

**Altavista Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“The Apostles’ Creed,  
Part VI”  
Isaiah 41:8-13  
Ephesians 4:9-16**

**Seventh Sunday of Easter  
May 13, 2018**

**Isaiah 41:8-13**

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”; fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Behold, all who are incensed against you shall be put to shame and confounded; those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish. You shall seek those who contend with you, but you shall not find them; those who war against you shall be as nothing at all. For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, “Fear not, I am the one who helps you.”

**Ephesians 4:9-16**

In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things. And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature adulthood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

**“The Apostles’ Creed, Part VI”**

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We are continuing in our series on the Apostles’ Creed and we are almost through with the section on Jesus Christ. Last week we discussed what it means to believe Jesus descended into hell, and the third day he rose again from the dead. Not only do we believe that Jesus received the full punishment of sin and resurrected from the grave, today we’ll see what it means to believe *he ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty*.

We all know how important Easter and Christmas are. These two high holy days see the biggest crowds in churches across the world. And with good reason, too. Christmas represents the incarnation of Christ, Emmanuel, “God with us.” And this Sunday happens to be the last Sunday in the season of Easter. Easter represents the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the lamb that was slain for the sins of the world. But there are two more holy days that are vastly underestimated in the contemporary Protestant community. Ascension and Pentecost are both

celebrated forty and fifty days after Easter, respectively. In fact, we find ourselves today located right between both of those days, for Ascension was Thursday and Pentecost is next Sunday. Both of these holy days celebrate the results of Jesus' ascent into heaven.

When we confess that Jesus *ascended into heaven*, we are asserting that the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are effective for us. The reason for this effectiveness comes through the understanding of the Kingdom of God. One of the primary threads that is woven through both the Old and New Testaments is this theme of God's kingdom. From the kingdom that was established in Israel, to the invisible kingdom of the Babylonian exile, to the renewed kingdom and the coming kingdom of Christ. The zenith of this thread is at the coronation of Jesus as the Messiah-King. The Ascension is that moment of coronation and without it Jesus cannot be King. In John 16, when speaking of his forthcoming departure, Jesus says the Holy Spirit will convict the world "because the *ruler of this world* has been judged." Jesus is here alluding to his position as "ruler of the world" and that the Holy Spirit will make that known first to the hearts of believers, and then, in the fullness of time, to all people.

Notice what Jesus says about his Ascension. In that same chapter sixteen of John, Jesus says, "Now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for *if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you*. But if I go, I will send him to you." Jesus is encouraging his disciples. While he will no longer be with the church, he will not leave them alone. He promises to send the *paraklet*. That's not a bird, but the Greek word that is often translated as "Helper" or "Comforter" or "Advocate." This *paraklet* is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. When Jesus says he will send the Spirit, he is promising to send one of the oldest creative forces in the universe. In fact, at the beginning of the Bible we hear at the moments before creation, God's Spirit hovered over the deep void. Moreover, it was the Spirit who strengthened the judges, sanctified the priests, anointed the kings, and inspired the prophets. This same Spirit is promised to us.

So, one of the major benefits of the Ascension, as Jesus himself states, is the sending of the Holy Ghost. This was something that even Moses desired, for in Numbers 11:29 he says, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them!" Moses' wish is that God would not only enlarge the company of those who were endowed with the Spirit, but also that the company would include the sum total of all the people of God. Moses wished that the empowering of the Spirit would not be limited to a few isolated individuals. But for much of Israel's history, this was the case. Moses' wish wouldn't be fulfilled until Pentecost, ten days after the Ascension and the day the Holy Spirit descended. On that day, called by many the birthday of the Church, the whole body of Christ was empowered through the Spirit to fulfill the Great Commission. We'll talk more about the Holy Ghost when we reach that section of the creed. For now, it's enough to know that the same Spirit that empowered Jesus for his ministry is now sent by Jesus to his people. This was impossible before the Ascension.

An interesting, yet nonetheless important, side note is that by the time of Jesus' ascension, the disciples were no longer sad. Initially they were bummed to hear that Jesus would leave them and even tried to persuade Jesus into taking them with him. The disciples grew to understand the importance and necessity of the Ascension, for on that day they rejoiced in their temporal separation from Christ. How odd is that? Who would want to be separated from Jesus? It's not unusual to muse on the idea of Jesus walking here among us today. It's a common motif in literature and film, including the TV show *Family Guy*. While it would be neat to see Jesus face-to-face today; the truth is we are indeed better off without him here. What makes this separation bittersweet is mentioned by Jesus and asserted in the following phrase of the Creed. Jesus not only ascended into heaven, but also *sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty*.

This is the second major benefit of the Ascension. Jesus ascended to a specific place and for a specific purpose. The Ascension of Jesus is to the right hand of God the Father where he is exalted to the level of Cosmic King and Great High Priest. In his bodily resurrection and ascension, Jesus takes on the role that God originally instituted for Adam at creation. Adam was to be God's steward and ruler of the world, but through his fall from grace into sin, God's plan was for the second Adam — Jesus Christ, the Messiah — to hold that honor. As King, Jesus reigns as Lord and Judge over all of creation and stands as the head of the church. Now, next week we'll talk about his kingly role as judge. For now, as King, Jesus is the acting hands and feet of God, so to speak. Jesus is placed in a position of authority over the world, which means we must either obey and follow his rule, or we live in open rebellion to it. Because of his cosmic kingdom, there is no neutral territory.

