

Title: Reversing the tide
Text: Matthew 27.51-66
Theme: The Effects of Christ's death
Series: Matthew #128
Prop Stmt: No matter how cataclysmic the power of God is displayed, only the humble are able to see the truth.

If you have ever been in a circular above ground pool, then you have probably played whirlpool. The object is to get the water to flow in one direction as fast as possible and then see if you or anyone can stand up against the current. Initially it is difficult, but eventually you can, not only stand, but you can walk against it and then eventually you can actually reverse the tide and get the water going in the other direction.

When sin entered the world, the world was cursed. Ever since then we have been in the current of the curse. We are born into it. We live in it. We die from it. It is all that we have known. The current of the curse brings death. It brings fear. The current of the curse brings shame, violence, anger, abuse, disease, sickness, rejection, brokenness and insecurity. And while the current of the curse feels natural because it is all that we have known, it is not native. The current of the curse is alien to the creation of God. Yet we are trapped in the current and it carries us along even as we simultaneously hate the current, yet it seems that we can only add to its momentum.

But in this text something happens. No one saw all of its implications then, nor have we experienced all of them now. But in the death of Christ, the unwinding and reversing of the curse begins. Death has just been served notice. Death, you will not reign forever. Your scepter has been broken. The curse has just been cursed.

Read Text:

“The most interesting man in the world” has been an advertising campaign for the Dos Equis brand of beer. The ads feature a man who embodies what is assumed every man wants to be in his life. Earlier this month, the beer company announced that they were retiring this man. Apparently the most interesting man in the world wasn't that interesting anymore. I mean, Holy Boredom Batman! If the most interesting man in the world becomes a yawner, what hope is there for the rest of us? Right? The good news is this. The most interesting man in the world is not the figment of imagination by an ad agency. And he did not live the most daring, exciting, and exotic life that people tend to dream about because people dream too small and their worlds are too little. The most interesting man is the most amazing man. He is the God-man, Jesus Christ. Over and over Matthew says, “Behold, your King!”

The death of Christ is so much like the birth of Christ, isn't it? There were signs in the sky. A star shone at his birth while darkness covered the earth in his death. Angels sang at his birth while they hid their faces and the earth quaked at his death. Rich men and poor shepherds came to worship him as a baby while a rich man and poor women tended

to him in his death. Matthew points out three miraculous events that took place at the moment of Christ's death; three signs of wonder.

1. **Signs of Wonder**. (51-53)

A. The torn curtain

The OT tabernacle and the Temple that followed were designed to communicate one dominant truth. God wants to, but cannot live with man the way things are. We are contaminated by our sin and the righteousness of God is white hot. No one can approach God on his own terms. You need someone to go in your place. As a citizen you need a priest and a sacrifice to represent you. You need sacrifices to die in your place and you need a priest to offer sacrifices in your place. Even then, you cannot actually go into the Temple itself for a tour and a little look-see. The focal point of the Temple was the Holy Place. Hanging on the west side of the Holy Place was an enormous curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. In the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant. This ark was actually a throne. It was the seat where the glory of God rested. God called it the Mercy Seat. The entire design is amazing. God dwells with his people and rules them from a royal seat of mercy. But, the only way that God can dwell with his people is if a proper sacrifice is offered on their behalf. Apart from the right sacrifice there is no hope. Without the right sacrifice God can't stay because our sin is so offensive. If God stayed, then apart from the right sacrifice, we would die. We do not understand that. It seems extreme to us. But that is because we are born into the curse. If you grow up on the chicken farm, you don't realize just how bad they stink, right? Every year on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would take the blood from one specific sacrifice and, on behalf of the nation would go behind the curtain and pour out the blood on the Mercy Seat. For one more year, the wrath of God was held off. But every year, this sacrifice along with the hundreds of thousands of other animal sacrifices was made for temporary atonements for sin. They were temporary because the sacrifice of an animal could not fully pay for the sins of man. Somehow man had to pay for the sins of man. An animal could be a temporary substitute but never a final offering because while an animal was innocent, it was not righteous. That brings us to Christ. Christ was righteous, not just innocent. Christ was our representative, not just our substitute. Christ accomplished our salvation, not just symbolized it. It was not coincidence that when Christ cried out "It is finished." That the curtain in the Temple tore from top to bottom, because the way to God is now open. The ultimate sacrifice has been made. We can be forgiven and declared righteous. We can dwell with God and God can dwell with us. No wonder the earth shook.

