

**“Implications of the Ascension:  
Prayer & the Ascension of Christ”  
Matthew 28:16-20 & Luke 24:50-53  
May 12, 2024  
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service  
Pastor Nicoletti**

**The Reading of the Word**

As we’ve already mentioned, this Sunday is Ascension Sunday – the Sunday following Ascension Day, which is forty days after Easter, and when we recognize Jesus’s bodily ascension into heaven, where he went to sit at the right hand of God the Father.

That will be the theme of our sermon ... though, we will move beyond the event of the ascension to consider one of its implications. This morning we will consider the implications of the ascension and session of Christ for our prayer life.

Now, there are two distinct actions of Jesus included in that. One is the ascension itself: the moment in redemptive history when Jesus ascended bodily from the earth and into God’s immediate presence.

But with that – to include what happened after that – we need to also speak of the “session” of Christ. The word “session” is an older term, still used in theological circles, that essentially means “sitting.” In the Nicene Creed, we confess that Jesus “was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, he suffered and was buried, on the third day he rose again according to the scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and he sits on the right hand of the Father, and he shall come again with glory, to judge both the living and the dead.”

The “session” of Christ refers to where Christ is between his ascension and his final return – as he reigns now in heaven, at the right hand of God the Father.

This morning we want to consider the implications of the ascension and the session of Christ for our prayer lives.

And for that we will hear from the end of both Matthew’s Gospel, and Luke’s Gospel.

With that in mind, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

First, from Matthew 28:16-20:

<sup>28:16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup> And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

And then, from Luke 24:50-53:

<sup>24:50</sup> And he [that is, Jesus] led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. <sup>52</sup> And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, <sup>53</sup> and were continually in the temple blessing God.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

### **Prayer of Illumination**

Lord Jesus Christ,  
After forty days you ascended to the right hand of God our Father,  
and from your throne in heaven you rule over your Church.  
Rule over us now, by your Word and Spirit.  
Instruct us by your Word, that we may be your faithful subjects.  
Reign in our hearts by your Spirit, that we might obey your Word.  
And open our eyes to the reality of your reign not only over us, but over all things.  
Grant this we ask, for your mercy's sake. Amen.

### **Introduction**

My argument this morning is very simple: If we really believed in the ascension and session of Christ, then we would pray far more than we actually do.

That's all. That's the main point of the sermon this morning.

Now, to be clear, by saying “if we really believed” I'm not accusing this congregation of being unbelievers, or not true Christians. No, if you are a Christian, then of course you believe in the ascension and the session of Christ – you believe that he ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father.

But there are, of course, different levels ... different strengths of belief ... we might even say different depths of belief in our souls.

It's one thing to believe in the physics of how parachutes work on paper, when it's presented to you as a physics equation with the different forces and factors spelled out in writing. It's another thing to actually jump out of a plane with a parachute strapped to your back.

Or, less dramatically, it's one thing to believe nutrition science in a text book ... it's another thing for us to believe it enough to let it alter our eating habits based on those beliefs.

As Christians, there are many things we may believe on a cognitive level, or in the basic way that constitutes true saving faith ... but which, at the same time, we struggle to believe on a gut-level ... in a way that actually shapes our hearts and our actions as much as it should.

This combination of true belief and real doubt in a believer's heart is summed up in the prayer of the man who comes to Jesus in Mark 9, and pleads with him: "I believe; help my unbelief!" [Mark 9:24]

To help with our unbelief, the Lord has given us the means of grace: The Lord gives us the gifts of the sacraments, of prayer, of corporate worship, of his Body the Church, and also, centrally, the gift of his Word in the Scriptures.

Sometimes the Word helps us by granting us new insights we haven't had before.

But often the Lord uses the Word to simply remind us what we already believe, and to call us to believe it more deeply.

And that is the angle of our sermon this morning. If you have been a Christian for any amount of time, the information we reflect on today may not be new for you ... but you may need to spend some time considering it anyway ... because though you believe ... you may also need help with your unbelief.

