

“He Ascended to Heaven and is Seated at the Right Hand of God”
Acts 1: 6-11 **July 17, 2016**
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So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Acts 1:6-11

Here is a question I brought to you a few weeks ago- it’s just as relevant today. If you had a time machine that could transport you back to a particular moment in Jesus’ ministry, (his birth, baptism, miracles, the Last Supper, whenever you might choose), what scene would that be?

Remember that question?

Well, I really doubt if anyone here would have chosen then Ascension. Did you? (Raise your hand if you did.)

I mean, who wants to see someone you love leave? How fun is it to see a dear friend of yours depart; someone you’ve lived with or worked with, followed and admired? Not at all.

- This portion of the Apostle’s Creed in our Summer Sermon Series is all about the continuing movement of God in our lives through the enduring, lasting, uplifting presence of Jesus Christ.

At a time when we all need to hear the reinforcing promise of God with us, in ways deeper than our understanding, with new words added to our vocabulary with grief and sadness each week, it seems, now Nice, France, and with t=our prayers for the nation of Turkey, these words of the Apostle’s Creed are more assuring than they at first sound. The Ascension isn’t so much about a departure, but is rather about lifting up Jesus’ life and ministry as a model for us to praise and follow (what’s why the scene ISN’T called the Departing, or Dismissal or Departure- but rather, the Ascension, ELEVATING Jesus for us all.)

Our Reformed and Presbyterian founder, John Calvin, aptly summarized the meaning of Jesus’ ascension with one brief sentence. (He wasn’t always so concise.)

“Jesus Christ now fills with grace and kindness the throne that for miserable sinners would otherwise have been filled with dread.” *

One sentence can say a lot!

The pithiness of this sentence takes me back, in my own life, to the one, single question I was asked by the Senior Pastor with whom I first worked as an Associate Pastor; the Rev. Dick Hobson, in Sanford NC. I still remember that question well, and it took me quite a while to unpack it, to fully understand what was being asked when he put it to me.

It was in his office, full of dark mahogany furniture and shelves stacked high with books that he posed these words to me, his sole interview question, for all the marbles (or so I thought.) This is what it was, (I recall it word for word.) “Do you believe that it is the same Jesus of Nazareth who walked on earth who now reigns as Christ our Lord in Heaven?”

I remember that I took some time at first in answering. It seemed such an obvious ‘Yes’; a no brainer, that there surely must be something else going on with the question... Was it a trick question? It carries a lot of meaning. It’s implications roll down from heaven into our lives as we live and understand ourselves to be children of God.

My answer to him, finally, was “yes, for sure, Jesus on earth is the same Christ in heaven’, and he nodded, and simply said “good, let’s talk”, and then we talked about our families for a while. Then we both sought out, over three years time, to work out the meaning of Jesus’ Lordship and reign with us and over us; for us and a congregation together. The same goes for us here at Second Presbyterian in Baltimore. This is what being called to Christ’s ministry is all about—and this applies to all of us.

In other words, it is the Jesus we know from the Gospels, who with love for all, mercy for the penitent and understanding beyond our own who reigns. And to be clear, it is Jesus who reigns, and not we ourselves. We do not hold the keys to heaven (as much as heaven may or may not be important to us.) And we will be saved by the gift of God’s grace alone, the mercy granted to us by God’s free choosing.

And no one could possibly be more fair or gracious to us than Jesus. The dread that we might have felt about ‘getting into’ heaven is alleviated by the love of God in Christ that breaks the barriers equally between us and the gates of heaven and us from one another.

The end result of Jesus' Ascension, that Jesus is Lord, imputes whole meaning into how we understand and live our lives, with Jesus now seated at the Right Hand of God.

Which brings us to the second clause of this portion of the Creed for us today, important in it's own right. 'Seated at the right hand of God.'

The theologian Justo Gonzalez comments that as a child, when he repeated this part of the Creed, he would always think of a scene from a picture book of Gulliver's Travels that his parents had given to him at Christmas one time... he imagined that Jesus was a much smaller person, a Lilliputian, literally sitting on the right hand of God, as he saw characters pictured in that book.

