

Angelic Serenity

Ezekiel 36: 24-28

Romans 6:3-11

Psalm 114

Matthew 28:1-10

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

This morning can we talk about Matthew's angel? I realize that angels are not human and cannot be expected to behave like humans. Still, I find this scene fascinating. It starts with a great earthquake. The ground is literally shaking. I spent a lot of my life in California, so I'm used to these events, and I still find them terrifying. People in this area are still talking about the earthquake in Louisa from 2011. It cracked foundations in homes all the way out here. Earthquakes are a big deal. Whenever there's a serious earthquake, it instantly becomes THE center of everyone's attention. In today's story this angel breaks through the veil that divides heaven and earth and at that moment there is an earthquake. But the text indicates that the angel doesn't notice or care. He proceeds to roll back the stone guarding the tomb. If you haven't seen one of these tombs, then allow me to explain. They were hewn straight out of the rock, forming recessed caves where bodies were laid. The stones that covered the entrances were relatively flat and round, set into grooved tracks so they could be rolled. But even so, these stones were hundreds, sometimes thousands of pounds and certainly not intended to be moved by a single person. But this angel was not a person. The work was apparently effortless for him and when he finished, he casually plopped down on top of the stone. He reminds me of an irreverent teenager, entirely unaware of his own strength, completely oblivious to the weightiness of the moment, or the emotions of the people around him. He had a job to perform, and he was there to do it. Once he finishes delivering his speech to the women, he says, "this is my message for you," as if there is nothing more that needs to be said.

One of many noteworthy things about this angelic messenger is that he reminds us of the duality of the storyline. There are things happening in heaven and there are things happening on earth. We are generally only aware of the earthly part of the story, but this angel reminds us God is always at work, even when our eyes don't see it.

The important thing to note here, is the angel's demeanor. Angels are never worried, never harried, or anxious. They live with and experience God and reality differently than we do. They know the immensity of God's love, they are not constrained by an earthly clock, and they recognize the truth of God's power. And so, the angels are particularly serene. The women who appeared at the tomb on Easter morning were fully aware of the power of death and they lived as if death's reality was the truest thing. The angel, on the other hand, knew a greater reality. And the women who approached the tomb that morning were headed towards an encounter with God's resurrection power. They were about to learn that everything they thought was permanent, with God, could change in a moment.

This morning's Psalm uses a lot of water imagery. It mentions the parted waters of the Red Sea when the Hebrews were escaping Egypt. It talks about the Jordan River being parted when the Arc of the Covenant was being transported back to the tabernacle. And it retells Moses bringing water from a rock when the Israelites were crossing the parched desert. In the imagination of the Ancient Near East, water was always portrayed as their most formidable foe. Water was the image of primordial chaos, the place of the sea monsters, the terrifying boundary between the living and the dead. Israel's God conquered it in creation when the water was rent in two and life was brought forth from it. And throughout Hebrew poetry we hear stories like the ones in this Psalm, reminding God's people of eternal truths. God is not daunted by the things that daunt us. Even the fiercest enemy is mastered by God's supremacy, and so, Like the Psalmist says, God's people can rejoice and even play when confronted by fearful obstacles. -We believe that God's power on our

behalf can transform impossible situations in an instant. Seas of water part before the presence of the living God. We recite these ancient stories to remind ourselves, but the angels have the benefit of seeing this as their daily reality.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he also speaks of God's power over the waters of death. The imagery of the baptismal waters is meant to evoke being dragged down under the primordial waters of death and then emerging through the resurrection power of God who is the Author of Life! Just as Jesus gave himself over to the power of death, the greatest enemy of earthly existence, we follow him down. And just as Jesus is raised, we too are eternally freed from death's grasp, raised in newness of life to never die again. Those who follow Christ do not cling to earthly life because we are eternally alive to God, through the resurrection.

But living this way is often easier said than done. The angel's serenity came from his experience of the presence of God. For us, life on earth can feel like a daily battle against the primordial chaos of the ancient waters. It can be difficult for us to live with confidence in the things the angels see when we are limited to taking them by faith. The prophet Ezekiel speaks of the transformation of our thinking and believing as though being given God's own spirit and a new heart; one of flesh to replace the heart of stone. This new heart, this living from newness of life, this resurrection identity, is not something we can force ourselves into. We need God's power to destroy the chaos and rebellion that lives within and around us. But, just like the exiled Hebrew people to whom Ezekial was writing, we serve a God who is not limited by our circumstances, the governments under which we live, the pain we experience, or the pain we cause. The Author of Life is always standing ready to assist our efforts to live in response to God's power and bring resurrected life into hardened and impenetrable places. Ezekiel looked ahead to a future hope. Jesus came to make that future hope a present reality. Through Jesus' resurrection, he made it possible

for us to accept this new heart and be transformed by his own spirit, now alive within us. Paul calls this being alive to God. And the Psalmist says, “Hallelujah!”

The shout of praise is the response we all make when we have experienced new beginnings in places we thought were dead! The angels are serene in their regular experience of the power of God. The human response is a bit more animated! The women run from the tomb, juggling fear and joy. And when they see Jesus, they rush to embrace his feet.

The angels have the benefit of seeing the events of the world from the perspective of heaven. They are messengers who herald the story. But humans are image bearers of the living God, and it is we who enact it. We live the life of God into this world. Because the spirit of God is alive within us, we now have the privilege and responsibility of participating in resurrection. Like the women at the tomb, we are entrusted with telling others. Like the women, we may not always be believed, but when we live from the power or resurrected life, when our hearts are filled with joy, and when our actions bring life to those suffering under the primordial chaos of death, that is when Jesus’ life is clearly seen, the waters part, and new life comes bursting forth.

There are times when we feel like the women approaching the tomb on Easter morning, devastated by loss and hopelessness, anticipating only the crushing weight of death. When we face those days, let us remind ourselves of a carefree angel, causally loafing on a stone, because that angel knows the truth. Everything can change in a moment. Our God is the God of resurrection!

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!