I know that too much of some nutrients is bad for me, and that more of others would be good for me. But when I'm deciding whether to order the cheeseburger or the salad, a reminder of those basic nutrition facts can be helpful.

In a similar way, this Ascension Sunday, we are turning to God's Word to be reminded of how Christ's ascent to heaven, and his sitting at the right hand of God the Father should lead us to live more prayerful lives.

So that is our focus.

And the connection between the ascension and prayer is not an artificial one. In fact, it's right there in one of the texts we just heard from.

In Luke 24:52-53 we're told how the Apostles responded when Jesus ascended to heaven. They saw him ascend, right before their very eyes, and then what did they do? Well, Luke tells us: "They worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God."

The temple, remember, was the central place of worship and prayer for a first-century Jew. When the Apostles saw with their own eyes that Jesus had ascended, when they knew without a doubt that he was seated at the right hand of God the Father, their response was to pray continually, Luke tells us. And if we truly believe in the ascension and the session of Christ in the depths of our souls, then we will respond the same way.

But "Why?" we may ask. Why would the ascension and session of Christ lead to prayer? Is it just in the same way that any pious holy event in redemptive history should lead us to pray more?

Well, it's not just a vague spiritual impression that should lead us to prayer here. But there is actually a logic to it.

Luke doesn't spell it out in this passage, but Matthew gives us the connecting pieces in his account of Jesus's words leading up to the ascension.

And as we consider these two texts together, we see that the ascension and session of Christ should lead us to a life of prayer, because of what it means for Christ's presence, his power, and his pathway.

So, the logical connection pointing from the ascension and session of Christ to our own life of prayer has to do with what these events mean for Christ's presence, his power, and his pathway.

Let's consider each of those.

## **Presence**

First, the ascension and session of Christ should lead us to a life of prayer because of what it means for Christ's presence.

We see, in Matthew 28 that this was one of the truths Jesus sought to impress on his disciples right before he ascended to heaven. In verse 20, in his final words in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to his followers: "behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Jesus promised to be with us always, to the very end of the age. The ascension is not Jesus abandoning his people – it's not him detaching from his people. Rather, after the ascension, Christ is present with all his people in a new way: though his body remains in heaven, Jesus is still truly present with his people through the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit Christ comes to us in our hearts, and in the Church, and as he does, he works in us and through us.

Jesus is always with us – always. And knowing that, believing that, should deeply impact our prayer life.

But often, we live as if we don't really believe that the ascended Jesus is always with us. And that shapes our lives in a number of ways, including our frequency of prayer ... or lack thereof.

I mentioned Henri Nouwen last Lord's Day, and while I was on a recent trip I brought along and read his book *The Way of the Heart*. And in that book, Nouwen argues that solitude and silence make space for prayer in our lives.

Now, of course it's no new observation to note that we, as modern people, don't do very well with solitude and silence. But as I thought about that this week, I was especially struck by how the presence of the ascended Christ is especially relevant to this problem for us.

More often than not, when no one else is around us, we believe we are alone. And let's be honest, most of us don't do "being alone" very well. I mean, even if you're an introvert, my guess is that you still often struggle with the combination of solitude and silence ... just you and your thoughts.

I've recently been listening to books about thru-hiking: people who try to hike the Appalachian or the Pacific Crest Trail in one go, spending months hiking and backpacking along the trail. Some have sought to do that alone. And they note that whatever the physical challenges of that might be (and those can be significant), it is the long stretches of solitude ... of just them and their thoughts ... that such solo thru-hikers found especially challenging.

And we Christians can struggle with the same thing, even in much smaller doses.

