

“EXALTATION”
The Ascension of Our Lord
May 18, 2023
Zion Lutheran Church
Fort Wayne, Indiana

TEXT:

[God] raised [Jesus] from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 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. And He put all things under His feet and gave Him as Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 1:20-23 (ESV)

The ascension of Jesus has been looked at by many Christians as a coronation of sorts—the celebration of Jesus’ divine glory and majesty as the Lord, Savior, and King of all, revealed when He returned to His heavenly throne after completing His mission of redeeming the world. This is certainly in keeping with a particular passage of Scripture that describes what this festival is all about: “After making purification for sins,” says the writer to the Hebrews, “He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (*Hebrews 1:3*). From this point on, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity is no longer the humble and meek suffering Servant of the Lord; He is and ever shall remain the Exalted One whose “name . . . is above every name,” before whom “every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (*Philippians 2:9, 10*).

As we mark the Lord’s ascension today, we give thanks especially that He is our exalted Head—our King. This is part of His threefold Office of Prophet, Priest, and King that most of us learned about in confirmation class. Jesus’ Kingly Office means three things, touching on all three of His kingdoms (His kingdom of power, His kingdom of grace, and His kingdom of glory): It means that He rules over the kingdom of power, exercising His lordship as He presides over the laws of nature; that He rules over the kingdom of grace, governing and protecting His Church on earth; and that He rules over the kingdom of glory, leading His Church to the heaven that He prepares even now for all who trust in Him. This evening as we celebrate the Savior’s ascension and coronation and exaltation, we will examine this glorious event especially in terms of what it means to Him and what it means to us.

The text before us says of Jesus that God has “put all things under His feet.” This obviously has to do with power and authority. The Man who seemed to be so

powerless when He was betrayed, tried, mocked, beaten, and crucified now possess and uses all of the absolute power over everything that was His from the very beginning—the power that He willingly set aside for a time for our sake when He came into this world as the humble and suffering Servant of the Lord. But all of that is completed now. His mission has been accomplished perfectly. Our salvation has been won. His humiliation for our sake has ended. He is now exalted and glorified. There is no longer any reason for Him to hold back on using any of His divine power. In His glorified state everything that was always true of Him as God is now true of Him also as Man. That’s why He was able to appear to His frightened disciples in a locked room without using a door or a window. And that is why even today He is able to be present bodily in many different places at the same time in the Sacrament of His Supper.

The text also tells us that the glorified Christ is “Head over all things.” Everyone and everything must exalt Him and submit to Him. Those who bowed down in front of Him in order to mock Him will one day find themselves bowing down again before Him, whether they want to or not, to exalt Him and acknowledge His lordship. The High Priest who stood in judgment over Him and accused Him of blasphemy will, as Jesus Himself predicted, “see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (*Matthew 26:64*). And lest we become too puffed up with pride about this, let us bear in mind that the King who comes to judge the world will come to judge everyone—including us. He who loves us so much that He suffered and died to redeem us also hates our sin so much that He suffered and died to wipe it away. And we who know what He went through in order to overcome our sin cannot afford to take our sin lightly before the Judge, because taking our sin lightly is, in reality, no different than taking His suffering and death lightly.

The exaltation and kingship of Jesus not only bring glory to Him; they are also a comfort to us because, as the text before us points out, Jesus is not merely the “Head over all things,” but God “gave Him as Head over all things to the Church.” It is for our benefit that He is “King of kings and Lord of lords” (*Revelation 19:16 KJV*). It is for our benefit that “He shall reign forever and ever” (*Revelation 11:15 KJV*). But when we say that these things are for our benefit, we have to be honest enough to recognize that these things promote what actually benefits us, not necessarily everything that we think might benefit us. God knows better than we do what is best for us, and that’s what He promotes for us and in us and through us. We know from His own revelation that what He promotes is our spiritual growth and the spread of His kingdom through the preaching of the Gospel. No matter how dismal and hopeless things may appear to us in our limited vision, He rules over all things in such a way as to bring about these blessings for us.

Another comfort for us in the exaltation and kingship of Jesus is the knowledge that we—the Church—are “His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” King Jesus does His work in this world through us—His people—those who bear His name and make use of the means of grace that He has given for the purpose of spreading His kingdom, with the promise that His Holy Spirit is present in these means and works His good and gracious will through them. These means of grace are, of course, the Word of God (particularly the Gospel of Christ) and the Sacraments (in which the Word is joined with visible elements and is communicated to us in action). His promise is that when we gather together around His Gospel, no matter how it may come to us, He is there, working—all for the purpose of strengthening our faith and equipping us for service in advancing His kingdom of grace.

What a great comfort it is for us to know that the One who took all of our sins and all of their consequences upon Himself and put them to death in His own body on the cross is also our exalted Head—the One who rules over us for our own good and rules over all things in our best interest. He has returned to His place of glory at the right hand of the Father but, at the same time, He remains present with us in the power of His Holy Spirit, making His presence and power known in Word and Sacrament. The Spirit who imparts this knowledge to us encourages us and strengthens us so that we might be about the business of our King as we live in this world, sharing with everyone we meet the Good News of His grace and forgiveness, preparing for His final return and the full manifestation of His divine glory. It is an awesome task, to be sure, but one that is possible—in fact, certain—because it is not really we who do it but our exalted Head who does it through us.

Amen.

May the God of peace, who brought again from the dead that great Shepherd of the sheep, our Lord Jesus, by the blood of the everlasting covenant equip you thoroughly for the doing of His will. May He work in you everything which is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, to whom be honor and glory forever and ever. He who calls you is faithful, and He will do it. Amen.