

If you visit Westminster Abbey in London, you can see King Edward's Chair on which the kings and queens of England have been enthroned for eight hundred years. And if you went up the steps and sat on that throne it wouldn't automatically mean you'd have the royal job. (You'd just as likely get thrown out of the Abbey!) Going up and sitting on that throne doesn't make you a monarch; and you can become monarch of England without actually sitting in that old chair. The point is that the ascension to a throne is not defined by a change in physical elevation, but rather a change in legal status and relationship.

It's the same for Jesus. If Jesus merely wanted to return to the Father, he could have just vanished. There were other times in which he vanished immediately out of sight, as with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. But instead, at the ascension, Jesus rises up into the clouds and disappears into Heaven. Why? Because much like a coronation, the elevation in space symbolized his elevation in authority and relationship. Jesus traced out physically what was happening cosmically and spiritually. At that moment, Jesus took his place as the new king and head of the human race.

When the eternal Son of God "became flesh," he became fully human. Besides being vulnerable, subject to injury and death, he had the limitations of being confined to one place in time and space. But at the ascension, Jesus leaves the space-time continuum and passes into the presence of the Father. Any time-space limitation to his work passes away. Jesus is still doing all the things he did before, but now, after the ascension, he's doing them with access to anyone, in any place, and all at once. The ascension doesn't mean a loss of intimacy, leadership, or advocacy; it means the magnification and infinite availability of all of these things.

In both Matthew 26:6 and Acts 2:33-36 the Bible says that in the ascension Jesus went "to the right hand of the Father." In ancient times, whoever sat at the right hand of the throne was something akin to the king's prime minister, the one who executed the king's authority and rule by making the laws and policies. At the ascension Jesus begins his reign. He has always been a king, acknowledged as such from his birth in the manger, but now he begins his job as heavenly head of the church, ruling over all other rulers and powers, and directing a cosmic transformation that will yield a new heaven and a new earth.

Practically speaking, this has a major impact on our everyday lives. First, the ascended Jesus is available for loving communication and fellowship. Whereas before, Jesus interacted with people as he encountered them, now he is available to each one of us, at any time, in any

place. The Apostle Paul speaks of the love of Jesus being "poured into our hearts" (Romans 5:5) as one of the marks of being a Christian. And, Paul says, it is because Jesus "is at the right hand of God, and is also interceding for us" (Romans 8:34) that nothing can separate us from his love. Because Jesus is ascended we can know his presence –speaking to us, teaching us, and pouring his love into our hearts – through the Holy Spirit. His presence is not just for a select group of mystically attuned or morally spotless saints: Jesus passed into Heaven, out of the space-time continuum, so that he can come into everyone's life as a living, bright reality of love and personal connection.

But the ascended Jesus is not only sublimely personal, he is also supremely powerful. He controls all things for the church, and therefore, we can face the world with peace in our heart. Ephesians 1, speaking of God, reads: *He raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and...placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body.* Jesus, the one who died for you, is now at God's right hand directing everything for the benefit of the church. Jesus went to Heaven to get things done for our good.

The other classic text on this attribute is Romans 8:28: *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* The key word in there is "together." It keeps us out of the realm of greeting-card-style wishing. Paul is not saying that every bad thing that happens to us is actually good, or that every cloud has a silver lining. No, he is saying that from the vantage point of eternity, looking back on all of history, it will be clear that even the genuinely bad things that happened were incorporated and used by God so that in the end they accomplished the opposite of what they intended. We will see that evil things ultimately brought about more glory and good than if they had not happened. To say that Jesus is making *everything* work together for your good means that not only are the bad things part of his plan, but also the little things.

One small illustration: as a seminary student, I had to serve an internship in a church. I applied to dozens of churches, only to be rejected by all of them. Not sure what else to do, I decided to sign up for summer language school. As I walked to the administration building, the director of the field education office stopped me and asked if I had a summer internship yet. When I said I did not, he asked if I would be interested in serving a church in Scotland whose application for an intern had been delayed, and which had just arrived on his desk that morning. I jumped at the chance, not knowing my life would be forever changed. You see, I

entered seminary with the intention of pursuing a Ph.D. and teaching church history at a college or university. Parish ministry was not even on my radar. But after spending four months in Scotland, living and working with that congregation, I was hooked! And I’ve never regretted it. My life changed because two dozen rejection letters left me free to accept God’s call in a new direction. Out of those rejection letters, God worked something good. God’s plans are intricate beyond our understanding, and Jesus is supremely powerful in working all things together according to God’s plan.

Finally, the ascended Jesus guarantees that we can know we are forgiven, accepted, and delighted in by God. Jesus represents us before the throne of God. Whoever is at the right hand of the throne has power to execute the royal will, but that person also has access to the royal ear. And so, if a person or a matter comes before the judgment seat of God, there is no stronger advocate possible than the one who is at the right hand, Jesus.

So, the ascension matters. Jesus is now (from heaven) “actively engaged in the continuation of his mediatorial work”¹ all across the globe. He is still our prophet, teaching and instructing us with his Word, but now he does it everywhere through the Holy Spirit. He is still our King, but now he guides and directs his entire church through the spiritual gifts he gives his people (Eph. 4:4-6) – gifts of leadership, service, mercy, teaching, administration, and giving. And he is still our Priest, counseling and supporting us, but now representing us before the very face of the Father.

This sermon is inspired by Timothy Keller. *Encounters with Jesus*. (New York, Dutton, 2013), 171-188.

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1941), 350

The Right Hand of the Father

Sunday, July 6, 2014

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Acts 1:6-11

Here we come to the very last act of Jesus on earth – his ascension to the right hand of the Father in heaven. This was a puzzling thing to the disciples who witnessed it – they’d seen Jesus do many miraculous things before, but this was something new – and they stood staring, dumbfounded as he rose. And it’s puzzling for us, too, because we’re left asking not “what happened?” but rather “why did it happen?” and “what difference does it really make for the state of our souls and how we live?

Actually, the ascension makes an enormous difference because it marks Jesus’ enthronement, ushering in a new relationship with us and with the whole world. The ascension is not simply Jesus leaving the surface of the earth. It’s not so much about him going into the heavens, but rather into Heaven. The Bible does talk about “the heavens,” as when Psalm 19 speaks of “the heavens [sun, moon, and stars] telling the glory of God”. But Jesus didn’t go into the heavens of the stars and planets: he went into Heaven with a capital H, something far more profound than an orbit in outer space.

OK, let’s start with the word “ascend.” We know “to ascend” means to go upward, like an aircraft, but we are usually quite careful when we apply the word to people. For example, we could say “he ascended the ladder,” but we don’t usually use so grand a word to describe such an ordinary thing. We would say “he climbed the ladder.” But we would certainly use the word “ascend” to describe a coronation. When someone becomes a king or a queen, there is a ceremony in which authority is officially transferred. The person literally walks up onto a podium and then goes up some steps and sits on a throne, a higher chair. And we say, “She ascended to the throne.” The word “ascended” gets across more than a change of elevation: there is a new relationship established, and new powers and privileges are granted.