B. The earthquake

The second sign of wonder was an earthquake. The quaking of the earth indicates that what has just happened is an earth-shaking event. Next week we will read of another earthquake that happens on Sunday. Both of these earthquakes are signs that something of major importance has just taken place. The timing of the dreams that Pilate's wife had, the sky going dark and now the shaking of the earth are supernatural exclamation points on the cosmic nature of the death of Christ. This event on earth is a big deal in heaven.

C. The open tombs

This event is unique to Matthew. And it generates all sorts of questions, doesn't it? I would have loved to have known more about this. So, what is going on here? Notice carefully what Matthew says. Apparently as a result of the earthquake some of the tombs were opened. This makes sense when you realize that most of the tombs were above ground. (pic) The ground was too hard to dig in, so tombs or sepulchers were above ground. So, when the ground shook, the stone slabs which were the tops of some of these tombs slid open. Of course, that is a little spooky, isn't it? But, at this point, on Friday, that is all that happens. Matthew then says that after the resurrection of Christ, that the bodies of those who were in those tombs (he calls them saints) were resurrected and that they went into the city of Jerusalem and appeared to many in the city!

Don't think of this like some zombie scene from the Walking Dead, ok. This is actually a preview of heaven on earth. Notice how these two signs work so closely together. The earthquake announced to the world that something cosmic had just taken place. The opening of the tombs of the saints made it clear that whatever happened was for the benefit of those who believed in God. The death of Christ announced the death of death. The death of Christ dealt a deathblow to death and the opening of the tombs was a sign of what was going to come. The opening of those tombs was a preview that death could not keep its prey. The tomb of Christ would also be rendered powerless and he would rise again just as every one who believes in him will too rise again. The tide was turning.

The white city of Gondor stood at one time as the most splendid and capital city of man in Tolkein's classic work, The Lord of the Rings. High atop the city and just outside the palace was the tree of the kings which was still guarded in hope, yet it appeared to be dead. Gondor's rightful rulers were long gone and the city had long since fallen from her days of glory. If you are watching the movie and you are into the story, you will never forget that scene when on this barren tree a little flower blooms. You cannot help but smile because you have hope. There is a king and he is returning. All is not well with the world. The enemy is still strong and there are many battles to yet to fight. But in the stench of decay a fresh breeze is detected. In the darkness a candle has been lit. It's the faint pulse that is now felt, the twitch of the eye that is now detected, the slight squeeze of the fingers let's you know: something is different now.

2. Signs of Faith. (54-61)

The reappearance of the sun, the tearing of the curtain, the earthquake and the opening of the tombs were all very clear markers that the death of Christ was not an ordinary death. In fact, no one ever died like he died because no one ever lived like he lived. Witnessing this spectacle were different people from different backgrounds.

A. Centurion and soldiers

The Centurion saw too many things to simply brush it off as being coincidental. He saw the earthquake. I love how Matthew records that. He saw the earthquake. I know that you

normally feel an earthquake and you see its effects. Matthew says that he saw the earthquake. The Gentile centurion saw what the Jewish leaders were blind too. It was undeniable unless you choose NOT to believe. People do not remain unconvinced of the claims of Christ because of the lack of evidence. The evidence for the authenticity of Christ is overwhelming. People do not believe because they do not want to believe. The Centurion and the other soldiers are in stark contrast to the chief priests and Pharisees who were mocking Christ. The scribes and Pharisees were demanding more and more signs for a reason to believe even though they had rejected everything that had been shown to them. The Centurion saw enough. His confession stands as one of the great confessions in all of Scripture. "Truly this was the Son of God." This confession of faith was a response that was marked by awe and wonder. We are right to assume that we will meet this man in heaven.

