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Rick Myatt

NO STINKING ARROWS Psalm 33:6-9

Tomorrow we embark on a journey through a new year. We know that right now many people are making resolutions that things will be different in 2018, and of course the vast majority of those resolutions will be forgotten in a few weeks, if not sooner. Beyond that we have no idea what this new year will bring, except that things will change in some ways. But in what ways?

The whole predicting what will happen thing has a pretty poor track record for everyone. Back in 1995 American scientist, Clifford Stoll, wrote an article in Newsweek magazine, in which he said that the Internet, “is grossly oversold...within two or three years people will shrug and say, ‘Uh, yep, it was a fad of the early 90’s and now, oh yeah, it still exists, but hey, I’ve got a life to lead and work to do. I don’t have time to waste online.’” He went on to say that people won’t bother prowling around the Worldwide Web because there is so little of value there.

I looked at ESPN’s preseason predictions of how the NFL season would go. They predicted that the New York Giants and Oakland Raiders would both win their divisions and go to the playoffs. Oakland is in last place, but New York has been horrible. They’ve won a grand total of 2 whole games. Do you know how many people predicted that the Los Angeles Rams and the Jacksonville Jaguars would be two of the best teams in the league and would win their divisions? That would be exactly zero. Nobody saw that coming. Yeah, that whole predicting the future thing just doesn’t work very well.

No one can predict what is going to happen in the coming year. CBS News carried a story in August about a woman named Mary Grams who lives in Alberta, Canada. She was engaged to be married 13 years ago and one day while working in her garden somehow lost her engagement ring. They looked everywhere for it, but it was just gone. This year her daughter in law was in that same garden and pulled a carrot out of the ground. And on that carrot was the engagement ring that had been missing for 13 years. The carrot had actually grown up with the ring on it. No one ever saw that one coming. The point here is who knows what will happen in 2018? So how should we approach a new year with such uncertainty hanging over us? I believe there is one thing that is crucial for us as we embark on a new year. We catch a glimpse of that one thing in Psalm 33:6-9.

PREMISE: WE SHOULD LIVE IN CONTINUAL AWE OF GOD

The New American Standard translation of Psalm 33:6-9 says, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and the breath of his mouth all their host. He gathers together all the waters of the sea as a heap; he lays up the deeps in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord; Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spoke, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.”

Those verses call all the inhabitants of the world to stand in awe of God. At all times, no matter what may be going on in our lives and in the world around us, we should be standing in awe of God. God is truly awesome, and is worthy of awe and reverence. We should be in awe of him because he is the source of everything, including us. In fact he accomplished everything merely by ordering it to happen. He spoke, and it was done.

The technology in cars these days is amazing. I hope some day I can get a car that parallel parks itself. I find that feature astounding. But one of the humbler technologies that I love is Bluetooth, which allows you to link up your cell phone with the car. I get a kick out of driving in the car, pushing one button on the steering wheel and saying something like, “Call Jerry” and the car calls my brother’s cell phone. It’s not perfect. Sometimes you say, “Call Jerry” and the car says, “Calling Mary.” Still, that is a really cool feature. There are not many times in life when I can just say something and it happens. So imagine the power to simply envision something that has never existed, then say it and have that thing pop into being. I could have used that power at Christmas. Our house has eaves 20 feet in the air. I don’t have a ladder that tall and even if I did Laurie wouldn’t let me climb up that high to hang Christmas lights on our eaves. So how great it would be if I could just say, “Let there be icicle lights hanging from our eaves” and the lights would suddenly be there. As you may have guessed, I don’t have such power. But God does. He spoke and worlds, plants, creatures all came into existence. That is the power that God has.

The entire universe, all that exists, was brought into being by God. His power is truly inconceivable. A recent German study has suggested that there may be 500 billion galaxies, each of them containing hundreds of millions of stars. We can’t even begin to grasp how enormous that is. Astronomers tell us the edge of the observable universe is 45 billion light years away. Voyager 1 is still traveling out near the edge of our solar system, moving along at a decidedly healthy clip of 37,000 miles per hour. At that rate it could reach the edge of our galaxy, not the universe but merely our galaxy, in 400 million years.

God's power should create awe in us. But so should his sovereignty. He has been and is controlling all of history, as evidenced by how he predicted the coming of Messiah and then carried it out, along with other fulfilled prophecy. We should be in awe of his love, demonstrated at the cross of Jesus Christ. His love is unlimited and unfathomable. We should be in awe of his holiness and his goodness.

