

"THUNDER, OR THE VOICE OF AN ANGEL?"

Text: "The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said, "It was the voice of an angel." -- John 12:29

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The twelfth chapter of John overflows with spiritual depth and power enough to change your life. You can pause at almost any verse and find something lasting to hold on to. It opens with the well known incident where Mary took a jar of precious ointment and wiped it over the feet of Jesus with her hair. Judas Iscariot objected that the ointment could have been sold to feed the poor. Jesus said "Let her alone. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me." That sounds a trifle worrisome for those who love and serve the poor, to say nothing of the poor themselves; but it is a gentle reminder from Christ that life is fragile and our kindnesses to each other cannot wait. We do not always have the luxury of time. If you intend to share a word or act of kindness, you should do it now. At times the times are urgent.

Like the cartoon in yesterday's Charlotte Observer: President Elect Obama is standing at the podium ready to take his oath of office. Descending from sky at breakneck speed are some huge meteoric clouds labeled "Financial Collapse", "Global Warming," "Conflict in the Gaza Strip," etc. about to annihilate everything around. The new President looks over to the Supreme Court Justice about to administer the oath of office and says: "Hey, can't we hurry this thing up a little bit?" Oh dear...

In the same chapter, after "the poor you will always have with you," comes John's version of the Palm Sunday Parade. (John 12:12-19) Palm Sunday is decidedly different here from the other three Gospel writers. E.g., John alone tells us that the cheering crowds waving palms were the curiosity seekers who came out to Bethany to see Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead. The raising of Lazarus is not mentioned by the first three Gospel writers. In the other three the Parade is planned by Jesus, and it appears that the "crowd" is made up of his disciples and close followers. Whatever...

Next in John 12, the visiting Greeks walked up to Philip and told him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." – One of the most memorable sayings in all the Gospel. In the old King James translation it reads: "Sir, we would see Jesus." You at Sharon should affix those words on a plaque in plain view here in this Pulpit. We would have to change the pronoun to "Pastor," But "to see Jesus" is the only reason a preacher should ever stand here. His opinions and hers could be interesting, even stimulating; but the preacher is not the person: Jesus Christ is. We could keep meandering in John 12, but it is past time to move along to our sermon.

In verse 27, Jesus is mulling over his impending death. He has come to realize that he is not going to escape a premature death. I don't know how you responded the first time you realized that you might not live forever; assuming that you have. Some never get that far. "Now is my soul troubled," he states, "What shall

I say? 'Let it pass from me and save me from this hour.?' I.e., "Shall I ask the Father to exempt me from the coming crucifixion? Shall I run away? No one wants to die. I was reading a story of Johnny Wooden, the old basketball coach at UCLA. He is 92 now, looking back on a wonderful life. He said that he was looking forward to being with his wife and loved ones on the other side, but he added bluntly that "I am not afraid to die, but still, I do not intend to do anything to hasten its coming." Life is precious; no one wants to lose it, especially not at age 33. Clarence Darrow once chided that while believers speak of heavenly bliss, "Still," he wrote, "like everybody else, they use their last breath to try to grasp another!"

With our Lord, immediately after he thought of asking God to postpone it, he realizes what he has said. He answers to himself: "No, of course not! For this very purpose I have come into the world. Why would I choose not to fulfill it? I shall never let my selfish longings come between me and the Will of my Father." That's not easy; to surrender everything to God; and it was not easy for Jesus either. Don't try to make it easy for him because he was the Son of God. That makes it too easy for us to lean the other way. If he overcame temptation because he has extra power as Lord, we can excuse ourselves: we are only mortal; but so on earth was he! It was turmoil and worse: "My soul is deeply troubled." He pleaded with God in Gethsemane to let this cup pass away; nevertheless, "Not my will but thine be done." Part of him wanted to run away, but the other part knew where and when to cast the anchor: "That's why I am here; to do the will of Him who sent me." That's why we are all here. And he prayed.

As he did, a voice was heard from Heaven. I don't know how you want to take that. Some will wonder why I even mention it; they believe it has to be true because it says so in the Bible. Others will think of it as symbolic, meaning that somehow Jesus heard or felt it inside himself. People do not normally hear voices from the sky. Either way, it does not matter for the purpose of our sermon. There was this sound which John recorded as: "A voice came to Jesus from Heaven saying: 'I have glorified your name, and I will glorify it again.'" It was his Father's way of reassuring him that while his death was unavoidable, he would not be alone. God said: "I will glorify your life and death and life forevermore. Your work is done, my son, come on home." If you have to walk through the darkness, it sure helps to have someone kind and strong to hold your hand.

