

The Ascension of Our Lord.
May 20, 2009
Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Pastor T. Clint Stark
St. John's LC-MS
Topeka, KS

The snuffing out of the Paschal candle today gives us a visible symbol of Christ's Ascension. According St. Luke in His Gospel and the book of Acts, Jesus was "taken up" to heaven and is now seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. The ascension of Jesus fulfilled yet another promise written in the Law of Moses, Prophets, and Psalms. Indeed, much like the incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection – the ascension too came to pass as was promised of old. But what should we learn from Jesus' ascension into heaven where He is now seated and the right hand of God the Father Almighty and from thence He will come to judge the quick and the dead?

We should learn that the Kingdom of Heaven isn't up, up, and away somewhere really high. It says that Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took Him out of their sight. If you want to try to think of heaven, think more in terms of dimensions than a geographical place really high above the stars. We should also learn from the ascension that Jesus is Lord. He is King. Christ's seat at the right hand of the Father isn't just some seat of honor far away some place where He is just waiting to come back on the Last Day and is uninvolved in His creation. It is a seat of power where He rules from right now, and from there He will come visibly on Judgment day. Since He has won the victory by His life, death, and resurrection – He now sits at His rightful seat. His enemies are His footstool and He is in control.

And don't we love to hear about how our Lord is in control and that He is the victor? Don't we love to hear about the end of Christ's humiliation and the beginning of His exultation? Isn't easier to worship God when we celebrate His victorious death, His victory lap in the descent into Hell, His glorious triumph from the grave on Easter morn, and His ascension to rule? Isn't it comforting to know that Christ is sitting on His throne, at the right of God, and has won the victory over sin, death, and the devil?

But here is the rub for our fallen minds: When thinking about Christ ascending and taking His seat and knowing the He is in complete power - there is one question that continually creeps into our minds, especially in the midst of intense suffering - Why does the GodMan, Who is good and omnipotent, allow such suffering in the world? Why doesn't He step in and easily heal our illnesses? Why doesn't He do something in that horrible situation that no one can see that any good will come from? Have you had those thoughts? In the hospital room have you thought that God should be more involved or more merciful than what you see? Do you think at times that you know more than the all-knowing Lord? Do you think that your ways are more gracious than His ways? Have you at times concluded that God's promise to never leave you nor forsake you is false? Do you think that the presence of God has been extinguished forever? Do you live like He did ascend to a faraway place that your prayers cannot reach?

This question of theodicy has spurred philosophers, theologians, and laypeople alike to come up with answers to justify the behavior of God. But there is a right way and wrong ways to answer this question. There are many wrong ways to answer this question, as philosophers and theologians have demonstrated, but I will only mention two. One wrong way is to understand God by only the things you can see and define as good by your own standards. This is what is called the *theology of glory*. Theologians of glory define "good" by what they can see and comprehend as such. They call a good thing bad and a bad thing good. For example they

conclude that suffering is always bad. But is that the proper teaching of Scripture? The second wrong way to answer this question is to deny original sin. You have heard the phrase, “Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?” Well, there are no good people. As sinners, who have rebelled and who want to be as god, we all deserve God’s temporal and eternal punishment.

So, here is the right way to answer this question. The right way is to have your mind opened by hearing the full revelation of Scripture. God defines what is good and bad for us. God could have rightly punished us now and forever. But instead, from the Genesis, He willed to save us. Christ humiliation that began at His incarnation and ended at His death is not bad while only His exultation and glorification are good. To use some modern day slang, “It is all good.” It is good for us that Jesus entered the womb to redeem the womb. It is good for us that Jesus lived His life keeping the 10 commandments in our place. It is good that Jesus never questioned the wisdom and mercy of God and therefore sinned like we do. It is good for us that He fulfilled the psalm and was completely forsaken by God on the cross and suffered the hell that we deserve. It is good that Jesus took on Himself all of your sins and the sins of the world - He took upon Himself the weight our filthy thoughts, words, and deeds and He received the full wrath of God. He was completely forsaken. Unlike our situations where we only feel abandoned by God, Jesus really was forsaken by Him. What a good deal for us! Jesus was forsaken for all our sins and so we aren’t. This *theology of the cross* calls a think what it is. Christ vicarious satisfaction was indeed good. His suffering was good. It was good enough to restore peace between the fallen world and the Father. Now we know that God will never forsake us for our sins. It is through the good suffering and death of Jesus that we rightly view our suffering.

Since we are covered with Christ in Baptism we follow in His footsteps. We live a life of humiliation and suffering before our glory on the Last Day. Yet, we suffer not to pay for our sins – Jesus took that role- but we suffer for our good. God works all things for our good. He even, like with Job, makes evil serve our good. Your tears that you have now will be wiped away when He returns visibly on the Last Day. Then you will see that He never left nor forsook you and always did what was good for you.

Christians you are baptized into Christ. In Christ there are no bad things. He is seated in power and He is always working things for your good. If you want to know how God feels about you, don’t look at your life circumstances, look to Christ crucified. Look to the Christ who actually comes to you in Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, and Holy Absolution - giving you forgiveness of sins, life everlasting, and a peace beyond understanding.

Christ is not far away somewhere. His presence, as demonstrated by the paschal candle today, is no longer a visible presence like it was for the 40 days post resurrection, but He is with us to the end of the age. As we will celebrate next Sunday at Pentecost, Christ sent us His Spirit. Christ’s Spirit in Word and Sacrament will give us the strength to endure the suffering and death in this world unto the life without end in the world to come. Amen.