

## Ascension Sunday - 2013 **We Worship the Ascended King**

Our text for the Festival of Ascension is the assigned psalm, Psalm 47 which you sang a few minutes ago. We listen again to verse 5.

*God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Let me begin by setting the stage for what we are going to do in the next 20 minutes or so. In the next 20 minutes we are going to talk about an event, a real historical happening that occurred almost 2,000 years ago and we're going to discuss that event using the words of a song that was written about it 3,000 years ago. That's right, the event was described in song and sung about 1,000 years before it happened and it happened 2,000 years ago. And by the way, in the next 20 minutes, I want you to see how this event continues to have importance to you, the believer, in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

Now first of all, how can we dare to use the words of a song written 1,000 years before something happened as a teaching tool about that event? Well, here's how. The event we are talking about is the ascension of Jesus into heaven which occurred almost 2,000 years ago. (That should come as no surprise to you since this is Ascension Sunday.) The 3,000 year old song which describes the ascension and teaches us about the ascension is Psalm 47, our text for today. You sang this psalm a few minutes ago and it is printed out for you on page 7 of the worship folder.

The authorization for using a 3,000 year old song to describe an event that occurred 1,000 years after the song was written is found in our Gospel reading for today from Luke 24. There Jesus said to his disciples:  
<sup>44</sup> . . . "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. "The 5 books of Moses, the 16 books of the Prophets, the Psalms and the other 17 books of poetry and history," Jesus says, "they are all talking about me." Elsewhere, when referring to the Old Testament Jesus had said, " . . . These are the Scriptures that testify about me." John 5:39 (NIV). So we are well within bounds to use Psalm 47 to talk about Jesus' ascension. All the Old Testament books speak about and testify about and prophesy about Jesus. Today on the basis of Psalm 47 we are going to

1. Celebrate the Great Victory Christ Won, and
2. Live with Confidence in Christ's Continuing Reign Over All

### **1. Celebrate the Great Victory Christ Won**

Forty days after Jesus rose from the dead, he took his disciples to a hill outside the town of Bethany, not far from Jerusalem. There he ascended, bodily, up into heaven. From the book of Acts (1:10-11) we get the impression that the disciples stood there looking like children who had just lost their helium balloons. They kept studying the sky intently maybe hoping that Jesus would come right back with thousands of angels in tow to usher in the end of the world.

Two angels appeared to assure the disciples that Jesus would come back someday, visibly, just as he left. In the meantime, the disciples were to return to Jerusalem and wait for the promised coming of the Holy Spirit. In today's Gospel, Luke told us that the disciples returned to Jerusalem "*with great joy,*" rejoicing, celebrating. Why? Because by God's grace the disciples had come to understand the reason for Jesus' ascension. On their way back to Jerusalem they may have even sung Psalm 47. It would have been most fitting if they did. Listen again to the opening words of this psalm. They will help us understand the nature of Jesus' ascension and what it means for us.

<sup>1</sup> *Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy.*

<sup>2</sup> *How awesome is the LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth!*

<sup>3</sup> *He subdued nations under us, peoples under our feet.*

<sup>4</sup> *He chose our inheritance for us, the pride of Jacob, whom he loved. Selah*

<sup>5</sup> *God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets.*

<sup>6</sup> *Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. (Psalm 47:1-6).*

Psalm 47 is a "double reference" psalm. Written by divine inspiration, this psalm actually refers to two different events in history. The original event celebrated was the occasion when King David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. God (whose presence among the nation of Israel was symbolized with the Ark) God was, in essence, "ascending" as the Ark was carried up the hill and into the city of Jerusalem. This was a joyous occasion. The residents of Jerusalem were 'clapping their hands' and 'shouting to God with cries of joy.' The Ark ascended into the city 'amid shouts of joy' and 'the sounding trumpets.' The second reference and, by far, the greater reference of Psalm 47 is to the Ascension of Christ.

The Ascension of Christ was also a joyous occasion and not only here on earth. Mark's Gospel tells us that as soon as the cloud hid Jesus from the sight of the disciples, *Jesus was received into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.* (Mark 16:19). This was a joyous homecoming. You can just imagine the angel choirs singing songs of praise, celebrating the fact that God's Son was back where he belonged, on the throne of heaven, at the Father's right hand. The crown of thorns was exchanged for a crown of glory. Jesus was back in heaven and he was back for a reason.

Jesus didn't ascend into heaven to begin his retirement. On the contrary, think of a king returning to his palace after winning a war. Trumpets play. Citizens clap their hands. Flower petals rain down from balconies. People cheer. That's a scene which has been repeated hundreds of times in world history. But Jesus' ascension is different. Jesus is a king who went to war, not for his benefit, but for ours.

