

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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THE PRESENCE OF GOD

27th November 2016

Ezekiel 1:4-28

Luke 1:26-38

It is the first Sunday of Advent, so we are turning our thoughts towards angels. Angels play a prominent part in the Christmas story, beginning with the annunciation to Mary. The presence of angels shows us that God is active in the story we are hearing. But how do we think of them? How do they come?

When Ezekiel saw his angels they were far from the Victorian ladies in nighties with wings, which we see weeping over old gravestones, or in pre-Raphaelite art. I don't think that I have ever seen an artist try to depict the angels that Ezekiel saw – the angels which are cherubim, the plural form of cherubs. Cherubs are what artists have tended to show as little children with tiny wings. That could hardly be further from Ezekiel's vision.

Just try to imagine it – he says they have human form, but with lots and lots of things that are different from you and me! Imagine a human torso, with four heads, human, lion, ox and eagle, looking in four directions. Imagine the legs, straight, with no knee and ending in calves feet. Imagine the wings, four of them, two arched over the head and two covering the body, while the four, yes, four, arms grow out from under the wings. Is your mind boggling yet? They are in a cloud of fire and glinting amber, and when they move they go straight ahead, one way or another, they do not turn so that their human face is looking the way that they go.

And with them are wheels, like wheels within wheels, so that they can run any way with the creatures. And what wheels! They are rimmed with eyes – they can see everything and everywhere. The wheels are interdependent with the living beings, you might say that they are all part of the same whole. And with the crystal dome above them and the noise of their wings – no silent hosts of angels these – and with the appearance of God's glory on the throne above the dome – with gleaming amber and burning fire – it is hardly any wonder that Ezekiel fell on his face.

Not all angelic visitations in the Bible are as dramatic and alien as the vision that was given to Ezekiel. Abraham received angels who he could mistake for travellers, so ordinary did they look. We are not told what form the angel Gabriel took when he came to Mary to announce the gestation of Christ. Maybe he was a little different looking, maybe he looked just like everyone else, and it was his message, rather

than his appearance which caused him to say to her “Do not be afraid.” Certainly it was a message which might make any girl be more than a little worried.

The presence of angels in a story is a sign of God’s presence. They come with messages from God, but they also come with some of the wonder and glory of the presence of God. They bring his holiness into a situation. As we have read through the prophetic writings, one thing which I hope has become clear to us is that the prophets were aware of God’s holiness. They were aware of God as God, as high and worthy of all honour and obedience, and this is why it hurt and grieved the prophets when they saw their people taking God casually. They broke out into condemnation, which they said was from God himself, when they thought of the way that God’s laws and God’s very presence were given lip-service or ignored altogether. They saw the way that the flow of history was taking their people, as greater powers encroached and subdued them, and they had no hesitation about saying that this was a judgement on them for taking God lightly.

As we read their words we may wonder and question: does God really punish like this, bringing disaster on his people because he is angry? Does God really cause the evil in the oppressors so that he can teach his people a lesson? Is that the God we believe in?

It is the God that the prophets believe in, or so it seems. And yet, there are in their words exquisite passages of God’s forgiveness and love and promises of restoration. Can it be the same God speaking?

What the prophets have firmly in their minds, and what we might sometimes not hold on to quite so firmly, is that nothing in this world is outwith God’s power and influence and love. People make choices, they have ever since the days of the Eden, and very, very often the choices they make are for the worse, even for evil, and not for good. People make choices that are selfish and which take no account of the happiness or even the lives of others: and when national leaders do this, the consequences are seen in the whole tumultuous course of world history right up until the present day. God does not cause the evil, and does not plan it, but he allows it, because we have to be independent, if we are to be in his image. To take away our choice would be to make us less than we are, and God does not settle for less than what is possible. And so he allows our evil and allowing it, he can use it. So, if the Babylonians were coming against Judah, as they were, if some of them were already in exile – as were those to whom Ezekiel spoke – God could use that to teach a lesson. It certainly did not mean that God was absent. There is nothing that means that God is absent.

