

Sermon: Year B, Sunday after the Ascension

Texts: Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

One of the marvels of cathedrals is the way they effect the people who enter them. As visitors cross the threshold, they almost always fall into a palpable silence. The world outside, which is just a few steps behind them, is suddenly hushed. I've watched this many times in New York. All around the city is bustling. The subways are rumbling; the sidewalks are filled with hurried crowds; horns and sirens pierce the air. But when you enter a magnificent church, all that busyness seems to just drop away. No signs are posted asking people to observe a reverent quietness. It simply happens, whether those who are entering are young or old, whether they're tourists or residents, whether they're faithful or merely curious.

The buildings themselves compel this reaction. They stand as witnesses to a different kind of reality. In their form and design they offer an experience of timelessness and transcendence. There's a story bigger than us. Instead of being flashy monuments to our own triumphs or markers of the trendy styles of the immediate moment, they evoke humility instead, where our chatter is out of place. Their beauty emanates from a conviction of endurance set patiently in stone, illumined by the light of the sun that keeps the steady rhythms of day and night. 24/7 doesn't exist in cathedral space. Neither do any of the pressing agendas that keep us running in the world that is so much about us. Within their walls, God takes precedence. And even the long line of human history can seem small in comparison to the expression of God's eternity.

Thus, we are inclined to forget ourselves for a while and to be enthralled, instead, by the greater expanse of divine love, which encompasses all time and all creation. We fall silent because our words are too much our own. We don't have a ready vocabulary to describe what transcends us and pulls us out of ourselves. And often we step inside these sanctuaries precisely with the hope that we will be reminded of the vast freedom and joy of life that God provides. We can walk within the sturdy assurance that our time is in God's hands – which is a promise that can, too easily, be overwhelmed by the cascade of petty desires and concerns that occupy us from day to day.

Very few cathedrals or churches of this form, however, are being built any more. We are more inclined to build churches that are functional or utilitarian. Worship spaces today are designed to morph easily into assembly halls or gymnasiums. Instead of narrating the story of God's people through history, modern churches are more likely to look like shopping malls, complete with food courts, cafes, and playscapes. Transcendence has been displaced by immanence, and God has become something more like a friend or a companion, a fellow humanitarian, intimate with us. After all, so we say, God has descended to us, and this closeness is deeply comforting. This is why Christmas is so universally celebrated. God in human form is lovely and even encouraging. The incarnation affirms our value as persons, and this vision of God is acceptable, particularly if, by its overemphasis, it merely offers us reason to congratulate ourselves in God's name. God so loved the world that he gave his only son...

Yet we should note that in the church calendar, this past Thursday was the feast of the Ascension, the church's celebration of Jesus' ascent to heaven. It doesn't get quite the same festive notice as Christmas. In fact, it gets almost none. The ascension can feel embarrassing because we are so bedeviled by the strange and ridiculous image of Jesus literally floating up into the skies, disappearing in the clouds. But this picture must be erased, because it gets everything wrong. The ascension wasn't included in the Gospels to describe Jesus' physical exit away from us. It's rather the direct complement to God's incarnation: as God descended to us in Jesus, so in Jesus our destiny is our own ascent to God – or perhaps better said, to Godliness, to living above the usual mire of daily struggles. Heaven isn't just some other place, somewhere else at the far edge of the cosmos, perhaps soon to be discovered by the repaired Hubbell telescope, where diaphanous souls peer down at us from a great height. Heaven, and our ascending to it, is actually begun by our awareness of transcendence, by our seeing our own lives and our own time in the light of God's purpose. Like stepping into a cathedral, it's entering a different world even as you live within this one, but, once you cross the threshold, everything is reframed.

Paul gives us an excellent example of this. He stated that God raised Jesus – not into the skies – but into the place where he would be “above all rule and authority and power and dominion.” This should be read closely. For Paul did not say that God gave Jesus the place of greatest power along the continuum we know, of least to most, where authority is exercised to gain dominion and judgment comes by show of force. What Paul said was that Jesus has been raised above these distinctions. He has transcended them. They do not hold the same sway. Rule and authority and power and dominion have been displaced. They no longer determine the world. God has raised Jesus to a higher plane of judgment, determined by peace and forgiveness and reconciliation and love. This, he said, is what it means to be seated at the right hand of God. By these actions heaven is revealed. And we, already, in our time, have been raised to live up to this height. Christ's ascension reveals our destiny, and if we know this to be our end, then the way, all along, can be transformed.

In this regard, some people are themselves like cathedrals. They seem able to ascend above the common fray, and they bear eloquent witness to God's purpose which surpasses our own designs for ourselves. By faith and hope and love they change the world and they silence so much of the strife of their times, not by force of power, nor by threat of authority, but by a resilient confidence that our true future is to be raised to God's heaven. Holding to incarnation and ascension in equal measure, they reveal in themselves the glory of God and the holiness of salvation, which both humbles and exalts.

And, in truth, this is the beauty to which all of us are called – to live cathedral lives, where the usual chatter falls away because, somehow, in us, a more profound grace abounds – offered to everyone, regardless of race, creed, clan or any other distinction. For we have been raised and these distinctions have been transcended.

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