We see this in the fact that most of us tend to fill every moment of our lives with chatter and noise. We want constant input. We first have ways to keep input and output going with other people even when they're not with us – as we scroll through social media, or post over and over about what we're doing. We text or message others relentlessly. This is so common and ingrained for us, that many of us can find it difficult to just go out and just have an experience alone without broadcasting it to others through our smartphones while we do it ... and then also checking repeatedly to see how others are responding to what we've broadcast. Through such digital connections, we rarely allow ourselves to actually be alone ... even if no one else is physically around us.

But then, when others aren't available, we have many other ways to fill our minds with unput. We have our podcasts, our audio books, news articles, videos, music, books, video games, all sorts of different forms of input – different forms of chatter – with which we can fill every single moment of our lives.

And while there has always been a human temptation to avoid silence and solitude, it does, of course, take on a new pitch in the modern world.

A medieval farmer faced many hardships and trials we can only imagine. But he also didn't have the option to fill his mind with chatter every waking moment. For long stretches he was out in the field, maybe often alone. He had to learn how to handle silence and solitude. And as Abraham Kuyper has pointed out, this may have been a help in directing his attention to God ... a help that we lack with the constant availability of noise, and chatter, and input. [Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, Vol I, Series I, Chapter 7 (It was James Eglinton, on *Grace in Common* [45:20-48:40] who made me aware of this chapter and its modern relevance.)]

I don't know if that's true for you. But it's certainly true for me. I am an input junkie. I crave constant input. When I'm not working, there are few moments when I'm not seeking out some sort of input, whether it's listening to something, reading something, or watching something.

And maybe, if Christ is not present with his people, that makes sense. Silence can be hard. Sitting with our own thoughts can be uncomfortable.

But if Christ really is present with his people always ... then we are doing more than just filling the silence with our constant input. We're also avoiding engaging with the presence of Christ.

I saw a video the other day that was making a joke about a family all getting into the car for a long drive somewhere, and the father just popping in his noise-cancelling air pods as they pulled out of the driveway, and putting on a podcast ... completely cutting himself off from his wife and children.

Now I know that a long drive with younger kids can be difficult ... but the joke drew attention to the effect of that on his wife, sitting next to him in the front of the car, while he pops in his air pods, and fills his ears with chatter instead of engaging with her. There's something sad and not right about that picture.

And yet, this is something we do to the ascended Jesus every single day. When we get in the car ... when we go for a walk ... when we carry out some mundane task on our own ... Jesus is always right there beside us. But more often than not, rather than turn to him, and speak to him in that time ... we turn away, we pop in our air pods, and we ignore his presence and fill our heads with chatter instead.

Now, I'm not saying there's no place for chatter, or podcasts or audio books, or reading, or videos, or information, or entertainment, or anything like that – that's not my point.

If a husband and wife had been taking time to talk deeply every day, and they'd just recently had an in-depth conversation together, and then when they got in the car, they decided to just listen to some music together, or each pop in their air pods to listen to their own podcasts – then that would be one thing.

But when most of us turn to our preferred chatter ... when most of us reach for our headphones ... we have not spent much time engaging with Jesus beforehand ... maybe not that day ... maybe not that week ... maybe not even that month.

And it's not even that we are consciously tuning Jesus out. It's that more often than not we don't even think about the fact that he's there. That's what we need to remember: his presence. And that should drive us to be more prayerful.

If the ascended Jesus is truly present with us by the Holy Spirit, as he promised he would be, then that fact alone should lead us to prayer.

And as I say that I don't necessarily mean anything fancy by the word "prayer."

Let's remember, after all, what prayer is. The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it well. It says: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies." [WSC #98]

It is lifting our desires up to God, it is confessing our sins, it is acknowledging the Lord's gifts and mercies, all through Jesus Christ. That is what prayer is.

Prayer doesn't have to be eloquent or fancy. It doesn't have to be creative. In fact, Jesus calls us to pray simply. The Lord's prayer is deep, but also profoundly simple. And to it, Jesus adds the following directions – he says: "When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." [Matthew 6:7-8]

Now, Protestants have often taken this to mean that we should not use repetition in our prayers. And if we think repetition will somehow force God to answer us, or manipulate him, then that is certainly a right application of these verses.

