

“Beating or Blessings”

Ephesians 1:15-23

Ascension Sunday, May13. 2018

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Grace, mercy and peace...

The sermon is based on the Epistle to the Ephesians. I will begin with a quiz: You are in final Jeopardy. What big event, holiday, do we have or observe this week? In all honestly, a lot of us will probably say, “Well, Mother’s Day, DUH!!” Because we have seen a thousand, adds, commercials, internet pop ups, of course there is Mother’s Day. The love of a mother, how could you live without it? But with all due respect, shifting the focus to the infinitely greater love of our Lord, what big event do we have this week? It is the Ascension of our Lord.

I spent five of the last eight years in Germany. Around this time of the year, the same thing would happen. You’d have a very high- ranking general who wanted to move a large, noisy, military convoy on this particular Thursday, and the German liaison would say, “Sir, you can’t move a convoy on that day. It is a German church holiday. Imagine if a huge convoy would move through your village on Christmas morning. People would be mad. It can’t be done. This is Himmelfahrt.” The CDR would turn to the chaplain and ask, “What’s this Himmelfahrt thing?” I would say, “Sir, Himmel is “heaven,” “Fahren” is to travel. Jesus traveled up to heaven. It is the Ascension of our Lord. I would usually get this vacant look so, I’d try to get in mini lesson about the faith, “Sir although it doesn’t get much attention in the United States, Christians all over the world observe and celebrate that not only is Jesus risen from the dead, He’s our ascended, all powerful, King who sits on the throne, who loves us....”and I would usually get cut off at that point and He’d say, “I get it. Whatever....” And really, I don’t he got it. But St Paul and our Lord want us to not only get it but rejoice in it.

The Ascension means that no matter what we are going through, especially when life is so rough we don’t know what to do, our Risen and Ascended King gives us the encouragement to keep going. When it seems we are getting a beating, our Lord provides His love and joy, the strength, to go the distance.

I would like to get at it by having you picture two situations. These might

seem extreme in being very sad, tragic, situations, but I ask you to bear with me for a minute. Three years ago, in May, my son, the one who graduated from Dutch Fork, moved from his first job in Valdosta, Georgia to New York City! Slight change! My wife and I were about to leave for 3 years in Germany. So, I got the command from my wife, "You go and visit "MY SON" and make sure he's ok. (Yes, you don't argue with the love of a mother.)

So, my son was showing me the sights of the town. I went to the new 9/11 memorial museum. I thought I was ready for it. You know the pictures and the stories. Right off the bat, I saw the first picture of a New York fallen fire fighter. It was a punch to the gut. I basically stared crying. This is the brother of a good friend. I know stories about this guy. Suddenly it wasn't this big event, an anonymous mass casualty; I knew the impact of the loss of that man's family. That empty hole they still have. This is a very Christian family.

One more illustration here. I spoke to a young lady, a Solider who was in the Warrior Transition Battalion, at that time, people getting out of the Army, a lot of them for being wounded down range. This young lady spoke about her trials. Seriously wounded. She nearly lost her marriage because of her hostility she didn't understand. She didn't want to admit her trauma from down range combined with a fair amount of physical problems. Once was suicidal. But then she admitted she needed treatment. They reconcile just in time for her husband to get hit in the head in a pick-up football game and now he was comatose, on life support. This young lady is a Christian. I was thinking, this is so much suffering, she's giving Job a run for his money. And then she addressed God directly. She said, "God, really? Really?" These are probably two extreme examples, but we know that is the truth, don't we? We have those moments, when we think, "God, really?"

Those are the struggles of faith the people of God eventually always have. It is the same situation those believers in Ephesus found themselves in. As they tried to be people of faith and live for Christ, they took a beating.

When St. Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians, he was writing to a group of churches that had their reasons for being very dispirited. They encountered set back after set back. As they tried to tell people of Christ and salvation in Him, they ran into a whole lot of opposition from a pagan cult that was there and from

Jewish people. Actually, the opposition got so upset at the message of Christ, they started a riot. Paul talked again and again of how he almost lost his life there in Ephesus. And then came the final blow. Paul was arrested and thrown in prison. So, they were getting to the point of saying, "What's the use? Who needs that? Christianity looked like it was a losing cause. I imagine they were thinking, "God, really?"

And as I mentioned earlier, there are all those things, maybe even tragedies, that also happen to us, the people of God. And then you wonder "Is God with me or not? Does He care for me?" We have those, "God, really? Kinds of moments.

So, where do we look to have our faith and hope sustained in trying circumstances? Where do we look for encouragement to carry on as Christ people in faith and service? Well, we look to Christ, of course. As Paul said, "Let our eyes ever be towards the Lord." The writer of the Book of Hebrews said, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus." The question is, "How do you do that?" How do you keep sight of Christ even in the midst of hard times?

At the Ascension, Christ went up visibly out of sight of those first disciples, but the fact is Christ is still visible to us. Christ is present with us, no less than He was present with those first disciples during his earthly ministry, in His Word, in the Scriptures. We believe that Christ is present with us in the Lord's Supper, there, in His body and His blood. We see there the guarantee of God's love for us and presence in our lives. It is the promise that God loves us still and that He'll never let go.

Paul says "Here is the encouragement you need to keep going." In the Scriptures and in the Supper we see what God has done, will do and is doing for us in Jesus Christ.

Paul says that in the Scripture and in the Supper we get the "knowledge, the wisdom and the revelation of God." Those are all words used to say that God has brought us into a saving relationship with Him through Christ. Even in our sins and stupidity God never lost sight of us! Paul said, "Once we had no hope. We were without God, but now in Christ, we who were once far away have been brought back to God by the blood, the sacrifice, of Jesus Christ."

And once we belong, God will not let go. Christ said, "When we cling to Him in faith, no one can snatch us out of His hand." Our future is secure. Come what may. Paul says that we have a wonderful "inheritance." We have the guarantee of eternal life. "What can separate us from Christ's love? Can hardship or trouble? Paul said that nothing, "Not life, not death, nothing in the present or the future, will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We see what Christ is doing for us now and will do for us. You see, when Christ ascended into heaven, it was for a reason, to sit on "THE throne." Christ ascended into heaven to rule this world on our behalf as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Paul says here, "God has placed everything under the rule and authority of Christ, and He will rule it for the church."

What does that mean? It means that our destiny is in His hands. It's like we say in that song, "He's got the whole world in his hands." He's got you and me in His hands." It means that Christ is running this show. It means that Christ is guiding this world and our lives even if we can't always see it. Christ is guiding this world forward according to His plan and the day when He comes again. And in the meantime, He's on our side! He will stand with His church so that we can spread His love in the world, come what may.

If you've ever been in a Greek Orthodox Church, especially an older one, you may have seen something that reminds us of what this reading is talking about. In a lot of their older churches, if you look up, you see the inside of a dome. Painted there is a picture of Christ on a throne. He is our Savior. He is THE King and He loves US!

Sometimes we face strong discouragement, even tragedy, but God's encouragement is stronger still. Here is the encouragement: Christ is running this universe and He's on our side! I like the way King David said it "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?"

Jesus is OUR Risen and Ascended King! Amen