

“The God Who Keeps Us From Falling”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

February 14, 2010

**Text: “Now to his who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory and rejoicing.”
(Jude 24)**

This past Monday evening I watched a news report from Haiti by Anderson Cooper on CNN. It has been over a month since the devastating earthquake struck Haiti, bringing death and destruction on a nation already living on the border of life and death. Cooper noted that the destruction and death continue in Haiti, and in fact, is worse now than just two weeks ago. He went on to note that there was little news coming from Haiti today. The television anchors and news people have moved on. Haiti is yesterday’s story. People today are more interested in the snow fall in Washington, D.C. than in the suffering and death in Haiti.

I.

The Gospel of Luke tells of an occasion when Jesus was teaching and a great crowd of people gathered around him (Luke 12:1). Apparently, the crowd became so large that a riot almost broke out among the people. It must have been a frightening experience.

Jesus used this experience to speak to the crowd about “sparrows.” Two sparrows often sold for a penny. And, if one wanted to be outright reckless, one could lay two pennies on the counter, and the store owner might throw in an extra sparrow for good measure. Sparrows were very small and of little value.

“Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?” Jesus asked. Then he went on to say, “... not one of them is forgotten by God.” In Matthew’s version we read, “Not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will.”

Sometimes sparrows do fall. Sometimes they fall by the tens of thousands, as in the case of the people of Haiti. On other occasions a solitary sparrow falls – a child is stricken with a rare disease, a person takes his life because of darkness too great to bear.

So, why does trouble strike us at our weakest point and not our strongest? Why is it, we wonder, that tragedy blindsides us precisely at the place we are the least prepared?

Sometimes Christian faith must be defiant faith in the face of inexplicable tragedy that says, “Nevertheless, I believe.” Perhaps the bedrock of our faith is the assumption that even though we cannot always be trusted, God can be trusted, and that when a person slips, we can trust that God is able to keep us from falling.

II.

The Book of Jude is not a familiar one to us. It is the shortest book in the New Testament and contains only one chapter. Some have wondered how it found its way into the New Testament.

The letter of Jude is written by one who identifies himself only as a “servant” of Jesus Christ. He also identifies himself as the brother of James, who was a brother of Jesus and a leader in the early church.

The Book of Jude reflects a period in the New Testament when the church was under attack. There were false teachers, who not only were misleading the people but also leading immoral lives. Jude cites several illustrations from Scripture of those individuals who disobeyed God and were punished by him.

There are several distinctive aspects of this small book in the New Testament. The first occurs when Jude admonishes his readers to contend for the faith “that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” This is one of the few illustrations in the New Testament where faith is understood not as trust but as an objective set of propositions.

The second distinctive aspect of this letter is the benediction that closes the letter. Jude concludes the letter with these words:

“Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (Vss. 24-25)

So, then, how does God keep us from falling?

III.

One of the ways that God keeps us from falling is through the inner resources of God’s spirit. Paul called it “being strengthened by might by his Spirit in the inner person.” Unfortunately, many people never know that. They may discover Christianity’s appeal to the mind and are greatly stimulated by that. They may discover the Christian ethic and are greatly challenged by that. They may discover the deep fellowship of the Christian church and share wonderfully in the life of the local church. But many people, who have discovered all these things miss the essence of it all, and

that is the vital, transforming present of God in one's life as a daily source of strength, power and friendship, "strength in the inner person."

"I would rather hear my friend, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, talk about God," observed Harry Emerson Fosdick, "than any theologian I know." A militant agnostic, scornful of religion, he was hopelessly beaten by drink and then, to his amazement, reaching out in despair for some power to save him, he found it. "You should hear him talk about God," Fosdick continued, "humble, no theological dogmatism in him – not thinking he knows much about God, but sure, absolutely sure, of one thing: a Power is here greater than ourselves that we can get in touch with and that can give to a person spiritual mastery over life."

