

## SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Ascension Sunday

May 24, 2020

### Psalm 47:1–9

- 1 Clap your hands, all peoples!  
Shout to God with loud songs of joy!
- 2 For the Lord, the Most High, is to be feared,  
a great king over all the earth.
- 3 He subdued peoples under us,  
and nations under our feet.
- 4 He chose our heritage for us,  
the pride of Jacob whom he loves. *Selah*
- 5 God has gone up with a shout,  
the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.
- 6 Sing praises to God, sing praises!  
Sing praises to our King, sing praises!
- 7 For God is the King of all the earth;  
sing praises with a psalm!<sup>1</sup>
- 8 God reigns over the nations;  
God sits on his holy throne.
- 9 The princes of the peoples gather  
as the people of the God of Abraham.  
For the shields of the earth belong to God;  
he is highly exalted!

### 1<sup>st</sup> Scripture Reading

#### Acts 1:1–11

##### The Promise of the Holy Spirit

1 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy spirit not many days from now.”

##### The Ascension

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” 9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their

sight. **10** And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, **11** and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

## **Epistle Reading**

### **Ephesians 1:15–23**

#### **Thanksgiving and Prayer**

**15** For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, **16** I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, **17** that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, **18** having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, **19** and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might **20** that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, **21** far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. **22** And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, **23** which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

## **Gospel Reading**

### **Luke 24:44–53**

**44** Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” **45** Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, **46** and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, **47** and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. **48** You are witnesses of these things. **49** And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

#### **The Ascension**

**50** And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. **51** While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. **52** And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, **53** and were continually in the temple blessing God.

## **Sermon 21 – Ascension Day**

### **“Care to Power”**

#### **Ephesians 1:15-23**

Dear friends,

Our epistle lesson is from Ephesians, and he does something that he occasionally does, which is that he uses a lot of words to say something you could say in a quick sentence. I have the same problem

so I'm sympathetic to this, but more to the point there is a reason why Paul can't seem to wrap this thought up. Christ's power is our power. Christ's destiny is our destiny. Fair enough, but what does it mean? That is why Paul has to describe this in so many words. What is Christ's power, and what does that mean for us? What does that give us? These are the questions to answer.

Remember Ephesus. Always remember Ephesus. Ephesus is a center of both trade and idolatry, one of the crossroads of the Roman empire. This was a coastal city back then, erosion has kinda put it a couple miles away from the coast in our time, but back then this was a place where ships docked and camels got loaded up for the overland trip through Turkey. Ephesus was Turkey's throat, it swallowed all the goods and people that came east from the Mediterranean. It was famous as a place of idol worship and idol manufacturing. When you have a religion that allows you to smelt statues out of precious metals and sell those statues, you have the potential for some real money, and Ephesus had real money. There is a Christian church here, struggling to do the right thing in the face of both the money and the idolatry.

Here is what Paul says to these struggling Christians. **“15 For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, 16 I do not cease to give thanks for you.”** This is the easy part, a simple display of human gratitude. Churches can be gifts to their spiritual leaders, I should know, you all have been a tremendous gift to me these four years, and I thank God for you now more than ever. Paul did the same. He spent a fair amount of time with the Ephesians, so he is grateful that they're holding to the truth.

Paul goes on. **“Remembering you in my prayers, 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.”** Paul is specific in his prayers. He asks God to send His Holy Spirit. Not to make them happy, not to have them do miracles, not to have them speak in tongues, but to deepen their understanding of what God has

revealed to them. Paul asks for the Holy Spirit to increase their knowledge of Jesus, their appreciation of Jesus. This is no accident, this is in fact exactly what the Holy Spirit is there to do. Remember your Catechism. The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with him in the one true faith. That is the Holy Spirit's job. Not mindless miracles, not babbling, not healing or benefit for our lives. So many have forgotten that the work of the Spirit is to show us the crucified Jesus, to show us Jesus risen from the dead. The Holy Spirit is a tape on repeat, He has no other job. He is there to deepen our faith, to strengthen it, and He does this by reminding us what our faith is founded on.

