Stop the World! I Want to Get Off

Acts 1: 6-11

I owe this sermon to Janet Koehler. Well, her and the Holy Spirit. Janet had come into my office a few weeks ago, asking me about Ascension Day – which is this coming Thursday. It’s always forty days after Easter.

I told her that we Presbyterians don’t focus on Ascension Day all that much. Roman Catholics refer to it as a day of obligation and are supposed to go to mass on that day. But we Presbyterians seem to set it aside in favor of the more ‘important’ days on the liturgical calendar, like all of Advent, all of Lent, and Pentecost, which comes ten days after Ascension Day.

Well, Janet did some internet research and forwarded several items about Ascension Day from our Presbyterian Church, with a Scripture passage other than the one from Acts and words from our Book of Confessions (we are, after all a confessional church). Ministers do need to be reminded once in a while of what really is important. So do all of us. For in a world in which we feel as if we Christians are marginalized, in a world where far too many things declare their lordship, in a world where the real truth is deformed, destroyed, and dominated by lies, we need to remember that Jesus IS LORD! Always has been. Always will be.

And when He ascended into Heaven, it was not His way of saying: Stop the world, I want to get off. It was His way of saying: I am exalted; I am Lord; I am sovereign.

So, with thanks to Janet, and the Presbyterian Church website, hear these words. And think about what they mean as we too often are pressured by false lords and imitation systems.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews begins with these words: “Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom God also created the worlds. 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, having become as much superior to angels as the name He has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”

It’s not like God has offered us a spiritual smorgasbord from which we can pick and choose as it suits our fancy. Jesus is it. The one with the imprint and power and majesty of God on high. And because He is, He sits at the right hand of the Almighty God (as we say each week in the Apostles’ Creed). And because He is all that, what human forces can threaten to undo us? Does ISIS have more power? Can North Korea overwhelm Him? Are we under any one of countless thumbs? Absolutely not!

The Scots Confession of 1560 (those good old Scots who gave us John Knox and brought Presbyterianism to the New World) gives us these words: “We do not doubt but that the selfsame body which was born of a virgin, was crucified, dead, and buried, and which did rise again, did ascend into the heavens, for the accomplishment of all things, where in our name and for our comfort He has received all power in heaven and on earth, where He sits at the right hand of the Father, having received His kingdom, the only advocate and mediator for us. We believe that the same Lord Jesus shall visibly return for the Last Judgment as He was seen to ascend.”
For our comfort – did you notice those three words the Scots inserted? For our comfort. That our hopes might be fulfilled; that our possibilities might bear fruit; that the life of abundance Jesus promised will not be a pipe dream, but a guarantee. That when we look at the world around us with fear and trepidation – and we do – we know that Jesus has received His Kingdom, and His is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. No matter what other kings try to take over. We may be in this world, but because of Jesus, we don’t have to be of it. With the way the world works most days, who would want to be ‘of it?’

Now around the same time as the Scots prepared their confession, a catechism was developed in Heidelberg, Germany.

And in that catechism, there are three questions that focus on the Ascension of Jesus. And answers, of course.

How do you understand the words: “He ascended into Heaven?”

“That Christ was taken up from the earth into Heaven before the eyes of His disciples and remains there on our behalf until He comes again to judge the living and the dead.”

“What benefit do we receive from Christ’s ascension into Heaven?”

“First, that He is our advocate in the presence of His father in Heaven. Second that we have our flesh in Heaven as a sure pledge that He, as the Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself. Third, that He sends us His Spirit as a counter pledge by whose power we seek what is above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God, and not things that are on earth.”

“Why is there added: ‘And sits at the right hand of God?’”

“Because Christ ascended into Heaven so that He might manifest Himself there as the Head of His church, through whom the Father governs all things.”

He is there on our behalf. Assuring us that we will be there, too. Promising that we are not left here on this earth to deal with all of its pain and heartache and oppression and prejudice on our own. That we are free, as well, of the burden of our sins. And He’s got the power that we might have the power. To be victors not victims in a world system that is too often us versus them. Too often my way or the highway. Too often it’s my ball and if you don’t play by my rules, I’ll take it home. Too often might makes right. Well, Jesus has the right might, the only right might, that frees us from our own sin and from all the sins that dominate our world and our culture and that attempt – unsuccessfully – to imprison us.

Around the same time as these two confessions, the Swiss were preparing their own confession, two in fact. And in the second Helvetic (Latin for Swiss) Confession, we read these words: “We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ, in His same flesh, ascended above all visible heavens, into the highest heaven, that is, the dwelling place of God and the blessed ones, at the right hand of God the Father.”

I will tell you that very few things bother me more than when someone refers to God as ‘the man upstairs.’ It makes me think of some crazy uncle a family locked in the attic to keep him from getting in trouble.
Well, God is not a man, nor is He upstairs. Neither is Jesus Christ. He ascended above all visible heavens – beyond the atmosphere, the solar system, the Milky Way galaxy, even beyond the universe itself, to the highest heaven. And that’s more than ‘upstairs!’ It’s above and beyond everything we can imagine. But that doesn’t mean He is, as the song goes, ‘watching us from a distance.’ It means He has the entire universe in His purview, able to see all that goes on, aware of anything that takes place in any corner of the cosmos, and all so that He can help us. Each one of us – even though we inhabit a rather small planet, orbiting a rather small star in a rather distant corner of a rather small, comparably, galaxy. In other words, He loves us so much that nothing, not even a speck of cosmic dust, enters into our lives without Him knowing about it. And doing something about it – whatever that something is.