So, to recap, a crowd of people was standing with our Lord. Jesus heard this voice. The Bible says that the whole crowd heard the sound too. Don't miss that. There was no argument about the sound. No one muttered, "What are you talking about? I didn't hear anything. What's the matter with you?" Everybody

heard it! The same information was available to all. That's the point. The difference was in the interpretation of what they heard. Same sound, same place, same time, same people, and then what? And isn't this funny, not funny ha ha, but funny ridiculous, listen to what John says, "The crowd standing by said that it thundered (Boom, Boom, Crash, Bang, Rumble, Boom!) But others heard the voice of an angel – same sound, different ears. It's not what happens, it is what you make of it, and how you conquer it or acquiesce – grab it or give up - to it. Thoreau said in a different field of senses: "It is not what you look at; it's what you see."

So when life comes crashing in: when you lose someone you love, or your marriage falls to pieces, or the doctor gives you some unwanted news, or your children disappoint you, or your partner runs away, or you lose your job and/or your senses – the sound of all of that is thunderous, and it can be terrifying. For sure. But once the sound leaves its heavenly dwelling place, it is up to you and me to corral it and incorporate it into our lives and souls and psyches.

Now there are plenty of sounds coming down from the skies in these recent days and months. Some drift into our individual lives and families; some we hear about across town; some trickle in from far away places, all around the globe. And the noise they make is the same for everyone. The Bible says that the rain falls on the just and unjust alike. Some fall down and complain at the cacophony of the swirling noises in our culture. Some say it thundered, but others hear the voice of an angel. You have to look for the silver lining. "Having eyes they see not," Jesus said, "having ears, they hear not."

I would guess that it has always been that way. But walk it briefly down a couple of little pathways with me: first in the huge arena of the universe, in cosmology, in the creation of the whole universe. At the beginning, when darkness covered the face of the deep, Genesis says God said, 'Let there be light! And Light there was.' Modern scientists have long muttered that it was not quite that simple. The current theory is that there was a huge explosion 14 billion years ago, called the "Big Bang" theory of Creation. It holds that our planetary system came by a mass explosion of matter which hurled the galaxies and stars and the planets on their unending courses, and they are still moving further out. Some believe it. Some do not. For our purposes, it does not matter; the same information, the same sound is available to all.

What you make of it hinges on who or what you think was or is charge. In all the ascending spirals of the evolutionary progress, and in all the cul-de-sacs that never made it, in all the longing of mankind for life and

spirit, some would say it was simply a natural movement, like boom, boom, boom. Others would say, "I see the Hand of God; I hear the voice of an angel." I see both at once.

One thing is certain, at this beginning step and at every other step along the way: you have to make a choice. Robert Frost, the then famous poet, who read his poem, "The Gift Outright" at John F. Kennedy's Inauguration has a wonderful poem called "The Road Not Taken." Obama by the way has selected Yale University Professor and Poet Elizabeth Alexander to read one of her poems come January 20th.

"The Road Not Taken"

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

....

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

I you make the wrong choice when you come to a fork in the road, then the further you rush down that road, the further you get from the truth. The more skillfully or hurriedly you travel, the farther you are from where you want to be. And the way back is always harder than the way down. Choices matter. One thing is certain, whether we are talking about the theory of how the universe began, or about your private prayers last night, or what you intend to do come Tuesday night, we all make choices, all the time, all around us: in the huge cataclysmic events of the day, in the quiet little conversations at the dinner table, in the silent places of our souls, the noises sound the same. The Voice of God is the same for everyone. Some grumble and run from the thunder; others hear the voice of an angel. Which do you hear today?

St. Paul writes in Romans 1 that the evidence in the universe itself is clear. "What can be known about God is plain to everyone," he writes. "Since the creation of the world, His invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse!" Those who do not believe are without excuse, so complete and convincing is the evidence from nature itself. That is a powerful notation.

Surely, for many, the sound of thunder is jangling the nerves of all of us. What a loud and awful clatter it makes. Sometimes it is the loss of a job, the diminution of reserve funds, the crimes of trusted advisors, the weariness of worries that will not go away. It's scary! Some know it already; others could meet it come tomorrow morning. The inequity of what some people have to bear puts the rest of us to shame.

I think about a young woman I knew, who just as she was about to enter the most productive years of her life, with wedding plans made, and hopefully a family -- just at that moment a dread disease came staggering by, stole her energy away, atrophied her muscles, and, for the ensuing twenty two years, she was confined to her bed. That's what I call thunder. Why does God allow that to happen? Why do people slip into mental darkness? "If God is so good," Gideon shouted, "why has all this befallen us?"

Then there was a man in the 1960s, who told me how cheated he felt: in return for his faithfulness to the company for twenty years, they came and told him to be out of the office by noon that very day. He said, "What good was it all?" I said, "Faithfulness has its own reward." But I wasn't sure. I told him to listen for the Voice of God. But all he could hear was thunder.