Christian counselor and author Paul Tripp points out that we were created to live with awe filling every day of our lives. We were made for awe, for it to be a part of everything we are and do. When we aren't living in awe we go looking for it. We must have it. So we try to find cheap substitutes for the real thing, awe for the truly awesome, God Almighty. We find things that give us a little "awe buzz" for brief moments, but then it fades and leaves us longing for the real thing. The cheap substitutes only distract us and make us ever more frustrated and empty.

Psalm 33 tells us that the most important thing we can do as we journey through the highs and lows of this new year is to stand in awe of God. We should view everything that happens in our lives through the lens of being in awe of God.

AWE OF GOD IS POWERFUL

Awe of God produces peace

Psalm 91:1 says, "Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." Verse 5 says, "You will not fear the terror of night nor the arrow that flies by day." Arrows? I don't got to fear no stinkin' arrows!

That is a beautiful promise. As long as we are in the shelter of the Most High we will rest. We won't fear the terror of night nor any arrows that might be fired at us by day. Notice the words used in those verses to describe God. He is the Most High. He is the ultimate ruler. There is no one above him, no one as powerful as him. He is the Almighty. That means he has all might, all power. To see him as he is, is to be in awe of him.

And what that results in for us is we aren't afraid. We rest. If we are worried we don't rest. We lie awake in the middle of the night wishing we could sleep. If we are afraid we don't rest. In his book, *The Rest of God*, Mark Buchanan related how on hot summer nights he and his wife would sleep in their basement where it was cool. They did that until they found a family of snakes living in their basement. He said there was no way they could sleep there after that. They didn't feel safe. They would lie in bed and envision snakes crawling on them.

So awe of God's might and power which shelters us can set us free from those worries and fears. We can be at peace. We can rest, because he has all power and he cares for us. There is just one fly in that ointment. We want that to mean that he will see to it that none of the things we fear will happen to us because God will protect us from them. The fly is that many of those things we fear can and do happen to us. It's great not to fear any arrows that might fly...right up to the moment that one of them hits you right in the chest. Or until that time in life when you get hit so often and have so many arrows sticking in you that you look like a pin cushion.

There is a reality that is unavoidably true. We live in a world that has been invaded by evil, every single corner of it. To live in this world expecting to not have hurtful, hard things, grievous things happen to you would be like diving into the ocean expecting not to have salt water touch you. It simply is not going to happen. If you go in the ocean you're going to get wet. If you live in this world you're going to get hurt.

Then is that promise in Psalm 91 just a bunch of wishful but false promises? No, we need to remember 2 facts about that Psalm. First, it is poetic, so it is intended to communicate something through imagery and feeling. It is about feeling secure because God is great. Second remember that in the Old Testament physical things were used to depict spiritual truth. So the promise that nothing can harm us is not that we will never have anything hurt us physically, but that spiritually where the gravest dangers by far lurk, we are totally safe.

So how does that help me be at peace when I know bad things can and will happen to me? Awe of God raises our eyes to a bigger world, a higher plane. It reminds us that God is working his cosmic plan that is for our good. It calls on us to set our minds on things above. To rejoice that God is protecting us from evils far worse than we can even imagine, and to know that God is working to bring good for us in everything that happens.

As I was thinking about this I found my mind somehow going back to a now ancient movie. It was the Karate Kid. In it the central character, Daniel, moved to LA with his single mom. He found himself on the outside socially and running afoul of a group of bullies who were all karate students. He is befriended by a kindly older man, Mr. Miyagi, who rescues him from being beaten up by the bullies in a display of awesome karate skills. He asks Mr. Miyagi to teach him karate. The man agrees and promptly starts giving him a bunch of menial chores to do. There are no lessons in karate. Just work. Just washing and waxing Mr.

Miyagi's car. Finally Daniel thinks the older man is taking advantage of him and using him for chores without teaching him anything. The chores are just hard work and they had nothing to do with what he wanted, which was to learn karate. Then Mr. Miyagi informs him he has been learning karate all along. He shows him how the motions he has been using in his work are actually karate moves. Wax on, wax off.

Daniel was in awe of Mr. Miyagi's karate ability. When he trusted him Mr. Miyagi took care of him and taught him what he needed to know. When we live in awe of God's power we can trust that God is doing what is good, for us as well as for the world, all along. We can be at peace with whatever he chooses. The greater our awe of God, the more we will be at peace and rest.

