

The Earthshaking Message of Angels

In the name of him who died and was raised and now rules and reigns over all Creation seated at the right hand of God, dear friends in Christ: I'd like to start with a quick show of hands: How many of you have experienced an earthquake – and I mean actually felt it while it was happening? Once in a while they'll announce that an earthquake that measured 2 point something on the Richter scale occurred someplace and people will say, "Hey, I was there. I'm an earthquake survivor!" I'm not talking about that. I mean feel the floor shaking, the windows rattling, and reach over to stop the lamp from falling over – that kind of quake (or bigger). Raise your hands. If you've experienced it, you know it's an unsettling thing. The rest of you go ahead, hang your heads in shame. (I'm joking, of course.) Seriously, though, the one thing you count on is that the ground you're standing on will stay put. When it doesn't, it's very disturbing.

I spent my first 13 years in southern California, a place known for lots of seismic activity. Quakes in the 5.0 to 5.5 range were a fairly common occurrence. Later in life I returned to earthquake country when we were stationed at Fort Ord, California, which is near Monterey, about 90 miles south of San Francisco. Most of you have heard the story of how our daughter was in the process of being born when the big Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 hit. That's the one that happened as a World Series baseball game in Candlestick Park was about to begin. A little about that earthquake: its epicenter was in a primitive state park called the Forest of Nisene Marks, about twenty miles from where we lived. It's a very rugged and remote place. No one lives there. And the area around it is very sparsely populated. I recall doing a land navigation and orienteering exercise there once; and what I remember most are steep hills, deep ravines, some second growth redwoods, and lots of thick underbrush – most of which is poison oak.

But a little after 5:00 pm on Tuesday October 17th, 1989, from that relative no place that I'm guessing you've never heard of, powerful shock waves went out in all directions. The quake measured 6.9 or 7.0 on the Richter scale, depending on whom you want to believe. Either way, it's a pretty big seismic event. Sixty-three people were killed in all, one when a 50 foot section of the Oakland Bay Bridge collapsed and she suddenly found herself driving her car through the air. Forty more died when the upper deck of the Cypress Street Viaduct on Interstate 880 fell on them, pancaking them and their cars. And just to give you an idea of the scope of the event, both of those bridge collapses were more than 50 miles from the epicenter. Other people died when buildings fell in on them. Another 4000 or so were seriously injured. Millions lost power. Fires broke out in various places, mostly due to gas lines being damaged. It was a real mess. And in the aftermath, thousands of homes and public buildings were found to be damaged beyond repair and had to be torn down.

And that's what happens with an earthquake: in an instant, lives are changed forever. Lots of what's old and unstable falls down and is destroyed. And then it's time for rebuilding – and hopefully rebuilding in ways that are stronger and better than before. And before you ask why anyone would be so foolish as to live in such a place where earthquakes are prone to happen, consider that it may have something to do with the beach and the mountains and the near perfect weather all year round. Oh, and no tornadoes, ever. People who live there wonder why anyone would choose to live here.

But perhaps you're wondering why I'm talking about earthquakes this morning. It's because they often figure prominently in the Bible. That is to say the Lord uses earthquakes to

punctuate important events in the unfolding of his plan of salvation. St. Matthew mentions one in today's Gospel. Actually, it's one of three that take place in Jerusalem around the same time. One of the others, Matthew tells us, took place immediately after Jesus died on the cross. When he gave up his Spirit, the earth shook, huge rocks were split apart, and the heavy curtain in the Temple that divided the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies – the inner Sanctum in which dwelt the presence of God – that curtain was torn from top to bottom. It was an announcement that in Christ's death for sin the barrier between the Holy God and sinful mankind had been breached. And the idea is not so much that we can now go into where God is; but rather that he can come out and dwell with us without destroying us on account of our sin. In Christ, in his death, because the debt of sin was paid in full, the dwelling place of God can be with us again.

And now to announce the Lord's resurrection, another earthquake strikes. This one is accompanied by an angel who rolls away the stone from the tomb. It's not to let Jesus out – he's already gone. It's to show that the tomb is empty. It's to show that despite the seal and the guard and all their puny efforts, the enemies of Jesus could not prevent him from rising again as he said he would. These same enemies, Matthew tells us, who thought they were alive enough to stop it, now lie trembling on the ground like dead men. A rather interesting reverse. We can presume they fled the scene before the arrival of the women, who, as we know from the other Gospel accounts, were wondering who was going to remove that heavy stone for them so that they could finish the job of embalming the body of their beloved teacher.

As it turns out, there was no need to worry about the stone or about finishing their work on the body: living people don't need to be embalmed. And that's when the third earthquake strikes. This one, however, was not a seismic event caused by the shifting of tectonic plates along a fault line. No, this was a verbal earthshaking event – one with the power to change lives forever in an instant. It was the message of the angel: "Do not be afraid, for I know you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he is risen as he said."

Imagine the effect of that on those women. Everything they thought they knew and understood about Jesus was knocked down. While he was alive, they had such high hopes. But they lost that when he died. They had to reorder their thinking because they didn't believe or understand what he had told them. So, in place of what they had believed, they built a new construct: Jesus was a nice guy. A good teacher. But in the end, a false Messiah. We were wrong about him. That's the shoddy shack they built from the ruins of what had been their faith in him. And now the angel's message flattens it with just a few words. And in its place the angel's words begin to build something new, something permanent, something indestructible: living faith in the risen Lord Jesus, living faith that brings with it eternal life.