But others have argued that it's the pressure we may feel to use a lot of words in our prayers, or to speak in a certain way or with a certain eloquence in prayer that may more often lead us to fall into this error Jesus is pointing out.

Maybe our request to God is actually very simple. Maybe our confession of sin is quite simple. Maybe the thanks or adoration we feel has simplicity at its heart. But simple words may feel inadequate to us. And so we try to fill our prayers with more words. And if the words don't come, maybe we get frustrated and give up.

There is, of course, a place for word-filled prayers when they are from the heart, and given as "an offering up of our desires unto God" or a sincere "confession of our sins," or a genuine "thankful acknowledgment of [God's] mercies." But our prayers don't need to be wordy.

The seventh-century monk John Climacus put this well. He said: "When you pray do not try to express yourself in fancy words, for often it is the simple, repetitious phrase of a little child that our Father in heaven finds most irresistible. Do not strive for verbosity lest your mind be distracted from devotion by a search for words. One phrase on the lips of the tax collector was enough to win God's mercy; one humble request made with faith was enough to save the good thief. Wordiness in prayer often subjects the mind to fantasy and dissipation;" [Quoted in Nouwen, 80]

Or consider the words of Anne Lamott. There are some important things that Anne Lamott and I might disagree on, but she had a good point when she wrote: "Here are the two best prayers I know: 'Help me, help me, help me' and 'Thank you, thank you, thank you.'"

Apparently in a later book she expanded that list to include three central prayers: "Help me." "Thank you." and "Wow." We might, of course, add "I'm sorry." to the list as well.

Whatever the quality or simplicity of our words, our calling is to "offer up our desires," our "confessions," and our "thanks" to God. We can, of course, use our own words for this. But when using our own words feels more like a hurdle than a help in speaking to God, we can also pray the words of Scripture.

For centuries Christians have found short prayers from the Scriptures to be a help to them. Centuries of Christians have prayed the simple prayer of the tax collector in Luke 18:13: "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Encouraged by the fifth-century monk John Cassian, centuries of Christians have prayed the simple prayer of Psalm 70:1: "O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me."

And there's many more:

- "Lord, I am yours, save me." from Psalm 119:94
- "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you." from Psalm 16:2

- “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” from Psalm 19:14

Or we might turn other passages into simple prayers. We might pray, based on Psalm 94:19: “Lord, when the cares of my heart are many, let your consolations cheer my soul.”

Or based on Philippians 4:7: “Lord, grant that your peace; which surpasses all understanding; would guard my heart and mind; in Christ Jesus.”

We could go on.

Still other times, we may seek more words from Scripture to speak to our Lord. Here, as I’ve said before, the psalms are a great resource to us. Whether we choose psalms that fit our situation, or we simply pray through the psalter over time as part of our regular devotions, in the psalms the Lord provides words for us to pray.

In addition to this, other Christians have also compiled words that help us express the needs, desires, thanks, and confessions of our heart. There are books like *The Valley of Vision* which collect Puritan prayers, or *The Book of Common Prayer* that collect Anglican prayers. Or many more.

The presence of the ascended Jesus means that we are never alone. By the Holy Spirit, he is always with us. And if he is with us, we should be speaking to him regularly in prayer.

And as we receive that calling, our Lord is merciful. He remembers that we are dust. And so he helps us – asking not for the eloquent prayer of an orator, but the simple prayer of a child. And not even demanding that we come up with the right words ourselves, he provides us words to speak in his Word and through his people.

And when we struggle even with that, the Lord also accepts the groans of our heart. It is something of a mystery to us, but the Apostle Paul tells us that the Holy “Spirit helps us in our weakness. For,” Paul writes, “we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” [Romans 8:26]

Some have held out “wordless prayer” as some sort of spiritual, meditative ideal we are to aim for, and I have my questions and concerns about that.