The Church benefits from his kingship because we have that authority both as our head in guidance and at our backs in support. The children of God have the witness and teachings of Jesus to direct our path. He gives to us commands that dictate our relationship with God and with our neighbors. As King, we owe him our allegiance and as our Savior, we owe him our very lives. As Head, we obey his instructions to piety, charity, and love. Furthermore, as our eternal Monarch, we know that he will bolster us. I like to use three images from architecture to illustrate how Jesus supports us. First, he is our foundation. Without a firm foundation, no structure would be able to stand. Second, he is our cornerstone. The cornerstone is important because all the other stones and bricks will reference off of it. This means the cornerstone determines the position of the entire structure. Third, he is our keystone. The keystone is the final stone placed at the apex of an arch or a vault. It locks all the stones together and keeps them from tumbling inward. If Jesus is your foundation, cornerstone, and keystone, then you can stand firm against all odds.

Not only is Jesus seated as Cosmic King, but also as Great High Priest. In the Old Testament, only the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple, and that only once a year. As Great High Priest, Jesus takes up residence in the ultimate Holy of Holies and involves himself in the perpetual ministry of intercession. In the Old Testament, the priest would offer intercessory prayers and sacrifices on behalf of the Israelites. He had to do it repeatedly because the people were always sinning, even the priest himself. Christ's intercession, on the other hand,

is perfect and on behalf of the whole church. There's no longer a need for ritual sacrifices because his sacrifice was sufficient. I find this comforting. On a human level, people enjoy being prayed for. There's something comforting and unifying in praying for one another. Now magnify that consolation to a cosmic level, and that's the feeling I have when I see Jesus interceding on my behalf and on your behalf.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews does a great job summarizing this consolation. In speaking of Jesus' role as Great High Priest, the Apostle says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Jesus, Emmanuel, "God with us," he knows what it's like to be human. He knows the emotions you feel. He knows the baggage you carry. He knows the stress of life. Our Great High Priest is not some absent, self-absorbed person. He is one who shares in our suffering and we share in the benefits of his suffering. These are comforting words from the Apostle, for we have as our Intercessor, someone who knows us. Jesus knows you. Jesus knows me. And he's standing before the Father praying for us, each of us by name. In fact, Jesus' high priestly prayer is recorded in John 17:6-19. I strongly encourage each of you to read that prayer, but read it personally. Imagine Christ praying that prayer for you. Whenever Jesus says "them," "they," "your people," substitute your name there. That's the prayer Jesus offers when seated at the right hand of the Father.

While Jesus is in heaven providing intercession, he did not leave the church unmanned, so to speak. The Apostle Paul, who never followed Jesus in his earthly ministry, encourages the church in Ephesus concerning their earthly ministry in light of Jesus' Ascension. Not only is Christ the Head of the Church as King and Priest, he also chartered undershepherds "to equip the saints for the work of ministry." Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are just a sampling of leadership roles established by the Ascension. The whole Body of Christ, with all its different members, bears witness to the Ascension and the glory of Christ. And this body bears that witness successfully through "speaking the truth in love." Truth, God's truth especially, has power. It has the power to convict and to bind. That power comes from Jesus' position at the right hand of the Father. But if we, those who are speaking his truth, do not speak it in love, then we cause more harm than good. Going back to the architectural metaphor, our love for God and love for neighbor are the framework of the house built in Jesus Christ. All of this is encouraged within the Body by the church's leadership and ministry.

Later in our service we will pay witness to this mystery of faith and the building up of the Body of Christ when we baptize baby Ivey. In baptism, we believe we share in Jesus' death and resurrection. The waters of birth and rebirth are symbolized by the font. But Jesus' Ascension is also symbolized in this Sacrament. Jesus, as Cosmic King, knows who his subjects are. No one in his kingdom is unknown to him. This is one reason we baptize infants. Jesus knows the subjects of his realm, and baptism symbolizes that eternal foreknowledge. As Great High Priest, again, Jesus intercedes for people by name. He doesn't stand before God and pray for some unknown person who may or may not be his follower. No, Jesus knows Ivey, he knew her from the

moment she was conceived and even before. Jesus is at the right hand of the Father right now, praying the high priestly prayer with Ivey's name in it. Does this mean she requires no action from her part? Of course not. This infant, though she cannot at this moment confess her faith, our faith, the faith of the church, believes that she is known by God. And that is only possible through Jesus' ascent to the right hand of the father. Our role, as her brothers and sisters in the faith, is to teach and encourage her until she can confess her faith.

Let us pray. Most Holy God, you sent your Son, our Savior, into this world, incarnate by the Holy Spirit, to be crucified, dead, and resurrected. We give you all thanks and praise for this gift of salvation. You solidified this gift when our risen Savior ascended to your throne. The seat at the right hand of God is no longer vacant. The coronation of the King of the kingdom of God is no longer a vague hope of the future. The King reigns over us. The King reigns for us. Now and forevermore. May the knowledge of our King and High Priest empower us, embolden us, and encourage us to be his disciples in this place and to the end of time. May we bear witness to the historic faith of the church, for Ivey's sake and for the sake of the world. We pray this in the name of our Lord of lords, Jesus Christ. Amen.