The epicenter of that earthquake was the garden tomb on the outskirts of Jerusalem, which is a rather obscure place in the grand scheme of world history. Big events happened in places like Rome, Athens, Alexandria, and Babylon, in the courts of mighty kings; not in a graveyard in a politically weak and comparatively small city inhabited by a race known for being contentious and hard to rule. But from that remote place, shock waves with the power to change lives went out in all directions – wherever the earthshaking message of the angel was repeated.

We get a glimpse of that in today's first reading from Acts. And it's interesting because the Apostle Peter is both being shaken with aftershocks while he's doing the shaking on a group of others. You see, in the first few years of the Christian Church, the Apostles of Jesus thought of the faith that saves as something exclusively for Jews. It never occurred to them to share the

Gospel with Gentiles because, after all, “We are God’s chosen, not them. They’re unclean. What’s Jesus got to do with them?”

But the Lord had other ideas. And in the back story of today’s reading, the Lord has given Peter a series of visions in which he sees a great sheet being lowered from heaven. In it are all kinds of animals that the Lord had proclaimed off limits for Jews to eat. As Peter is looking at these critters, he hears a voice that says, “Rise, Peter, kill and eat.” In response, Peter snorts in disgust, “Oh no, not I; I’d never eat anything unclean.” And the voice comes back, “Don’t you dare call unclean what the Lord has made clean.”

When Peter comes out of this vision, he’s sitting there wondering what it could possibly mean. At that moment some messengers arrive. They’ve been sent by a Roman army officer named Cornelius. They’re to bring Peter with them and take him to see their boss. So Peter goes; but he’s not very comfortable with the idea. These aren’t just unclean Gentiles; these are Romans, soldiers in the hated army of occupation. They’re the enemy – people every red-blooded Jew loves to hate. When they arrive at the home of Cornelius, Peter asks why he was summoned. Cornelius tells him, “I was hoping you’d tell me. An angel appeared to me and told me to have you come. He said you had a message for me. Let’s hear it.”

Today’s reading from Acts is Peter’s response. The earthshaking message of angels has just knocked him down again. He realizes that in the Gospel of Jesus Christ the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile has collapsed. He now sees that it’s God’s plan to build a Church that consists of people of every race and nation. Thus he preaches Christ crucified for sin and raised for our justification – the message of the first angel – to Cornelius and his household. They become believers in Christ. And their lives are forever changed for the good.

And not just theirs: today’s Epistle is evidence of just how far reaching is the earthshaking message of the angels. It’s a couple decades later. Paul is writing to the now firmly established church at Colossae, a Greek city near Ephesus, on what is today the west coast of Turkey. By this time the idea that Gentiles are included in the Gospel is old hat; but the shock wave that accompanies the message of Christ crucified for sinners and raised to life again is as powerful as ever. This is what Paul is saying: Christ has been raised. And if you’ve baptized, you’ve died and have been raised with him. You’ve died to sin and have been raised to new life. In view of that, set your hearts on things above. This world and everything in it is doomed to pass away. It’ll be destroyed. Only what you’ve invested in Jesus and your eternal home will endure. So focus on that.

By way of comparison, suppose you had a crystal ball and could see into the future. You see that a decade from now a company that you’ve invested heavily in is bankrupt. All the stock you owned in it is worthless. But you see some other company that’s just a start up now has grown by leaps and bounds. It’s worth mega-billions. And those who invested in it are all rich beyond their wildest dreams. If you knew that was going to happen, wouldn’t you pull your investments in the company that’s going to fail and put it into the other one? Duh. Of course you would.

That’s Paul’s point. You have something better than a crystal ball. You have God’s Word of truth. You have the earthshaking message of the angels: that Jesus Christ is raised and you have been raised with him. In view of that, what are you investing in? Are you putting all your time and effort into the things of this world, pursuing sinful, selfish pleasures? Are you focused on acquiring toys, being well-liked, and building a name for yourself – one as great as your super-inflated ego? Or do you recognize that all that and more is going to come to utter

ruin? Have you set your mind instead on things of lasting importance? Are you focused on Jesus Christ, his death for your sin, his proclamation of forgiveness, receiving his body and blood, growing in his Word of Truth, and your new life led by his Holy Spirit – his Spirit who guides you in faith and holiness of living?

My concern for us is that the earthshaking has stopped. The Gospel itself has become old hat. We gather here on this Highest of Holy Days and hear “Christ is risen!” and think, “Yeah, yeah. Same ol’. Whatcha got that’s new for me?” If that’s the attitude, I’ll tell you what I’ve got. Let this shake you up: that attitude is deadly. That spirit of apathy will take you straight to hell. That’s the sinful nature in you resisting the Spirit of God and trying to protect its precious turf. And if you don’t come under the Spirit’s conviction and repent, you will allow your sinful nature to kill you. Christ did not die for your sin to leave you wallowing in it. He died and rose again to raise you up to a new and better life both now in time and in eternity.

Therefore let us repent of stubbornly setting our hearts on the things of this world that are destined to pass away, and resolve to pursue with ever renewed interest the things that are above – the things of Christ in his kingdom that cannot be shaken. Let’s repent, and hear the glad earthshaking message of the angels that has the power to change us: Alleluia! Christ is Risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!