In Narvik, Norway, when things were at their worst, with the Nazis in control, in their calculated cruelty doing abominable things, and the Allies were bombing the country just to get them out, the mayor of the city was heard to say, "They have the lowlands, but the mountains are ours." So the Eternal God, present in and sovereign over our troubled lives, has often given to people a certain sense of the "strength in the inner person." Standing in the lowlands, they could still point at the mountains and say "the mountains are still ours."

In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "I believe God will give us all the power we need to resist in all time of stress, but he never gives it in advance lest we should rely on ourselves and not on Him alone."

IV.

Then, too, another way that God keeps us from falling is by giving us a community of the faithful, who hold us up in times of trouble and turmoil. The Letter to the Hebrews was written just as the persecution of the Christians was beginning. They had not "resisted to the blood" the author comments, but that was obviously just around the corner. Recall that in the 11th chapter the author speaks of the trustworthiness of God and of the gift of Jesus Christ. But then he does something else. He marshaled many of the great heroes of the faith and passed them in review before the eyes of those who were facing the threat of persecution. "Seeing we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses," he writes, "let us run with patience the race that is set before us." As if to say that God has given us to each other to keep us from falling.

This past Wednesday evening The Reverend Rob Weingartner, the executive director of the Presbyterian Outreach Foundation, spoke to a Presbyterian Women mission event at our church. He pointed out that just a few years ago Christians in Europe and the United States made up 60 percent of worldwide Christianity. Today 60 percent of the Christian population is in Africa and Asia. One of the most remarkable aspects of the past 30 years is the emergence of the Christian church in Russia and in China, both places where Christianity was outlawed by Communist governments. Most people believed that the church in China had been totally destroyed by the emergence of Mao Tse Tung and the communist dictatorship. But there was an underground church that emerged and today numbers over 8 million people. It is a remarkable testimony to the missionaries who, two hundred years ago went to China, translated the Bible into Chinese, and began a church that continues to this day.

V.

Then, too, another one of the ways that God keeps us from falling is in our confidence of the power of God to bring good out of evil. Recall, if you will, the Bible's similes for trouble. It is a "refiner's fire." It separates the gold in us from the alloy. It is "tribulation," that is a threshing – it can separate the grain in us from the chaff. It is "chastening," it can disciple, correct, purify. Now, please don't misunderstand me. I am not singing a hymn of praise to trouble. We all dread it.

Some people, when trouble comes, retreat into self-pity, anger, and depression. Others seem to thrive on it. The Apostle Paul once wrote, "We triumph even in our troubles."

One of the fundamental aspects of Christianity that is often overlooked is that it is basically a very positive religion. Too often we have made it into something else. Many see it as a religion of "thou shalt nots," but in fact, at its best it is a radiant religion that has a great deal of confidence in the world that God has made.

That was certainly true of Jesus. Listen to his words: "Do not be afraid." "Do not be anxious." "Be of good cheer." Even when he sat at table with his disciples, knowing that death was not far off, listen to his words: "I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be made full."

Jesus saw great beauty in nature. He said of the wild flowers that "Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these." He had no use for the solemn days of fasting and when he was confronted with this, he said that he and his disciples were like a bridal party, exempt from fasting.

Christianity is a radiant faith because it sees profound meaning in life, worth living, and if need be, worth dying for. What is the worst thing that can happen to a person? Not tragedy – that often brings out a person's best. No, the worst thing is meaninglessness, seeing no purpose in life, boredom, ennui, wondering if anything matters.

This is a central problem that Christianity meets head on. It is an exciting, stimulating confidence in the meaningfulness of life, its divine origin, significance and destiny.

Even Sigmund Freud, the great founder of modern psychiatry, struggled with his own atheism. He was haunted by anxiety about death and the meaningless of life. He had a superstitious fear that he was going to die during a certain year in his fifties, and while he lived some thirty years more, the thought of death haunted him and he often wrote about "this sense life." Contrast that to the Apostle Paul, who, though in prison, could write, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice."

There is a scene in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* where Hopeful, standing in the roaring Jordan river, and very conscious of its terror, calls back to the one who is yet to come and says, "Be of good cheer, my brother, for I feel the bottom, and it is sound."

Amen.