why has thou forsaken me?" This morning I am certain that I am talking to someone who struggling with doubt. To those who find themselves in this position, the Bible is not their enemy. All its faith was hammered out on the hard anvil of doubt.

The same is true with the lives of the saints. One thinks of John Knox, the great Reformer of Scotland. He was certainly a man of conviction—able to stand face-to-face with Mary, Queen of Scots, to fight for the soul of Scotland. Yet, Knox had moments of great struggle when he knew "anger, wrath, and indignation," which caused him to call all of God's promises in doubt.

Likewise, Martin Luther struggled with this issue. His great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is our God" is one of the finest statements of faith in our hymnal. Yet, on one occasion, he said, "For more than a week, Christ was totally lost to me. I was shaken by desperation and blasphemy against God."

There is something important to learn from this. Honest faith does not come easily. No person really possesses the Christian faith until or she has fought for it.

## II.

Faith and doubt are often pictured as if they were polar opposites. But often, they are much closer than we can imagine. In his little book *The Dynamics of Faith*, Paul Tillich speaks of the role of doubt in our faith. Often we feel anxious or guilty about our doubt. But there is an element of uncertainty in faith that cannot be removed, it must be accepted. Faith requires courage. That is why in the long run Mother Teresa's struggle may be of great value to many people. To be sure, she had her doubts. But look what she was doing. She was working with

some of the poorest people of the world in some of the most difficult circumstances imaginable. What did people think she was doing over there? Handing out candy to children?

The passage from which we read in the book of Hebrews speaks to this issue. Like the pillars of faith and doubt he pictures two mountains: Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion. Mount Sinai is the place where Moses received the law. It is a foreboding place, filled with fire and darkness. It is a mountain of death. He contrasts this with another mountain, the mountain of Zion, which was the mountain on which the city of Jerusalem was built. It is a city of life, not because there is no fire or darkness present, but rather because it is the mountain of the New Testament. There is now a mediator that bridges the gap between God and humankind. The writer of Hebrews speaks of a kingdom that cannot be shaken, of a God who stands with us even in the darkest periods of our lives. That is something that we desperately need today.

There is, I am convinced, a role for doubt in the church. So often we pretend that everything we say has an element of certainty about it, but that is not the truth.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once preached a remarkable sermon he entitled “The Importance of Doubting Your Doubts.” In that sermon he made the point that we often doubt our faith, but are willing to doubt our doubts as well. I thought of that earlier this summer when I visited the Lincoln Memorial with my daughter Lucy in Washington, D.C. On one side of the memorial next to where Lincoln is seated are the immortal words of the Gettysburg Address. On the day that the Gettysburg Address was delivered, there was a newspaper editor from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania who had traveled to Washington to attend the dedication of the battlefield. Lincoln was not the main speaker and this newspaper editor was incensed by Lincoln’s brief remarks. Listen to what he wrote in his newspaper about the Gettysburg Address: “We will pass over the silly remarks of the President; for the credit of the nation, we are willing that the veil of oblivion shall be dropped over them and that they shall no more be repeated or thought of.”

Here was a man who stood in the presence of greatness and disbelieved. It was he that was blind, not Lincoln. It was the skeptic, not the believer who got it wrong. It was the newspaper editor, not Lincoln, who turned out to be the butt of the jokes. If only he had doubted his doubts.

The older I grow the more I am fascinated with Judas Iscariot. He came so close not to betraying Jesus. He was a loyal disciple. Surely, it took courage to join this band of disciples and Judas had it. Jesus trusted Judas. He made Judas the treasurer of this band of believers. But then the doubts settled in. What kind of Messiah, Judas asked himself, would talk about “loving one’s enemies” and “turning the other cheek?” What kind of king was this, Judas wondered, who refused to be crowned and associated with tax collectors? So the doubts grew and Judas betrayed Jesus. He came so close not betraying Jesus, and we he saw what he had done, he hanged himself.

If only he had waited until Easter. What a difference it would have made. He stood in the presence of greatness and he disbelieved.

Do you see what I am saying? Believers can be credulous, but disbelievers can be fools as well. Take a long look at the Christ. The world needs him so desperately. He is the way, the truth, the life.

#### IV.

Today, we are living in a time in which many people are shaken. There are people who are very worried about an economy that appears to be in danger of collapsing. There are people who feel shaken in their own lives. They are worried about their families, their jobs, their own personal lives.

The writer of Hebrews understood this. The world around him was in great turmoil. The great Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans. The altars were now gone; the sacrifices now ended. The old politics were vanished; the old religions now gone. Everything was in ruins.

And yet, in the midst of all of this, the writer of Hebrews found that there are things that are unshakable. When he speaks of hope, he calls it an “anchor, sure and steadfast.” When he speaks about Christ, he reminds his hearers that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” When he is forced to interpret his times he says, “The removing of things that are shaken, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain.”

This summer I visited the beautiful Island of Nantucket, just off the shore of Massachusetts. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Nantucket was one of the most important centers of economic activity in this nation. It was the center of the whaling industry and sea captains and others made great fortunes in producing whale oil that was used all over the world as fuel for light and heat. No one could imagine that this prosperity could end. But it did. It ended because someone discovered fossil fuel—oil and gas that were in much greater supply and could be more cheaply made. Suddenly the Island was in a terrible crisis and the great whaling industry collapsed over night, leaving the Island in a terrible state of poverty and disrepair.

We are living in a time of great change. Nowhere is that more evident than in the realm of religion. The great Protestant denominations that once towered over this nation now are struggling for their very lives and there are many people who wonder what the future will hope.

So what is left? Well, the Ten Commandments are left. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” That is left. The Sermon on the Mount—that is left.

One of the greatest cities in the Roman world was the city of Corinth. It was on a crucial isthmus that connected Athens and Rome. Today, most people couldn't even find Corinth on a map. It is a city completely in ruins. But if you have even heard of Corinth, it will probably not be because it was a great seaport, it is because there was once a spiritual genius who visited that city, founded a church, and wrote a letter to that church that has a passage in it that begins, “Though I speak in tongues of men and angels, and have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (I Corinthians 13:1).

In the last analysis, everything moves out to take its stand before the judgment seat of Jesus. Nations—all gone. Religious institutions—shaken. Empires—risen and fallen.

There is only one thing that remains, and it is Jesus Christ.

In the words of the hymn:

“Change and decay in all around I see--  
O, thou who changes not, abide in me.”

Amen!