

“He Ascended Into Heaven”

October 7, 2018

Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor
 First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Hebrews 1:1-4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³ He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Hebrews 2:5-12

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. ⁶ But someone has testified somewhere,

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them?

⁷ You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, ⁸ subjecting all things under their feet.”

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, ⁹ but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹⁰ It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

11 For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father.

For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, 12 saying,

“I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”

A SERMON FOR A DECLINING CONGREGATION

The book of Hebrews is unlike any other literature in the New Testament. We sometimes refer to it as a letter. But, really, it's more like a sermon.

It's a sermon for a congregation that was on the decline.

We get a hint about this in the 10th chapter of this book.

The writer of Hebrews admonishes the congregation saying,

“Don't neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some...” (Hebrews 10:25)

In other words church attendance was down. Some people had become apathetic toward the church.

The word the writer of Hebrews used is “neglect”. They had gotten out of the habit of worshipping God.

How did this happen?

In the first century the church was filled with the power of the Spirit.

The teaching of the apostles bolstered their faith. Witnesses to the resurrection created a sense of urgency and hope.

As one of my seminary professors used to say,
 “The early church lived on tiptoe.”

But, now the church seemed to be flatfooted and lifeless.

Witnesses to the resurrection were dead and gone.
 The apostles no longer gave their first hand accounts of Jesus’ life.

And a kind of “malaise” took hold in the church.

I suspect the excuses back then were the same excuses that we give to-
 day.

“Yes, I know I should go to worship,
 but I have other things to do.
 It’s not convenient.
 I’ll get back to it.”

You ask people about worship, and they reply, “Meh....”

For those of you who are not up on the latest expressions, this is a way of
 saying that something does not create much interest or enthusiasm.

What’s a preacher to do?
 How can a church in the doldrums be revitalized?
 What is the answer to our world that greets the message of salvation with...
 meh..?

That was an issue back then.
 And it’s still an issue today.

CHURCH REVITALIZATION

In the church of my youth the preacher simply turned up the volume, and
 increased the threat level to “code red”.

That worked for some back then.
 But, that doesn’t work so much in this day and time.

And so, we have the birth of the church revitalization industry.

Many books have been written about it.
You can go to a conference every month and learn ways to bridge this enthusiasm gap.

We have studied the demographics of the problem.
What must we do to reach millennials
and “Gen Xers”?

There are a multitude of answers.

We Presbyterians have done what we always do.
We’ve formed committees to study the issue.
Nothing like long meetings to whip up more enthusiasm...right?

We’ve spent large sums of money in an effort to revitalize struggling churches.

We’ve attempted to change our style of worship.
Maybe if we put in a little rock and/or roll into the service that would wake people up?

Now to be fair, all of us should be concerned about church revitalization.
All of us should be concerned that worship is neglected by many.

I’m open to trying new worship styles.
I want to know how to make the gospel more relevant and understandable to a new generation. I’m all for giving congregations a helping hand in order to revitalize their ministry.

BACK TO BASICS

But, our lesson for today suggests something more basic is needed in order to revitalize flagging congregations. We have to get back to basics.

What is the essence of our faith?

The writer of the book of Hebrews does just that.

He asks,
“Why is it so important to worship?”

What is the earth shaking event that compels us to come together and sing and pray and preach each week?"

It's very simple.
God was in Christ.

Long ago we got glimpses of God's glory in the preaching of the prophets, but with Jesus we got something quite different.

In these last days,
God has spoken to us through his Son.
And then the preacher enumerates why we can say that Jesus is God's Son.

CREATION

First, He is the "heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds."

In Jesus we see the human face of the Creator.

Think about that.

When we come to worship, we expect to come face to face with the Creator of heaven and earth.

Worship is not just about what we want to do or how we feel or how entertaining the worship service may...or may not be.

This is about something that is much more important and basic.
It makes no difference if we're a baby boomer, a millennial or a gen-xer or whatever.

Worshiping the One in whom we live and move and have our being is as important to us as breathing. We were created to worship God.

Worship not only reconnects us with God;
it also connects us with ourselves, our true self.

As the catechism puts it,
this is our chief end, this is the purpose of our life,

to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.

Worship allows us to start forever now.

Different forms of worship may allow us to make that connection easier. But, in the end, it's up to us to remember that the subject of worship is God, and in particular God as revealed in Christ.

As the praise and worship song puts it,
"We are standing on holy ground."

That's worship.
Standing on holy ground.

Many churches now use projection screens as an aid to worship.

If I had that capability this morning,
I would show you pictures that portray the vastness of the universe... perhaps shots of the creation of the universe captured by the Hubble telescope.

And underneath that picture of a universe that is vast and uncharted,
I would use a caption from our lesson for today,

"...but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things,
through whom he also created the worlds."

That's worship.
That's a picture of how the church can be revitalized.
It's a picture of awe and wonder.

It's a picture of a God who is so big that we can't help but feel overwhelmed and full of wonder when we consider the creation.

The song puts it well,
"O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder,
consider all the worlds thy hands have made.."

"Then sings my soul...how great thou art."

That's what we're talking about.

Sometimes we can see more and be moved emotionally, when we get a higher vantage point.

Sometimes we need to look at things from 30,000 feet.

That's how our passage for today begins.

We see the big picture.

This is the Grand Canyon view of the gospel.

God was in Christ.

He is the heir of all things,
the creator of all worlds.

Worship begins with this view from upon high.

