

“Hopeful Thinking” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Ascension Day May 26, 2022

- I. **Ephesians 1:17-18** – As St. Paul prays, “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”
- II. **Ascension Day... the day we don't really know what to do with...**
 - a. I only say that because Ascension Day always falls on a Thursday, and usually gets lost in the bigger, Sunday celebrations of Easter and Pentecost.
 - b. However, as we extinguished the Paschal candle, it reminds us that a transition took place... a next step in God's plan of salvation... and the hope we have stored up in heaven (Colossians 1:5).
 - c. You see, Jesus and His mission to save the human race from sin, death and the devil needed a “handoff” if you will... to the Holy Spirit, and to the people who were given the gift of faith.
 - d. Now, Jesus ascended, or as I say with the children, He went up...
 - i. Yes, in a literal rising up into the sky, Jesus did ascend.
 - ii. However, the Ascension is better understood as Jesus taking His place...as a coronation for the King of kings.
 - iii. When a king is coronated, we don't usually think of him in terms of sitting on a throne as much as taking a position of authority or, ascending to the throne – so Jesus is now “ascended” or has taken His rightful place with the Father.
 - e. So, what does Ascension Day mean for us Christians in the trenches?
 - i. The world is a battlefield, right?
 - ii. Look around a little bit and you might struggle to find any bright places... anything good to talk about.
 - iii. In a world without hope, Ascension Day sets our minds on a very bright future.
- III. **St. Paul writes to the church he helped start in the city of Ephesus.**
 - a. Ephesus was not full of Jewish people and tradition but was influenced much more by Greek thought and philosophy.
 - i. These people were part of the Gentiles, or those outside the Jewish faith – who often had a very different world view.
 1. For one thing, the Gentiles of that day would have scoffed at the idea of hope.
 2. They saw time and history as a big cycle that just spun around with no purpose or end, and many believed it was better to not have been born at all... what's the point?

- ii. The Jews brought a different vision for the future, they believed a Messiah was coming... and Christians believed He had already come but was coming again on the Last Day.
 - b. Paul reminds the Ephesians, and us, that a Triune God is at work...
 - i. Vs 17 says, 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.
 - ii. Not only has God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit worked to save us in the past, but also in the present... AND in the future as well.
 - c. As Jesus was crowned King of kings, the Holy Spirit would come to enlighten our hearts... or open our eyes to the hope to which He has called us... namely – a future inheritance of eternal life and glory...an ascension!
 - i. Is this hope just wishful thinking or optimism?
 - 1. The late British Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book *Celebrating Life*, wrote that optimism is passive while hope is active.
 - 2. Optimism is having a gym membership. Hope is actually working out every morning.
 - 3. You see, hope is future thinking with an action attached to it... so as we hope in God fulfilling His promises, we don't just sit around – killing time – No, we are busy doing kingdom work in anticipation of the Last Day!
 - 4. Faith and hope are pretty similar.
 - a. Faith is a trust in God's promises... in the present
 - b. Hope is living with endurance because we are sure about what God has in store for us... hope is based on what will be... the future.
 - d. The work of our Triune God is the basis for our hope, when the world is not able to give us the same thing...
 - e. The world's hopes and dreams are always focused on the fading and transient, the things that rust and decay... or are lost and die.
 - f. Can you see the difference between hoping in something that is not absolute and certain?
 - g. It is all about the OBJECT of our hope!
 - i. In other words, God and our inheritance are worthy of our hope while the world is not.

IV. **The world and all who live in it are under a curse...**

- a. The curse of sin... and its friends, death and satan
- b. I know many people who are not Christians who claim to be hopeful – but a better description is that they are wishful.
 - i. Wishful thinking is a bit like optimism, with a regular let down

- ii. It's sort of like constant, broken promises... like the poor kid from a divorced family whose father says he will be there, take his son on play dates – but is a constant no show, leaving the kid out on the front steps looking in the direction of a dad who isn't coming.
- c. Every day we look around to a world that lets us down –
 - i. From the broken environment... droughts and fires... tornados and floods.. or from the pandemics and medical problems.
 - ii. Probably the most disturbing and sad things come out of the human condition though... If it wasn't bad enough that Sandy Hook happened, now we have another incident where little kids were massacred.
 - iii. I guess we can get a sense of the ancients and their lack of the concept of hope... everything just cycles around with no meaning.
 - 1. Yes, many times history does repeat itself, but it seems that just when we've seen the worst of it, something still worse happens.
- d. We have no control over these things, and the harder we try, the more anxious and out of control we get...
- e. For every promise the world makes... and all the let downs it has to offer, we are only left with wishful thinking... without the victory of our Savior.

V. **Ascension Day is a victory and great source of hope.**

- a. We move from wishful thinking to real hope
- b. Of course, the victory was won through the cross as Jesus was on the receiving end of the punishment that was rightly ours... and yet He did not allow sin, death and satan to win the day as He rose again.
- c. Everything God promised by His Word, by the enlightening and eye-opening Holy Spirit, has come to pass!
 - i. Except, what the angels say to the disciples in Acts 1:11 – He will come again!
- d. Our hope is grounded in the object – the almighty and eternal God of the universe has called you by faith into the “riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints.”
- e. Yes, Jesus has ascended, and as His followers, we now have an “active hope” – or a hope that gives us the endurance to stay in the trenches...
 - i. And please don't forget that your endurance is strengthened by the forgiveness and support and grace in the Word and Sacraments!
 - ii. Without this strengthening of our faith, our hope is not strengthened either...
- f. As Jesus ascends to His rightful place, we are full of confident hope that our future is secure... that our ascension to glory awaits us too...
 - i. No matter what comes our way – disease, disaster, cowards with guns, financial struggles, or loss of any type... even death – our future is secure.

- g. Ascension is different, because it is primarily based on a hope for the future...
 - i. Now go... into a hopeless and dying mission field with hope, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.