In 1647, an assembly of church leaders met at Westminster Abbey in England to develop a statement of faith to govern the spiritual life of the Puritans who were now in charge of England, Scotland, and Ireland (this was in the days just after Oliver Cromwell and his followers overthrew King Charles I). They produced a confession, called the Westminster Confession, and two catechisms known as the Shorter and the Larger Catechisms, all three of which have been a standard of Presbyterian doctrine for 370 years. If we are Presbyterians, these are our theological guidelines.

“On the third day Christ arose from the dead with the same body in which He suffered; with which also He ascended into Heaven, and there sits at the right hand of His Father, making intercession and shall return to judge humans and angels, at the end of the world.”

Pretty basic stuff, right? But one thing really stands out. Some years ago, I was visiting a member of our congregation at Children’s Hospital. As I came up to the entrance to the parking lot, I asked the attendant if there was free parking for clergy (there is, by the way, if you get the security department to validate your ticket). But on this day, the attendant, who was a Christian, decided to toy with me a bit. He told me there was free parking if I could answer a question. I was game, so he went on: “What,” he asked me, “is the only man-made thing in Heaven?” I must admit that I had to think for a minute, but then I told him: “The nail prints in Jesus’ hands.” Smiling, he waved me on to the parking lot.

Think about that – the body in which Jesus ascended into Heaven was the same body that was nailed to the cross, that was laid in a tomb, that left the grave clothes behind and moved that enormous stone out of the way so that He could prove that death is but a momentary way stop in the journey we call life. Not just His. But ours. His beaten and battered body is eternal that He might empathize with us in all the moments when we feel beaten and battered.

“In what way is Christ exalted?” So asks the Shorter Catechism. “Christ’s exaltation consists in His rising from the dead on the third day, in ascending up into Heaven, in sitting at the right hand of God the Father, and in coming to judge the world at the last day.”

Judgement Day. A lot of people – especially Christians – get a little nervous about that idea. “What if I haven’t done enough? Been enough? What if….?” And we can all fill in the blank with our own cosmic anxieties. Well, we will be judged. But so will the world. Jesus will judge the world – the world and its destructive systems, the world and its myriad of idols, the world and all the ways it dehumanizes and oppresses and represses the people Jesus died for. The world will be judged for every way in which it distorted the perfect creation of God.
You know, every time Jesus refers to Satan, the devil, Lucifer, Beelzebub, or any other name you want to put on the eternal liar, He calls him the prince of this world. Satan isn’t in Hell; he wants no parts of Hell. That’s where he ends up, in eternal damnation at the end of the Book of the Revelation. What he wants is to make this world a living hell, and he is sure succeeding. Listen to the news at any given hour.

When Jesus returns to judge the world, He’s judging Satan and all the ways he has tried to turn the creation God called well into something decidedly not good.

Yes, we are at fault, too, for the way the world operates. We can’t place all the blame at Satan’s evil feet. But the more we bind the power of Satan in our own lives, the more we refuse to listen to his lies, the more we refuse to accept his distortions, the more reason we will have to rejoice when Jesus does come to judge the world. And it will be judged. And while God is merciful, and while Jesus is all grace, He is NOT going to put up with the way the world, and its prince, operates.

Which all leads to a summation of Christ’ life and work as described in the Larger Catechism:

“How was Christ exalted in His ascension?”

“Christ was exalted in His ascension, in that having, after His resurrection, often appeared to, and conversed with His apostles, speaking to them of the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God, and giving them commission to preach the Gospel to all nations: forty days after His resurrection, He, in our nature, and as our head, triumphing over enemies, visibly went up into the highest heavens, there to receive gifts for humanity, to raise up our affections there, and to prepare a place for us, where He Himself is, and shall continue until His second coming at the end of the world.”

For us. With us. Beside us. Loving us.Triumphing because of us. Preparing a place where we will be (as He said in John 14: I am going there on purpose to prepare a place for you so that where I am you may be also.)

Of course, we are still here. Still here in this world that offers us so many problems, so many distortions, so many false lords, so many trials.

So many enemies. All of which, glory be to God, He triumphs over. And perhaps we can say that His ascension into Heaven is for that one purpose over all other purposes – His triumph for us.

He is Lord! No human government. No human society. No human army. No human institution. Not ISIS or Syria or North Korea. Not drugs or alcohol. Not oppression or hatred or any of the isms that exist in our world.

The world doesn’t want Him to be Lord. He threatens the domination of the ways of the world. But He is Lord!

And as our Lord, we are free of anything that would imprison us. Even our own attitudes.

And so let us close this message with a new verse to be added to the familiar hymn He is Lord – which is on an insert in your bulletin. And in place of the Apostles’ Creed, we will use two affirmations – also on an insert in your bulletin, one from a contemporary Declaration of Faith, and one from our Book of Order – which is also a reminder that as people under His Lordship, we, as a church, have work to do,
to continue His work, to preach the Gospel to all nations, and make disciples of all we meet. Someday, our world will stop and we will get off. In the meantime, we have work to do!

Sing: He is Lord.....
Worship

May 21, 2017

Call: Litany

Assurance: Litany

Children’s Message: Empty box, but it is a reminder that every day God will fill it up. Just keep your hands open

Prayer: Loving God, each day something new and wonderful comes to us from you. Each day, we have blessings beyond counting; hopes overflowing, and love without limits, all from Your hands. So help us be receptive to all You have for us. Help us to be open to use all You have for us. Help us to be ready to share all You have for us with the world around us. Help us to trust You, obey You, follow you, live with and for You, and be Your servants in all we say and do. Needs, etc.

LORD’S PRAYER