Awe of God produces hope

In Psalm 3:1-2 David wrote, "Lord how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him.'" We know of a number of occasions in David's life when he could have written those words. For years he faced terrible odds and really was surrounded by people who were trying to kill him. There did appear to be no hope for him. It went on for so long it did indeed look like God would not rescue him. But look at verses 3-4. "But you, Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high. I call to the Lord and he answers me from his high mountain."

The fact that David wrote those words was proof that God was indeed a shield around him. He was alive when by all rights he should have been killed on multiple occasions. The whole of his government was seeking to kill him, but time after time he somehow escaped. And in the end he became king. He cried out to God and the Lord did indeed answer him.

When we live in awe of God no situation we face is hopeless. Ever. If God is present then anything can happen. In Matthew 19:26 Jesus said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Did you watch the Super Bowl back in February? We did. I thought New England would win easily. And then they imploded. Atlanta roared out to a 14-0 lead. I was thinking New England will get the ball now, drive down the field, score and make it a game. Sure enough they drove down deep in Atlanta territory, and then the unthinkable happened. Tom Brady's pass was intercepted and returned 82 yards for a touchdown. The Greatest Of All Time messed up and put his team in what looked a lot like a hole too deep to dig out of. It got worse. By midway through the

third quarter they were down 28-3. Laurie suggested this was a blowout and we should just turn it off. It looked hopeless for New England, but I remember thinking, “You can never count Tom Brady out. With him almost anything can happen.” I told her we should watch one more possession by New England. You know what happened. Tom Brady did the impossible, bringing his team back from what seemed an insurmountable deficit to win the game in overtime.

Jesus reminds us that with God truly nothing is impossible. Wait, you’re comparing Tom Brady to God? No, I’m not. Tom Brady can play football and do amazing things. But he can’t do the impossible. God can, and not just on a football field. Nothing limits him. When we live in awe of him we are never without hope.

Awe of God causes us to serve him joyfully.

A few weeks ago our once a month potluck and Bible study had a Christmas gift exchange. It was one of those deals where everyone was given a number for getting a gift and when your turn came you could either take a gift someone else already had or an unopened gift. My number was rather high so my turn came late, which is a good thing. Fewer people can steal from you. I chose an unopened gift and was quite pleased that it turned out to be a gift card to Regal Cinemas. It was a very good gift that Laurie and I could use. Other people had gotten candles or candy, so I was feeling quite fortunate. However, someone choosing after me, a person who shall remain nameless to protect the guilty, decided that gift card looked pretty good. They stole it from me! The gall. I warned this could land them in a sermon illustration, and that clearly was not an empty threat. I was disappointed, but I noticed another gift had similar packaging. I chose it, and it was another gift card to Regal. God clearly had protected me from the evil doers. But then the last person to choose a gift, stole that second gift card from me. I ended up with some hot pads and kitchen towels. When Laurie saw it she started laughing. She went into that thing she does when she gets really tickled by something. She laughs so hard she can’t breathe, but she can’t stop laughing. That always has the same effect on me. The next thing I know I am laughing just as hard as she is. So there were the two of us, laughing hysterically, That happens quite a bit around Laurie.

For 38 years Laurie has brought optimism, joy, laughter and life to me. I am in awe of her, because she is such a delight to share life with. Because I am so amazed by her, giving to her and serving her is not hard. It is a joy. It feels good to serve her, and I am eager to do it. She often gets ready for bed and when she is about to climb into bed she realizes she left the book she wanted to read for a bit in bed downstairs. This happens on a fairly regular basis. I love to jump in and say, “I’ll

go get it.” Even if I’m already in bed I’ll do it, because it is one more chance to serve her. When it comes to giving her gifts I literally have to restrain myself. If I had my way I’d drive us into bankruptcy buying gifts for her. I love to do it because I am so in awe of her.

So the analogy is obvious, right? When we live in awe of God giving to him, obeying him, serving him will not be some onerous duty. It won’t be something we drag ourselves to do grudgingly. We will be eager to do it. The more we are in awe of God the more joyfully and eagerly we will obey him and serve him. Awe of God brings power and motivation to our Christian living.

Awe of God produces wisdom

Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” So we’re supposed to be afraid of God? No, that’s not what the fear of the Lord is. It is having such profound awe of him it is almost like you are afraid of him.