If that's true, and it is, why do we talk about anything else? Why does Paul keep talking if that is all he has to say? If its nothing more than Jesus and Him crucified and raised, why don't we all just walk around like nutjobs muttering that to ourselves over and over? All Christianity is connected to Christ and His resurrection, it is the substance of everything we talk about, but not the topic. What does that mean? We talk about Baptism because it gives us Jesus. We talk about the Lord's Supper because it gives us Jesus. We talk about sin because we are reminded *why* we need Jesus. This extends to our earthly struggles too. We talk about plague because it comes from sin, and because it may kill us, which reminds us that we need eternal life to survive our death. We talk about societal issues, politics, what is right and what is wrong, because we belong to Jesus and want to draw other people to Jesus. Jesus is at the center of everything we believe as a church, but like the spoke at the center of a wheel, He is connected to it all. He's connected to you the same way.

Paul wants his people to understand this, and that is his prayer. He continues with that prayer: **“18 Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the**

**immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe...**" Paul is answering the question here, what is it all about? He wants their hearts enlightened, but to what? He wants them to have the hope that Jesus called us to. What is that hope? The hope for better. A better world. A better you. A better future for our children. It all sounds triumphalistic and vague, but Jesus promises us exactly that, He just doesn't promise us that here and now. That hope will be fully seen, fully understood, and fully realized when Jesus comes, what we do here is wait and tap into that hope. In the face of this kind of life, hope has to be renewed, it has to be recharged. Hope is a battery, and we have seen that battery run out of too many people that we know and love. Paul wants the Ephesians to recharge their hope by knowing Jesus better. Everything after that is just him using different words for the same concept. Our inheritance is that heaven, that hope, that Savior. God's power toward us is the same. God isn't just powerful to be powerful, God is powerful and uses that power to save us and guide us back to that salvation. Both are important, and I hardly need to tell you this. Far too many of our children have wandered away, as children do, our families have abandoned that hope, and we echo Paul's prayer, trusting in His words. But we trust because we know that our chief shepherd is darn good at reeling in stray sheep, kicking and screaming in many cases. We know because we have seen him draw us back, because we know He promises to come for His lost sheep, not to forsake them. That is God's strength, that is God's power, and that graciousness is God's immeasurable greatness for us. His willingness to beat the bushes for His sheep and bring them home.

**"According to the working of his great might 20 that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."**

The working of God's great might is dying and rising, which misses my definitions of greatness by a country mile, but that just enhances the pleasure of it. God's greatness is dying and then undying. What a delicious challenge to how we see the world, and I urge you to see it that way. Through that act,

Paul reminds us, Christ was raised to the highest pinnacle of power. Name above every name. The King of Kings. The Lord of Lords. If you're like me, grand visions are filling your minds right now. Shining Christian kingdoms beaming with purity and righteousness. Nations following Jesus and sharing His glory. But that's not what Paul says. Paul says the church is Christ's head over all things. The church. Us.

I cannot imagine a less likely candidate. The church is many things, dear Christian friends, but it is not powerful. It does not shine here on this Earth. It doesn't inspire glorious images of victory, purity, or triumph. What is the church? It is a ragamuffin sackful of sinners who can't help but break God's commands, who can't help but trample all over their neighbors. The church is inefficient, often hostile, often way too prideful, it has accrued every blemish possible throughout its thousands of years of history. We aren't the rulers of this Earth, the big cheeses of the world. We aren't the clean sheep, we're the dirty ones that wandered through three thornbushes and rolled around in cow poop because it smelled good. But this is how Christ shows His power, and this is how Christ rules. Not through displays of piety. Not through earthly glory or earthly power. Christ rules through saving us, He rules through adopting us dirty little orphans into His family. My power is made perfect in weakness, Christ says to Paul, and He says the same to you. We're just Bethel Lutheran church in Lander WY. We can't even have a darn church service. How can Christ rule through a church that doesn't even have services? Christ doesn't. He rules through Christian faith, and He rules you through your faith, and that means He leads you back to Him. That means He takes care of you. That means He doesn't reject your offerings to Him, your sins and your worries and your fears. He isn't shaking His finger at you because you're not being the good sheep, He's giving you His promise to make you a good sheep. Christ may rule above all authority and power, but He gives that same power to you. What do we do with it? We confess we're not worthy of it, and in that is our power.

Doesn't seem powerful to admit how helpless we are, but that is exactly the power that God

gives us. The power to be powerless and in His care. He does care. We'd like a different kind of care.

We'd like a different kind of power. God doesn't do that. Thanks be to God He doesn't.

Amen.