And the prophets, who saw how things were going and were likely to go, took the chance to use the circumstances to remind people that God is always present, but that they have been ignoring him. If you are speaking in God’s name, if you have been called to keep God before the people then you will use any and every circumstance to do so. If the people had been more faithful to God would this disaster not have happened? We never know what might have been, but certainly the interpretation put on it would have been different if they had.

God is holy, and it behoves his people to remember that. Remembering the holiness of God means that we do not take his presence for granted, even though we know that there is no circumstance in which he can be absent. Remembering his holiness means that we will want to live to please him. God sent his angels, his cherubim, to Ezekiel to so that he would be able to tell his vision to the people in exile and so that they would know that God was with them even in the land of the Chaldeans. Ezekiel is not going to mince his words when he talks of the wrong that the people have done, but he begins by telling them that God was with them in holiness, and so the time to take that seriously and turn to him in awe and love and obedience was now – as it always is.

The angel came to Mary to tell her that God was with her, and that God was going to be with her and others, and all the world in a different way from now on. He came, and God's holiness came with him. God was getting involved in this part of Mary's story and this part of the world's story.

Later, when Jesus wanted to speak judgement on his people – because judgement did not begin and end with the prophets - he was to tell the parable of the workers in the vineyard. A man had a vineyard and he let it out to workers, expecting, as was the custom, that he would get a certain proportion of the harvest. But the workers kept everything for themselves, ignoring their overlord. So the owner sent to them various messengers, asking for his due, and they ignored them and ill-treated them. And then he sent them his Son, whom they killed, thinking that then the vineyard would be theirs and they would hear no more of the owner. And Jesus concluded by saying that instead of that they would be put out of the vineyard altogether, and it would be given to others.

It was quite a condemnation, and in explaining it, he made clear that those who came as the messengers looking for the expected tribute were like the prophets. The prophets were outspoken in their words, and they come across to us as worryingly irresistible, but they were resisted; in fact, they were largely ignored. They spoke of God's holiness and his presence and the expectations that this laid upon his people, but few turned back from their casual ways, few developed a lasting reverence in their lives.

When the angel brought God's holy presence to Mary, something new was beginning. It was something new for Mary, of course, which is why she asked how this could be. But it was also something new for the whole world. What the angel was announcing was a whole new way of God in his holiness being with us. Ezekiel saw the four-faced cherubim and the eyes of wheels and above them the likeness of one on a throne, glowing amber above and flaming fire below. Ezekiel saw something of the majesty of God, and majesty is a remote thing, it shows how different from us, how far above us God is.

God has not changed: he is still different from us, beyond our understanding and far, far above us. But in Jesus he chose to come to us in a different way. In Jesus he chose to take all his radiant holiness and show it in pure goodness and love. In Jesus he chose to submerge his vast difference from us and show how we are yet like him, by coming as one of us. In Jesus God came close in a way that is still challeng-

ing, but is more understandable. In Jesus he showed that to live in his holiness was not too hard even to contemplate.

Bad things can still happen and do still happen, because God has not withdrawn the ability to choose from his beloved human creation. We can look around at the world or at our lives and wonder how we got into this mess, and how God can have allowed it. Was he present? Is he still with us? And God still comes to reassure us. He may send an angel: angels can take all kinds of forms, from the most exotic, which throw people into holy panic and fear, to the most ordinary, who then surprise and excite by the message they give and the help they offer. Angels do still come into our human stories at various times, recognised or not. But now they are not the only, nor the main way that we can know that God is with us, that his holiness is present, no matter what our circumstances. Now we have Jesus, his story and example, his resurrection presence by the gift of his Holy Spirit. Now that we see God's holiness in terms of his love for us, may we also respond by lovingly living with joyful reverence for him at the centre of everything we do. Amen.

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