

To God Alone Be The Glory

Every time we recite the Creed, we repeat that Jesus ascended into heaven and is sitting at the right hand of God the Father. Why is this important? What does Jesus' ascension really mean for us? If you're like most Christians, it's been at least a year since you thought seriously about Christ's ascension. And if you are like most people, you can benefit from thinking about Christ's ascension.

In today's sermon text the Holy Spirit has graciously provided a way for us to learn (or relearn) just how important Christ's ascension is to our daily lives. By Christ's ascension GOD SWEARS TO YOU ...

1. He will anchor your hope now; and 2. What you hope for now, He will give you then.

In John 14(:2-3) Jesus reveals, "*In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And since I am going and preparing a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*" Such an excellent promise! It turns our heart toward heaven and leads us to long for the leaving. Even if your life is filled with easy days, low stress, and lots of fun, part of being a Christian is the longing that the Holy Spirit works in your heart to be with God. Maybe he's working this longing in you now for the first time. Or perhaps you've been longing for Christ to come back and take you to be with him for a long time.

Have you waited as long as Abraham? God had promised Abraham a son. But it took God 25 years to make good on this promise, during which time Abraham and Sarah had to wait patiently. "This month?" "No, not this month." Twelve months per year times 25 years is 300 disappointments for this infertile couple. You can imagine that they got a bit discouraged from time to time. And it wasn't just that they weren't having the child promised to them. Their Savior from sin would be a direct descendant of their son. So they were waiting to be rescued from sin too.

What did God do for them? He took an oath. He swore to Abraham that he would fulfill his promise. Now when God promises something, it's already sure to happen. But in order that Abraham and we might believe in his promise more firmly, God also took an oath. He swore to fulfill his promise to us.

Let's talk about swearing (taking an oath). Why do people swear? Isn't it to guarantee to others that they are telling the truth? Sure. They want others to believe them. They want to have credibility. So, how does swearing help a person gain credibility? The swearer gains credibility by appealing to the honor of something more honorable or sacred than himself. When you swear an oath, you are asking a power or authority higher than yourself to witness that you are telling the truth and to bring bad consequences if you are lying. Now, Jesus doesn't want his followers to swear (Matthew 5:34), except for the government (e.g. Matthew 26:63-64). But

if a person were to use the common oath: “I swear on my mother’s grave,” such a person would be saying, “If I’m lying, may my mother be dishonored as if she taught me to tell lies.” Or if you take this oath in court: “I swear to tell the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God,” you are actually saying, “May God help me to tell the truth; he’s the God of truth; and if I lie, I expect him to punish me.” See, you always appeal to someone or something higher or more honorable than yourself when you take an oath.

When God took his oath for Abraham, there was no one higher than God. So he swore by himself. And as our text reveals, Christ’s ascension makes God’s oath applicable to us. **GOD SWEARS TO YOU... He will anchor your hope now** (17,18-19). *¹⁷Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.* Because Jesus ascended, we are the heirs of what has been promised. We stand to inherit all the riches of heaven, thanks to Jesus. But we gotta wait, like Abraham.

Sometimes when things aren’t going well, people like to say, “I know God has a plan for me.” Yes, he does. But it’s not some unknown plan. God’s plan is to bring us safely through this life, with all its joys and with all its troubles, to himself in heaven. His purpose for us is as unchanging as he is. He’s not going to get tired of us. He is not going to change his mind and send all of us believers to hell. He promised, and he’s not going back on his Word.

But just in case that promise wasn’t enough for us, he swore that he would fulfill his promise. Why did he do that? *¹⁸God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.* God wanted to encourage us greatly by two unchangeable things: the promise and the oath. Because he has given us both a promise and an oath, *¹⁹we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.*

So now let’s see how the ascension of Christ anchors our hope every day. When things are going really well, as they so often do for people these days, we Christians can say, “Do you see how much Jesus, at the right hand of God, is blessing me?” As you read your Bible daily and have other faithful contact with God’s Word and Sacrament, you will find the Holy Spirit maturing you and leading you to say such things. But even if you don’t realize how much the ascended Christ is working everything out for you, he still does.

It’s usually when things go badly that people’s minds turn toward the Lord. So when things go badly, let this be the first thing out of your mouth: “My gracious Lord, I see that you are being good to me. You have sent me trouble so that I may turn to you for help. I always need your help, but these troubles help me remember that I need your help.” Let words like these come out of your mouth when troubles surprise you.