I don't think I am reading too much into his statement. Every time Matthew uses language like this, the person who says it is making a confession of faith. Even the Father says something like this about Christ at his baptism in 3.17. The disciples worship him after he walks on water and confess, "Truly, you are the Son of God." Peter, likewise in 16.33 says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Again in 17.5 at his transfiguration, the Father says, "This is my beloved Son..." So, when the centurion is saying what the Father says and what the disciples say, I think it is fair to say that this is a legitimate confession of faith.

Think about that, would you? If there is grace enough for the soldiers who executed Christ to come to faith, there is grace enough for you. I say that based on the fact that back in v.27, the soldiers that beat Christ and mocked him are identified as "they." Matthew indicates that these soldiers led him away to crucify him (31), compelled Simon to carry his cross (32), crucified him, divided up his garments (35), sat down and kept watch over him (36). They were also the ones who put the charge up over the cross which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." These soldiers who were keeping watch heard the mockery. They heard that he claimed to be the Son of God. Therefore, it is clear from v.54 that the centurion and those who were "keeping watch over Jesus" were the same Roman soldiers and they believed. The death of Christ not only shook the earth, but it shakes the hearts of people from all over the world. So, just as the opening of the tombs was a preview of the resurrection that is coming for us all, this confession of faith by the Gentiles is a preview of the fact that there will be people from every tribe, language and nation who will surround the throne and sing, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain..." These Gentiles are evidence of that, but they were not the only ones there.

B. The women

I am not usually all that whipped up about Christian movies, since the ones that emphasize the movie part tend not to be very good at the Christian thing, and the ones that emphasize the Christian thing tend not to be all that good about being a good movie. So, I usually don't go to see too many, but I did go and see the movie Risen. And, I think, for the most part it's actually a pretty good movie. One of my criticisms of it would be how Mary Magdalene is depicted. But, the way that she is portrayed in this movie is not

all that different than how she is portrayed in other films. Mary Magdalene was not from Jerusalem; she was from Magdala, a city in Galilee, south of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. The DaVinci code is way off base in its depiction of her. Luke says that Jesus cast 7 demons out of her and that she became a devoted follower of Christ. The Bible says nothing about her being a woman of the street. People have tried to read into the gospel accounts stuff that just isn't there. Here are the facts. Women did not occupy many positions of respect in that culture. That was not right, but that was how it was. Women were not even permitted to be the disciples of rabbis. However, Jesus encouraged these women. Mary Magdalene was probably the leader of the women. It is hugely important to see then that she and another Mary as well as the mother of James and John (Salome?) were the ones functioning as formal witnesses to all that had taken place. In fact, think about this. They were probably the ones that Matthew received his eyewitness information from since he wasn't there to see this.

Again, this is a preview of what is going to mark the church. In a world where women are historically treated as pieces of meat to be used and discarded, Christ loves, honors, respects and cherishes women and he calls husbands to do for their wives what he did for the church. I know that I am getting ahead of myself one week, but one of the reasons why every woman who is a follower of Christ needs to be a theologian is because one of the greatest doctrines of the Bible was first entrusted to a woman. And she was told to go and tell his disciples about the doctrine of the resurrection.

C. The rich man

When Matthew says (v.57) that this rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph was also a disciple of Jesus, it means that he actually had been discipled by Jesus. Mark tells us that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. Matthew simply says that he was rich. Where was he during the trial? We don't know. We are not told. This much is clear. Joseph is risking everything. Jesus said that it was hard for a rich man to follow him because money gives the illusion of power, protection, success and sufficiency. It is so difficult for someone who has money to realize their need for God. Who needs God when you have money? But to love God instead of loving money means that you have to be willing to risk it all for the sake of the gospel.

It is easier to risk it all, when you don't have much. I remember when I graduated from college that the only thing that I had in my name was a '78 Monte Carlo that I had paid \$2,300 for. It was not a big stretch to say, "here Lord, take whatever you want of me and from me for your use." But, when you have a wife and children and other possessions, it's not as easy to say that. But, look at what is going on here. The centurion risked a great deal by saying what he said. The women risked a great deal by identifying themselves with a condemned man. Joseph risked everything by going against his own kind and by asking for the body of Christ that he might take care of it so that Christ was not treated like all of the other people who were crucified. And once again another irony is seen. Christ, who was humiliated in death by the Sanhedrin is honored in his burial by one of their own because one of their own was no longer one of them. He was one of His. John tells us that Nicodemus helped as well.