Gonzalez then explains that in the ancient world, to 'sit at' the right hand of another was to have the place of highest honor.

This goes back thousands and thousands of years, when warriors carried shields in their left hand (because most people have always been right handed) and an offensive weapon, a sword, lance, or mace with the right hand. Thus the right side would be more vulnerable to attack from the right (with no defensive capability). So every Chieftan, Clan leader or King would place their most trusted warrior on their right.

The custom then evolved to have the most trusted and honored advisor the King sit at the right side of the throne.

So when we say this in the Creed, it is not so much literal as it is a way to say that Jesus and God the Father share the same importance, authority and stature.

Funny thing. As a side note here, it went through my mind to look for images



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Jesus, seated at the Right Hand of God the Father, in Christian art images on the internet, (you know there must be a million of them), just to see if any images had Jesus brandishing a sword or a weapon of any kind. (You just never know what there might be out there...)

Thankfully, I didn't find a single one. But I did see more than a few images of paintings with Jesus holding his hand up as a sign of peace with the nail marks still visible in his hands. This was clearly a sign to show that it was the same Jesus who was on earth who now reigns as the Lord in heaven; that Jesus' humanness did not depart as he left this earth, that he is still one of us, fully human and fully God, 'up there.'

Which leads to a brief concluding story. It was a number of years ago, while at a Youth Conference at Montreat in NC, I saw the little skit performed. I think it was Roger Nishioka who was the leader (a 'guru' in all things Youth and Presbyterian), to a packed Andersen Auditorium, filled with 700 or so kids. "As I call your name", he said, "come up and place yourself on stage. On my right is GOOD. All the way over to the left is BAD. Place yourself where you think you belong. Got it?" Simple enough, right???

First, Mother Theresa. Roger then pointed to a young woman on the second row... "Come on up, Mother Theresa!"

After confirming with her friends that she was sure who Mather Teresa was, she placed herself on the continuum of good and evil, well to the right of the speaker.

"Next, Adolf Hitler!" Roger pointed to a young man, midway back in the middle row. Accompanied by a lots of blushing and a few boos on the way up, the boy took his place far to the left of Mother Teresa.

"OK, Martin Luther King Jr." A teenager got up and voluntarily strode forward to stand to the right of Mother Theresa. Good enough. So did the next two, Mahatma Gandhi and Clara Barton.

When Josef Stalin was called, he was welcomed on the far left beside Hitler. Then the names George Bush, Al Gore, Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake were called up, all who tried to figure out just where they stood, finding places somewhat alongside of the really, really good Mother Teresa and Dr. King.

Finally, with about a dozen teenagers positioned on the stage, along the spectrum of GOOD and BAD, Roger Nishioka said, "And now I'll call up Jesus Christ." Someone giggled, some whispered. He pointed to a young woman who sheepishly walked up on stage. There was

no applause, just a lot of chatter going on behind her. She was graciously received, even with bows, by Dr. King and Theresa and the others to the right.

Then Roger asked the packed auditorium, “Does that look right to you?” The crowd gave its assent. Then Roger pulled out his Bible, and asked everyone to follow along with the words that were then projected on the big screen high in front of them. He read from Paul’s letters to the Romans, chapter 5, verses 6-7. **“At the right moment, Christ died for ungodly people.**

It isn’t often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone will die for a good person. But God shows God’s love for us, because while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

The person assigned to be Jesus Christ then gradually shuffled to the left until, by the time Roger had concluded the reading, Jesus was hanging out beside Hitler and Stalin, the worst of the BAD.

“Now’, Roger asked, ‘who of you here tonight thinks they are in a position where Jesus won’t want to be with you?’ No one raised a hand.

The Lord of heaven and earth returns to all of us in forgiveness and love.

The Ascension of Jesus is all about the One who conquered Death itself who now sits at the very throne of God, and because he is there the evil that once held us captive no longer has the power to do so.

Perhaps, when we reconsider the meaning of the Ascension, it is a scene worth revisiting. I know that for sure I want to see its effects worked out in my life and the world we live in. Don’t you?

Amen.

* John Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.16.16, ed. John T. McNeill, Philadelphia, Westminster Press,, 1960.