

A.I.

“*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?*” Acts 1:11a

A.I. Who knew you could say so much with so little? These two little letters are loaded with so much meaning in our world today. While I know that what comes to mind first when I say A.I. (artificial intelligence) is a hot topic throughout our world, I actually have some different A.I.’s in mind for our time together. Pausing a fuller discussion on the most well-known A.I., artificial intelligence, as means of comparison, I’m going to borrow that concern for the human element for these other A.I.’s.

Long before artificial intelligence was as familiar as it is becoming today, God had a different A.I. that He created, angel intelligence. You might remember when we confess the Nicene Creed, we state that God created things both visible and invisible. Well, part of what’s included in this statement about the invisible is the creation of angels. Since their creation, God has used angels in many different ways, several of which the Bible reveals to us.

Now we don’t have time to do a full course on angels in this one message, but it is helpful for us to briefly highlight some Bible moments with angels. There are several accounts throughout the Bible involving angels, but perhaps our most familiar encounters with angel intelligence in the Bible revolve around Jesus. The angel Gabriel is the one who talks with Mary about Jesus’ birth. Joseph encounters an angel in two separate dreams concerning Jesus. The angels fill the sky proclaiming to the shepherds that Jesus has been born. Angels cared for Jesus after His forty days in the wilderness and temptation by the devil. An angel strengthens Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before He’s arrested. Angels meet the women at the tomb after Jesus has risen. Now this weekend, angels point Jesus’ disciples to His second coming as He was ascending.

From verses ten and eleven in our Acts reading, **“And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’”**

I don’t know how the angels’ question hits you, but when I ponder this question, something seems off. It feels like a jolting interruption to the disciples’ final moment seeing Jesus. It’s not that the angels did or said anything wrong, to me it shows a disconnect between angels and human beings. Yes, certainly angels are quite different than human beings by how God made them. Angels often intimidate human beings just by showing up. Yet, the disconnection I have in mind is more than their appearance it’s their inability to understand things from a human perspective.

The question the angels pose to the disciples in this ascension moment seems to miss the impact that a goodbye has on a human being even if the goodbye isn’t for forever. It can be hard to say goodbye even in the best of circumstances. And when you consider all that these disciples had just been through, learning from Jesus for three years, watching Jesus die, and then processing His resurrection return, lingering looks into the sky where Jesus just ascended seem quite natural. But the angels don’t seem understand this and their question rushes right through this moment lacking appreciation for all that has happened. Like a cellphone ringing during a moment of silence or a person missing the cue to pray and continuing to talk while everyone else gets ready for prayer, the angels’ question seems so abrupt in this moment.

However, this isn’t the only time something like this happens. In fact, a more powerful example of this disconnect comes from some angels’ encounter with Mary Magdalene at the tomb. Now, I take no credit for this insight, I learned it from an article that was shared with me long ago.¹ Here’s a major takeaway from this article. When Mary comes to the tomb weeping, the angels and Jesus at separate times ask her the same question, **“Why are you weeping?”** (John 20:13, 15) While it’s the same question, it’s experienced in very different ways. On the one hand, the angels question Mary as ones who are detached from the grief that she is experiencing. Jesus, on the other hand, questions Mary as one who personally knows and understands her grief.

I kind of think about it like this. When I started here at Emmanuel, I was a single man who had been taught about the church and role of the pastor. I could serve my role in various situations, but early on I often recognized a point of separation between me and those I’ve had the chance to serve. My lack of experience with

¹ Schulz, Gregory P. [Why Are You Weeping? An exegetical and ontological remark on John 20:13 & 15.](#)

family and with the church prevented me from relating more fully to the experiences that I got to walk through with others. As I've been here longer and have a family of my own now, I've begun to understand situations with more depth. Shared experiences build a different kind of connection.

Well, when it comes to angels, they lack the human element to understand grief or goodbyes. But even more importantly, they lack the human element to understand salvation, to know the full impact of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Peter shares this insight with us when he describes the Old Testament prophets, human beings, understanding God's salvation plan more than angels, **"It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look."** (1 Peter 1:12)

This is an unbelievable reality for us as human beings. While we'll never be on the same level as the angels in terms of power and abilities, God has given us something they'll never fully comprehend – being saved by the God who takes on their same nature. While we both worship the same God, we worship the God who chose to become like us, human, yet without sin. Lacking this experience, explains the angels' detached question from our Acts reading, **"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?"** The angels couldn't comprehend that these disciples weren't just watching their God ascend, they were watching their friend, their brother ascend.

So, what does A.I. have to do with us this weekend? Contrasting the lack of the human element from artificial intelligence and even more so with angel intelligence, this weekend I want all of us to leave with a different A.I. in mind, ascension intelligence. And here's what I mean by ascension intelligence, based on this important ascension moment in Acts, the human element of Jesus, His saving work, and His Church can't be overlooked, replaced, or ignored.

For God, He has chosen to make the human element critical to everything He does – that's what this ascension moment is all about. And yet, it's so easy for God's people, ourselves included, to overlook, replace, and ignore Christ's ascension like it's an afterthought compared to Easter or confirmation. When we pass over Jesus' ascension, we miss the full value and worth that Jesus has given to humanity, to you and to me. So, it's good for us to admit and confess this temptation and struggle to overlook Jesus' ascension this weekend.

Ascension intelligence is so important because it reveals where God truly wants humanity to be, where He wants you and me to be. The fact that Jesus ascends bodily into Paradise into heaven brings full circle the plan He laid out to the serpent and to Adam and Eve. Jesus, the Seed of the Woman, not only crushed the serpent's head through His crucifixion and resurrection but now by His ascension He clearly shows that God and man, human beings, can be in Paradise together again. Our days of being separated from God by sin are numbered and we can look forward to walking and talking with God in the Garden of Eden 2.0.

Ascension intelligence also reveals this critically important human element in the way the Holy Spirit inspires writers of the Bible to talk about the Church. One profound image for the Church in the Bible is that of the Jesus' body. Paul writes extensively on this in his letters, and we have a taste of this, this weekend in our Ephesians reading, **"And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."** (1:22-23) This ascension moment makes it clear for us that the Church is not program, the Church is not a building, the Church is not a steeple, the Church is not a resting place, the Church is a people – a people who share the same flesh and blood as their Lord and Savior who has forgiven and redeemed them.

Ascension intelligence also reveals this critically important human element through whom Jesus calls His witnesses. Our Luke reading reminds us that Jesus tells his human disciples, not angels, that they are His witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Jesus picked as His witnesses, ones who experienced and personally knew His saving work. Angels may proclaim God's mighty deeds from time to time, but it is through His disciples that God continues to lead His Church out into this world. This weekend, that includes you and me. We are the Lord's current day disciples through whom He is moving His Church out into our families, our schools and workplaces, our communities, and our world!

Ascension intelligence reminds us that our God has not overlooked, replaced, or ignored the human element. Our God has not overlooked, replaced, or ignored you or me. He has made the human element a part of Himself, His Work, and His Church forever. Thanks be to God for Jesus' ascension. Amen!