When I was in college I had a roommate one year who was a really fun guy. He was a football player, a big guy, very intelligent and he had a great sense of humor. He was quite gregarious, but there was a girl, a really cute girl, that he had a huge crush on. I knew this girl and encouraged him to ask her out on a date, because I was pretty sure she would like to go out with him. But on several occasions when we were all in the same place I tried to get him to go talk to her and he wouldn’t do it. He was too bashful. He had fear of her. Not fear in the sense that he was leery that she might do him harm. It was just that she was, in his eyes, so wonderful that he didn’t stand a chance with her. I decided I finally had to do something. So one night I called her and explained that he would like to ask her out but was too shy, and wondered if she’d be willing to talk to him. She was quite pleased with the idea, but my big tough roommate was hiding in the closet. I had to drag him out to talk to her. They did go out after that.

Fear of the Lord is a bit like that. It is such huge reverence for him we feel unworthy in his presence, but we love him because he is so great. That kind of awe is the beginning of wisdom. Until you have that kind of awe you will never have real wisdom. In other words, you won’t have true understanding of what life is all about, you won’t know what matters most, you won’t be able to make the best choices in life, because all of that is wisdom, and it begins with awe of God.

There’s a very cool thing about wisdom. As we have wisdom from being in awe of God we will make choices that God instructs us to make. And it is those choices that produce the healthiest possible, the most fulfilling, life. To have wisdom is to

be able to master life itself, to live as we were created to live and as all of us desire to live. That is rooted in awe of God. Without that awe you will never have that wisdom, and will never master life.

APPLICATION

Unfortunately we are not people who are big on awe for anyone or anything. We have a paradoxical quality, for these days it seems everything is awesome. If you get seated at a table in a restaurant before you expected to that's awesome. And yet, we're really not in awe of much of anything. When have you felt genuine awe of something? When that has happened I guarantee you that you did not say flippantly, "That's awesome." As I prepared for this talk I reflected on moments of awe in my life. Awe can be provoked by several different things.

Many years ago Laurie and I visited Washington D.C. with our kids. There are some inspiring things there, but one sticks out in my mind. It was late on a chilly November afternoon when we were at Arlington National Cemetery. We watched the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Our culture really doesn't consider anything sacred. But there is a sense watching that ceremony that for once no one had anything to say. It was totally silent. It was a silence that you could almost feel. It was solemn. It humbled us. Everyone there was in humble awe in the presence of something everyone knows is sacred. Even when we left no one said anything. No one said, "That was awesome." It was a sense of awe much deeper than that. So awe can be provoked by the solemn and sacred.

Awe can be evoked by power. The last time we visited Michael and Carissa in Mississippi we all drove down to Pensacola, the home base of the Blue Angels, and watched the Blues fly over the beach at Pensacola. At one point after a 4 jet formation had performed some impressive maneuvers up high then flew off behind us. As we were looking up watching them suddenly a solo jet came blasting by at wave top level right in front of us. The roar and power of the afterburners of that jet was awesome. I could feel it in my gut. It caught us by surprise, and was so powerful and cool all we could do was yell. Words were way too small to express the awe we felt at that display.

A number of years ago Laurie and I were on vacation on Maui. We were driving back one night to the place we were staying. It was a beautiful cloudless night and there was a full moon. As we were driving at one point a spectacular view of the ocean opened up before us. The moon was out over the water and the reflection of its light on the water made a trail pointing right at us. The song, How Great Is Our God was playing on the car sound system. Both of us got choked up. It was just too

beautiful for words. Saying, “that’s awesome” would have been trivial in comparison to the magnificent beauty of the moment.

Then there was the moment this year when we met our second grandchild for the first time. There she was, after a difficult and stressful pregnancy, that little baby was perfect, beautiful. Again there were no words to express our wonder and gratitude.

So awe was evoked by the sacred, by enormous power, by unspeakable beauty, by glorious wonder. The problem for us is you don’t just work up that kind of awe. It overwhelms you. You don’t manufacture it. So the question is, how can we increase our awe of God? The simple answer is, experience him as he truly is and you’ll have it. But is there anything we can do to more experience his holiness, his power, his beauty, his wonder so we are overwhelmed by awe of him? There are several things we can do to help our awe of him become more real, something we feel, not just mentally give assent to.

START BY ASKING GOD FOR MORE AWE

In Ephesians 1:18-19 Paul prayed, “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.”