Verse 3 says, "*He subdued nations under us*" Here's what is amazing. Rulers normally don't leave the comforts of their palace unless there is something in it for them. Even then they will usually send others to do the dangerous work, the dirty work for them. It's the lowly soldier, for example, who sweats it out in the foxhole over in Afghanistan, not the commander-in-chief. Think about the vision of Jesus in today's reading from the book of Revelation: a victorious king, the rider on the white horse in garments splattered with blood, leading the armies of heaven. He went to war, not for his benefit, but for ours.

Imagine for a moment that the temporarily suspended White House tours resume and you get to go on the tour. As you pass by the rose garden you realize that you've just lost your wedding ring. While you're standing there, the President himself bursts out of the Oval Office and gets down on his hands and knees to look for your ring in the flower beds and in the grass and he doesn't stop until he's found it. The very Son of God loved you so much that he left his comfortable throne in heaven and got on human hands and knees to look for you. And he didn't stop until he found you and saved you. What did the Son of God get for his trouble? He was smeared with our sin and, as a result, was cast aside by his heavenly Father as if he were a rotten banana peel. The Son of God died, bruised and bloodied on a cross meant for outlaws. But the Son of God rose from the dead on the third day. And his ascension signaled the end of his rescue mission. Yes, Jesus' resurrection proves that he had paid for sin and conquered death. But his ascension strengthens the awesome truth that his victories were complete. If Jesus still had work to do for our salvation he wouldn't have returned to heaven.

So on this Ascension Sunday we celebrate the great victory Christ won. Satan was crushed. Sins were atoned for. And death was defeated. As that cloud came and hid Jesus from the disciples' sight their thoughts may have returned to the night in the upper room when Jesus said, *"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 if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."* (John 14:2-3)

After all the disciples had seen and heard there was more to come. Jesus was ascending into heaven to prepare a place for each believer. Once again we are presented with a reason to pause and appreciate what Jesus accomplished. He is preparing a place for each of us in heaven. There is a space that belongs to you in glory. That promise of heaven is yours already here on earth. The glory of heaven is something you'll have to wait to experience. But already now you can believe with certainty that your eternal inheritance is secure. Heaven is your home.

The God whose holiness will not permit him to accept you for what you are is a God whose mercy has accepted you for what Jesus is. The ascension of Jesus proves this.

## **2. Live with Confidence in Christ's Continuing Reign Over All**

The Son of God did win a great victory at Calvary, but what has he done lately, you may ask. Well, after politicians win an election they don't run away and hide. Just the opposite. You start to see them everywhere. They'll be on the radio talk shows and on TV. They'll be touring towns hit by disaster and offering relief through the powers granted their office. In the same way when Jesus ascended to his throne in heaven it was not to rest but to rule.

Verses 8 & 9: *God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne.*

*The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham,  
for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted.*

These words direct us to the ongoing work Jesus does in our behalf. Jesus now reigns over all things. He is seated on his holy throne. The powers of every government on earth belong to him. He is calling the shots every day.

What does it mean for you that Jesus reigns over the nations? In his letter to the Ephesians the Apostle Paul stated that God the Father, “. . . *seated him (Jesus) at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church . . .*” (Ephesians 1:20-22).

You don’t have any reason to wring your hands over the evils that our government is allowing and even encouraging. Jesus is in control of those who govern us. And when the powers of this world fight against Jesus and seem to win at first, you can be confident they won’t win in the end. The great Ascended King still works history out for the good of his church.

And what does it mean for you that Jesus is seated on his holy throne? The Bible tells us that he prays for us, he intercedes for us, and uses his power for our benefit. Hebrews 7:25: *Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.* And 1 John 2:1: *But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* Jesus didn’t ascend into heaven to take a long vacation. No, he is still working all things out for your good, interceding for you, defending you at the throne of God.

So you hit a little bump on the road of life and call out to God but he seems either unable to help you or not interested in helping you. All of a sudden everything in the world and everything in your life seems to be against you. Not so! The message of Ascension tells you something different. Imagine if you were best friends with Donald Trump. Imagine that Donald Trump told you that if you ever needed anything you should just call. With his money and connections he could take care of just about any problem that you faced.

Now take that imaginary situation and multiply it about a billion times and apply it to the real situations you experience in your life. All the resources of heaven and earth are at Jesus’ disposal. Everything belongs to Jesus. Every leader, every powerful person, every person in control answers to Jesus. And Jesus rules over all things for the good of the church, for the good of you the believer. He even rules over the little details of your life. Let these truths give you confidence in what Jesus continues to do for you.

On this Ascension Sunday think of that day long ago when Jesus was taken up into the sky in front of the disciples. Recall his victories for you. Celebrate what he has done. And then leave here today living with confidence in what he continues to do for you. Amen.