Then think of Jesus' ascension. Up he went. Why? To rule all things. To those with untrained vision or forgetfulness it may sometimes seem that no one is in charge, or that Satan is in charge. But shortly before Jesus ascended he said, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*" (Matthew 28:18). Now, there are only two possibilities here. Either Jesus **is** in charge or he is not. And if Jesus is not in charge, not sitting in the position of honor at the right hand of God the Father, then I don't want to be Christian any longer. There would be no point. But in fact Jesus did ascend, is sitting at God's right hand, is ruling all things for the benefit of the Church.

So when life is squeezing you... Maybe you are searching for a house and you think you have one, and then it slips away. You need something to lift you up out of your disappointment, something more than just, "God already knows where I'm going to live." You need to hear yourself say: "Jesus is going to work it out for me. God promised and he swore it. And he is still planning to bring me into his heavenly kingdom." *When your child or parent or cousin or friend is bucking your lead by bad behavior, perhaps even doing things that will damage his/her faith, it really helps to remind yourself that God still wants everyone to be saved, and that he has chosen to work through baptism which your loved one likely received. Remind yourself that even if we believers become faithless, God will remain faithful because he cannot disown himself (2 Timothy 2:13). And then help your loved one to repent. *When you have recently done a shameful sin against

others or God, and you wonder, "How weak is my faith if I couldn't say no to that? I didn't even try; I just went along with the sin." Even then lift your eyes to heaven's throne and see Jesus interceding for you with the Father.

This reminds me of a story I heard about a boy. He brought home a dirty stray dog. He asked his father, "Ah, Dad, could I please keep it? I always wanted a dog." And his father said, "Tell you what. You clean it up and bring it inside, and I'll let you keep it." Can you see Jesus bringing home a dirty stray YOU? Can you hear him asking the heavenly Father about you, "Ah, Dad, could I please keep this one too?" Can you hear the heavenly Father answering, "Tell you what. You clean it up and bring it inside, and I'll let you keep it"?

Do you see how Jesus' ascension serves as an anchor for the soul and revives our hope? Our hope ¹⁹*enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain*. Okay. What's this inner sanctuary behind the curtain? The writer is talking about heaven. Jesus has ascended to heaven and is sitting at God's right hand. But the writer says all this in terms of 'the temple in Jerusalem.' The inner sanctuary of the temple in Jerusalem was the room behind the curtain where God caused his presence to dwell. Not just anyone could enter the holiest room. No, people are sinful. Someone had to be specially chosen by God, consecrated, set apart. That someone was the high priest of Israel. He would enter the Most Holy Place only once per year on the Great Day of Atonement, with

an offering of blood to prove that sins had been paid for by death.

Well if that isn't a picture of Jesus, then none of you has a nose on your face. Jesus, the true Great High Priest, entered into the real Most Holy Place, where God really dwells. Jesus entered with his own blood to prove that sin has been paid for once and for all by his death. ²⁰*Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.* Think what that means. If Jesus entered before us, we too will enter. What an anchor for our hope!

He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. Okay. Who is this Melchizedek person? Melchizedek lived in the time of Abraham. He was king of the city we now call Jerusalem. He was also a priest of the Most High God. When Abraham came back from rescuing his nephew Lot, who had been taken captive, Abraham had loads of plunder. He gave Melchizedek 10% of the plunder. Melchizedek blessed Abraham.

We don't know much more about Melchizedek than that. We don't know who his parents (ancestry) were, when he was born, when he died. So we can think of Melchizedek as having no human father, no beginning of days, no end of life. Since we don't hear that his priesthood ended, we can think of Melchizedek as always remaining a priest.

And so the Old Testament believers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, saw Melchizedek as a picture of the coming

Messiah (see Psalm 110 and compare it with Hebrews 7:1-4). Christ always remains our high priest in heaven. What's the ascended Christ doing for us there? The same as an Old Testament high priest would do in the temple on earth. Jesus is offering prayers for his people. We call this "interceding." Jesus says things like, "Well, Father, since I paid for their sins, shall we forgive them one more day?" And the Father responds with something like, "Indeed we shall."

Do you see what the Lord is trying to do for us here? The Lord is trying to give us a marvelous picture of what's going on in heaven ever since Jesus ascended so we will have a reason to keep our hope of eternal life solid and sure. Why? Because when the rest of life is falling apart, when the things of this life on which we pin so many of our hopes fail and disappoint us, we then have an anchor to hold us in one spot, something to anchor us onto Christ our Savior, all the while the winds of change try to blow us loose. God is trying to convince us by taking an oath. **GOD SWEARS TO YOU... that what you hope for now, He will give you then (17,20).** The one who ascended has entered the sanctuary already. He is there preparing a place for us to join him soon, when the time is right. May this anchor our hope in our ascended Christ so that we are greatly encouraged.