The church is called out of her doldrums and revitalized by this sense of the holy.

THE HEART OF GOD

But, there's more.

In Christ, God not only reveals majesty and glory.
God in Christ also reveals compassion and forgiveness.

Christ reveals the very heart of God.

When the prophets spoke,
we got a hint of what God was doing.
When Jesus spoke,
we got to see God "up close and personal".

This is important.

In the Nicene Creed we spell it out.

Jesus is
"God of God,

Light of Light,
 Very God of Very God
 ...being of one substance with the Father”.

The writer of Hebrews puts it this way,
 “He is the reflection of God’s glory
 and the exact imprint of God’s very being,
 and he sustains all things by his powerful word.”

What we believe about Jesus will determine how devoted we are to worship.

If we believe that God was in Christ,
 then nothing is more important than trying to hear Jesus’ words more clearly.

We will come to worship
 with open ears and open hearts
 because we believe Jesus is indeed the

“reflection of God’s glory”,
 “the exact imprint of God’s very being”,
 and that “all things” are sustained by his powerful word.

And what kind of God do we see in Jesus?
 What is the heart of God as revealed in Christ?

We see a God who loves us enough to give up everything for us.

We see a God who was even willing to die for us.
 According to our Scripture, like a priest Jesus made “purification for our sins.”

You’ll remember that in the Old Testament,
 priests sacrificed animals as an atonement for the sins of the people.

Well, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross brought forgiveness to God’s people once and for all.

The central fact of the gospel is this,

“In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.”

ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN

And then, as we say each week in the Creed,
Jesus “ascended into heaven”.

Our lesson for today puts it this way,
“He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as
much superior to angels
as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians we learn that in the incarnation, Jesus
humbled himself,
even to the point of death on the cross.

But, that was temporary.
The one who was humbled was given a name that was above every name.
(See Philippians 2:5-11)

Jesus is now exalted.
He ascended into heaven.

Why is that important?
And how does this apply to us... or does it?

This does have an important application to our life.
It is a word of hope and guidance for those
who struggle to be faithful in an imperfect world.

Heaven is not only a place to which Jesus goes.
It is also a goal for us.

A LITTLE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS

Our lectionary lesson skips forward a few verses
to the second chapter of Hebrews, verses 5-12.

Quoting Psalm 8 the preacher wonders at the fact that though human beings are “lower than the angels”, nevertheless human beings have a special kind of glory.

God has given us the responsibility to care for this wonderful world. God has crowned humanity with “glory and honor”.

But, we have not lived up to our end of the bargain.

We have not been good stewards of this world.
We are out of control, and the world in which we live often seems out of control.

This general sense of malaise and neglect is not limited to the church.
It’s a part of society as a whole.
All have sinned.

We’re not the people that we’re called to be.
Like those early congregations a general malaise has set in.

Sometimes, we’re not excited about worship.
Sometimes we neglect the things that are most important.

THE PIONEER OF FREEDOM

But, God in Christ has a cure.
In Jesus Christ we’re still forgiven.
And that grace has an impact on the trajectory of our lives and our world.

Jesus is not just the one who (as the Creed puts it)
comes to judge the living and the dead.

He is also the one who empowers us for gracious living today.

Our lesson refers to Jesus as the “pioneer” of our faith. Let’s think about what it means to be a pioneer.

In the city of Macon, Georgia, the Harriet Tubman African-American Museum honors the memory of the “Black Moses.”

She was the best-known conductor on the Underground Railroad.

A runaway slave herself, Tubman returned again and again to the South to rescue her family members and other slaves.

In her nineteen trips, she escorted more than three hundred slaves to freedom.

At great personal risk, she blazed a trail to freedom for many.

Her own journey made her a trustworthy and knowledgeable guide for others.

Our lesson for today portrays Jesus in similar terms.

He is a trailblazer who guides "many children" to freedom (2:10).

Jesus is the pioneer who charts the course through the difficult landscape in order that we may follow.

Like the people whom God delivered from slavery in Egypt, we too are on a journey through the wilderness.

We're not there yet,
but we know where we're going.

The hope of the Promised Land still calls us forward.

The promise gives us courage to persevere when times are tough.

The promise energizes us and revitalizes us when we neglect those things that are really important.

That's why Jesus' ascent into heaven is important.

It's our version of the Promised Land.

It's where we're headed.

And Jesus is our Moses leading us through the wilderness.

That's where the pioneer of our faith is leading us.

It's a hope based on the glory of Creation,
the sacrifice of the cross,

and the joy of undeserved grace.

We don't have to guess about heaven.
Heaven is reflected in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

God in Christ has said that we are part of the family.
That's heaven.

In Jesus, heaven has come to earth.
And this pioneer of our faith now shows us the way back home.

Jesus' sacrifice was not in vain.
He overcame hell and created a path to heaven.

He ascended into heaven.
And he calls us to follow him to that place of glory.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Today we once again partake of the Lord's Supper.

And for people who have forgotten what it means to worship, the sacrament is a powerful reminder.

What did Jesus say?
Do this in remembrance of me.

And what do we remember?
We remember the sacrifice of God on our behalf.
Body broken for us. Blood shed for us.

We remember.
And we also look forward.

We look forward to a heavenly banquet.

People from all over the world will gather to eat at this gracious table.

Someone has gone ahead of us to prepare that table.

He ascended into heaven.
He is the pioneer of our faith.

Today we remember and rejoice.
Today we worship.

Amen.