Wait, my heart doesn’t have eyes. It has valves and chambers and muscle fibers, but it doesn’t have eyes. What do you think Paul meant by that? He meant that he prayed, he asked God, to give his readers awareness of his hope and his incomparably great power in their hearts. In other words, that they would not just know it, but feel it, be stunned and in awe because of it.

Do you think if Paul prayed that for people he would consider it a good idea for us to pray it for ourselves? Do you think that is a prayer that God might be open to answering positively? You can count on it.

REMEMBER GOD’S WORKS

Psalms 105:5 commands us to “Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles and the judgments he pronounced.” A critical factor in having ever deeper awe of God is remembering and contemplating the great works he has done. Especially that is true of his grace that came to us through Jesus Christ and the cross.

I have encountered Christians who seem so determined to make themselves holy. They are going to work hard at it. They usually believe deeply in accountability. And they almost always have an accepted methodology. The problem with all that is it is all about human effort. And as with all such approaches it has 2 sad effects. First, it tends to focus on physical acts and trivia. The second effect is it doesn't set us free. It doesn't bring liberty and rest. It just wears us out.

What we need to do is focus on God's amazing grace. The more we are stunned by his grace in our lives, the more in awe of him we will be. And we will end up way more humble and gentle with others as well.

But we can also recall how God has worked in powerful ways in our lives. Every now and then I think of how God acted to bring Laurie and me together. We were, and are, an unlikely couple. We avoided going our separate ways by the narrowest of margins, and it took a startling act of God to make that happen. I can't even begin to think about how much worse my life would have been without Laurie.

TAKE TIME TO APPRECIATE HIS WORK AND HIS BEAUTY

Have you ever wondered how David was able to write so many of those Psalms that are so profound? Some of them came out of the depths of great stress and hurt when he had no one to turn to but God. But some of them reflect the fact that he had spent many hours out under the sky while tending sheep. He was out in the fields and had time to consider the sky, the clouds, the mountains, the flowers of the field, the animals and the beauty of creation. When we do that we begin to feel that awe of God growing.

Take time to go down to the beach at the end of the day and soak it in as the sun sets into the ocean. Don't just watch for the green flash, but thank God for the restful beauty you experience there. You can almost feel your soul settling down as you do it.

LOOK FOR GOD AT WORK AROUND YOU

Francois Fenelon said that if we will start looking for God around us we will see him everywhere. We tend to have a very earthly world view that totally disregards the reality of the spiritual and of God at work in our world. But if you will open your eyes you likely will discover that he is more present and more at work than you ever imagined.

Laurie and I have noticed in the past an interesting effect when we were thinking about buying a particular kind of car. We begin to see that kind of car a lot. The

cars were always there, we just didn't take note of them. So it is with God's working. It's there, we just don't take note of it. This could be something as generic as God's hand in creation, or as specific as answers to prayer.

I've mentioned this before but this past year in our family had a classic example of God doing his thing. Anna deeply longed to be able to be more at home with her daughter, Ella, but she had to work full time. Then she had a high risk pregnancy that required her to stay home. We all prayed a lot about that, for there was considerable threat of the pregnancy ending. We had also been praying that God would make it possible for Anna to stay home. Initially I thought, "well, this high risk pregnancy makes that possible, but not the way we had hoped." But in the end, little Cara was born very healthy right on time, and in the period where Anna had to be at home her boss decided that was working so well he wanted to just continue it. So God worked it out through the most unlikely method that Anna would be able to continue working from home.

PRAISE GOD WITH HIS PEOPLE

There is something special that happens when we sing God's praises with others. Robin Dunbar, a psychologist at Oxford University, says that when we sing with other people it produces what he calls "a massive hit of endorphins." One effect of that is it makes you feel very bonded to the people you do it with. It also, of all things, boosts your immune system. It also increases feelings of joy and well being.

There is a reason the Psalms call on us to praise God with others. Psalm 35:18 says, "I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among the throngs I will praise you." Psalm 40:9 says, "I will proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, Lord, as you know." Psalm 68:26 says, "Praise God in the great congregation." Psalm 111:1 says, "Praise the Lord. I will extol the Lord with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly." When we praise God together it gives him glory, but it also builds awe of him into our hearts. It increases our joy and our love for others.

As you enter 2018 is there something you are concerned about, something disturbing your peace. Write that thing on a card, then deposit it in the box at the back. Think of how you will regard that thing if you live truly in awe of God. In awe of him there will be hope and peace, no matter what you may face.