It echoes throughout the history of the Church. It sounded like thunder when in the First Century A.D., the noise of the Roman Empire and its persecution was so boisterous, it drove the Church underground. Christians by the thousands were paying for the privilege of faithfulness with their lives. But upon the rock of their faithfulness, the foundations which hold us up to this day were being laid.

And, thunder ruled the Dark Ages. For centuries, nothing much was heard from the Church -- Centuries, I said. It had to retreat to talk to itself in hillside monasteries. The work-a-day world that Christ had come to save was left to the marauding barbarians. Whole generations, son, grandson, great grandson died not knowing how the end the story would end. But they preserved the Scriptures and the tenacity to hold on.

Then came the thunder at the time of the Reformation, when perfectly sane Christian people tried to kill each

other. In the tumult and the shouting, the Church was being drawn back to the essentials of what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ. That was thunder! Out of their pain a new freedom came to be.

Then, bring it to the modern world. During the long dark cloudy night of World War II, sons hiked off to battle, across both surrounding oceans and beyond. Foreign guns were thundering. Bombs were falling. Shrapnel hit soldiers; tanks burned; planes crashed; people cried and died. But, when the noise was over, the thunder and the storm were gone and the angel's voice was heard again.

Through the long 50 years that followed we were in what was colloquially called "The Cold War." Oh dear, there were troubles: the Berlin Airlift and the Cuban Blockade. Spies were executed. People racing for freedom were shot trying to escape the Iron Curtain. It took a long while, but eventually freedom won. While the fall-out is not yet over, still the voice of an angel called us to a new free world. And war continues in Iraq, in Africa, in Afghanistan, in the Gaza Strip, with no end in sight.

Back in the Sixties, so many different things were thundering in on our peaceful little world. When all the noises of Civil Rights marches were claiming headlines, where people were violently demonstrating in the name of peace. And honorable soldiers and sailors and marines were spat upon for defending freedom across the world. Students with guns occupied college offices and corporations and churches. Sure, that was thunder. Sensitive hearts all around the nation were breaking.

The thunder, the devil, ruled the day; but the angels of the Lord were waiting in the wings, calling this big old proud nation to something new and fine, bombarding it with angry words which in their rhetoric were hyperbolic. But, however sad and sorry those days were in the history of our nation, we are a far better country for it. The forces of evil act so quickly. A bullet can kill within five seconds, a car wreck in three, and a heart attack in one. But the forces for good take a long, long time.

It is time to go; but just before we do, let me bring it to you and sit it down beside you just now. In the struggles of whatever day you're in; don't run away when you hear the sound of thunder, unless you run to Jesus - "Come unto me all ye who are weak and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Don't be discouraged by the noise, however loud it sounds. Don't be discouraged by the voices inside you, telling you how bad it is. Wait awhile, trust in the Lord, and you will hear the voice of the angel. Sometimes it is difficult to hear the angel voices. The angels talk in quiet gentle voices. They will sit quietly down at the end of the couch

and wait for you to listen. They will wait until you stop complaining, stop shouting, and stop feeling sorry for yourself.

As I think back over my own life: just about every time I experienced a setback, it turned out to be a blessing. I false-started a couple of different occupations before I entered the ministry. In college I wandered into three different majors. Each time I thought I was going backwards on myself, God was nudging me up another step on the ladder. He was preparing me for a blessing. Finally, he got me to Seminary, and as they say, "The rest is history."

It reaches out to each one within the sound of my voice. Some of you have misplaced your faith; some have marital troubles; some are unemployed; some are lonely; some are newly divorced; some are growing older with pains and worries galore; some have lost their energy, others have misplaced their confidence. In my 45 years of ministry, I have never seen any occasion where some newness of God was not being offered along with the problem of the moment.

Whatever special demand is being made on you and yours today, in the noise and hurt and loneliness, in the anxiety of what might come next on earth, I whisper to you: God will never fail you nor forsake you. On Calvary it looked and sounded like the world was ending: the temple torn in two, earthquakes, storms, but hang around a couple of hours more, or is it days or months or decades, and take a peek at John 12:29: it might sound like thunder; but if you stop, look and listen closely, you will hear the voice of an angel. And a sweet, sweet sound that is.

To every problem, personal or corporate, church, school, work or play, do a voice-check on yourself. What do you hear? Some will say thunder: life is unfair and unkind. Others hear the voice of the angel. You have to choose. The choice is yours. . . . And, if you have that kind of choice, it does not take a rocket scientist to make the right one. Go with the voices of the angels, for now and for evermore. Amen.

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