The details of the burial of Christ, the wrapping, the shroud, the tomb and the stone would become very important details in a couple of days. For now, they are mentioned as steps that were taken in haste to get Christ “buried” before 6pm. The evidence of Joseph’s wealth is seen in this tomb. This tomb was probably cut out of the side of a hill, into rock. It had a door way, a burial chamber, a bench on which the body would be prepared, a niche for the body to be set and probably a couple of other things. Outside, a trough would be prepared and a large stone wheel set in order to be rolled into place. It would still take several men to get it into place. The contrast is amazing. Here is a man who was treated as contemptuously as possible in the last 12-15 hours of his life, who is now being buried in one of the most extravagant tombs for someone other than royalty. But, didn’t Isaiah say this was going to happen? Isaiah 53.9

3. Fear or Love (62-66)

The chapter begins with the chief priests and the Pharisees taking Jesus to Pilate in order to seek the execution of Christ. No matter how much Pilate tries to rid himself of Jesus, he just can’t wash his hands of him, can he? He tries to send him to Herod but Herod sends him back. He sends him out to be scourged but the people want his death. He tries to release Christ by giving them the absurd choice of Jesus or Barabbas and the people shockingly pick Barabbas. Pilate then sends him away to be crucified only to have the chief priests come back asking for the sign to be changed, which he doesn’t. Now, Joseph of Arimathea comes asking for the body of Christ. Finally, the chapter ends how it begins. The chief priests and Pharisees come before Pilate again regarding Jesus. They are never satisfied. I can only imagine the level of exasperation that Pilate has at this moment. But here they are, again. It is Saturday. Word of what Joseph has done has rocked them. They did not expect this from one of their own. If this is what one of his disciples would do who is not a "fanatic", there is no telling what these other guys will do. I will address some of the details next week, but I want to leave you with this. Matthew ends this scene with an enormous contrast between fear and love.

The chief priests and Pharisees loved themselves and they feared anything or anyone that exposed the truth about them. Their fear of others and fear of the truth drove them to diabolical fury and irrational hatred. Over and over we have seen how their actions simply do not make sense. Look at the life of a person who fears the truth. He has to lie. He has to manipulate. He has to control. He has to manage. He has to threaten. He has to coerce. He has to cover-up. He has to plot. And he can never rest. He is never at peace because he is trying to control something that refuses to remain hidden. Truth will always come out. One way or the other, truth will come out. These guys were terrified of the truth. They were so terrified of it, that they hated it and their hatred just shriveled up their little hearts into tiny pieces of stone that had no feeling and no rationality left at all. When you fear the truth, even the truth about yourself, you will never be at rest and you will ultimately resent Christ because he threatens to expose the truth about you.

On other hand is the Centurion, the soldiers, the women and of course, Joseph of Arimathea. Circumstantially, these people had plenty of reason for fear. In fact, the

earthquake basically summarized a number of other things that happened and they were afraid (awe). But, it was a different fear. They were in awe. They had a respectful, reverential fear that drove them to love. And their love and worship of Christ overcame their fear of what might happen to them. They could be arrested and tried for association with an insurrectionist. They could be threatened with losing their lives.

When your awe of Christ drives your love of Christ, then your love will overcome your fear. As John says, "Perfect love drives out fear. There is no fear in love. Fear has to do with punishment." But since Christ took my punishment, he eliminated the ultimate reason for fear. The worst thing that can happen to me is death, yet death is the best thing that can happen to me in that it ushers me into the presence of God, where I am perfectly free. Love from God drives love for God that overcomes fear of exposure and fear of my world. Love from God and love for God overcomes all fear.

What are you afraid of? What is at risk? What are you afraid that will be revealed? What are you afraid that someone might find out? What are you afraid of losing? A reputation? Your standing is Christ, not yourself. Your possessions? Your inheritance is incorruptible. Your comforts? This world and all that is in it is crumbling. When you see with the eyes of your heart the love of God, there is nothing in this world that can hold you and no threat that can control you. Perfect love drives out fear. Look at the cross and see perfect love.