

Seismic changes

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 17, 2001](#) issue

Those who occupy pulpits, be they the bully pulpits of the president or other nationally prominent people or the local yet influential pulpits of pastors, have special responsibilities for discerning signs of the times and pointing directions. Feeling some of that responsibility, this author is fumbling for ways to make a possible contribution.

Let me stress that when asked about the future, all honest historians have to say, “I don’t know.” But the past does offer some landmarks, some sense of what the future landscape might be. Some interviewers tell me that as they consider the future, they find useful a distinction I have made between the ways nations, societies and cultures experience change.

One way is *glacially*. That is, change is significant over the long pull, but not always perceptible in the short. The glacier slowly finds its way down the mountain, melting, gaining new snow at its source, carving a moraine, altering the landscape. Because such change is so gradual, a society seems very stable. Such change represents an approved social contract. We make decisions in view of a slowly altering landscape.

The other way is *seismically* (shock, earthquake, to shake). On September 11 the shock to the Pentagon, the earthquake-like destruction of the World Trade Center, and the shaking of our psyches forced a change so immediate and drastic that we do not yet have words for it, or the imagination to foresee the directions it will take us.

The immediate response to this *seismos* led citizens to fill churches, temples and mosques, hold candlelight vigils with their neighbors, shake in rage, wave the flag, tremble, seek and give counsel, and ask where God is in all this, or where God would lead us.

Historians, trained to roll with the punch of history and schooled not to confuse each rattle of teacups with true earthquakes, are cautious and reserved when asked to foresee aftermaths. The record of the human race reveals that people can roll with

hard punches, absorb the shock of events and pick up the pieces of their shattered lives. So we try to avoid hyperbole.

Try as I might, however, I cannot imagine returning to a world in which any generation can wake up feeling relatively secure, as most Americans have in most years, even after shaken by other earthquakes (Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy assassination, etc.).

That said, I also do not imagine that citizens should or could drop everything and act in shock and panic all the time. The Christian faith, for example, calls people to resume their vocations. They are to respond to the call of God to lead “whole” lives, with their mix of joys and sorrows, traumas and resolves, feasts and fasts, moments of clarity and seasons of confusion.

What we will all both be watching and helping to develop now is an altered moraine, a landscape more swiftly and perceptively changed. Will political parties now both come together where that brings healing and focus *and* contend vigorously where issues of justice are involved? Will religious groups both seek and employ common language that serves people *and* reach to the deeper resources that the particular faiths provide? Will those who kept vigils and crowd chapels both recall the strength they got there *and* carry that vision into the world? (And frequent those sanctuaries?)

Here is a text for our meditation, a favorite of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: II Chronicles 20:12, is a Godward gasp voiced long ago but appropriate now: “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”