But Paul reminds us here that there are moments where we might wordlessly pour our hearts out before God, and where we lack the words, the Holy Spirit will intercede for us. Sometimes the distressed child can only weep in her father’s arms. Sometimes the repentant child’s best plea for mercy is a sorrowful hug. Sometimes the thankful child’s best expression of gratitude is a joyful embrace. Sometimes our prayers are like that – not just that we feel the emotions, but that we direct them towards God. And where we lack words, the Spirit intercedes.

Whether with words that pour out from us, or in short simple prayers that sprinkle our day or that are repeated with earnest attention, whether with our own words, the words of Scripture, or the words of others, whatever the form may be, the first thing we need to see is that believing that the

ascended Jesus is really present with us, always, to the very end of the age, should lead us to speak with him more – to pray in a variety of ways.

## **Power**

But it's not only the ascended Jesus's presence that should shape our prayer life.

Because second, the ascension and session of Christ should lead us to a life of prayer because of what it means for Christ's power.

This too is highlighted in Matthew 28.

Jesus said to his disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

As we have been singing this morning, and as we will continue to sing today, Jesus's ascension is an ascension to the throne room of heaven, where he now reigns at the right hand of God the Father.

And if we really believed that ... then that too should impact our prayer lives. Because it would mean that prayer really can change things. It means that prayer is actually a very real appeal to someone in authority with the full power to change the situation.

But we have often reduced prayer to mere sentiment.

When tragedy strikes or when someone is facing a difficult situation, in our culture, a call to prayer first evolved into "Thoughts & Prayers." And in itself there's nothing wrong with that, if it's an expression that we want someone to know that we will both be thinking of them and praying for them. But in many circles that has evolved further to drop the reference to prayer, and instead give simple statements like "Sending you positive thoughts today." or "Sending good thoughts your way."

Now ... I actually think that for many there's a whole metaphysic behind this which is becoming more dominant in our post-Christian culture, but let's just set that aside for now.

In many cases, such statements are really nothing but sentiment. It's still a minority of people who think that "sending" "good" or "positive" thoughts will actually do something to help heal the person with cancer, or release the unjustly held prisoner, or comfort the sorrowful mourner. And so what they have in mind is simply an expression of sympathy.

And that's fair for an unbelieving world. It makes sense that the best they'd have to offer is sentiment and sympathy.

The problem is that many Christians can fall into thinking of prayer in the same way – as an expression of our desires to God ... that connects us with those in need ... that makes us more empathetic to them ... but that is ultimately powerless to change their situation.

We don't mean to think of it that way – and we'd never profess that as our belief about prayer. But functionally, we can treat prayer that way.

But if the ascension of Jesus Christ is true (and it is) ... and if Jesus, who hears us, really does reign as King from heaven (and he does), then prayer is far, far, more than an expression of our sentiment or sympathy. Prayer is an appeal to someone who can actually do something about the problems of this world.

Prayer to Jesus is more like making a phone call to the personal cell phone of someone with the power, and asking them to change a situation, than it is like sending someone “positive thoughts.”

Prayer to Jesus is more like a call to the president of the local hospital when our friend needs medical attention, or a call to the private phone of the governor or the president, when we need justice to be done. Except that prayer to Jesus reaches someone with far more power than any governor or president.

If Jesus really reigns, then we should be bringing our needs and the needs of others to him all the time. Because Jesus always has the power to intervene in any situation.

Now ... that doesn't always mean he will do what we ask. There's a difference between having a direct line to the president, and being the president's master. We have a direct line to the King of the universe ... but he is not our slave. He is at work doing things in the world that we do not know about – things far beyond our power to see or grasp. And so sometimes ... often ... when we ask for things ... he will say no. And we will be called to trust that his wisdom is beyond ours, even when we cannot see what he is doing.

But that fact – the fact that he is wiser than we are, and that he is not our slave – that should never stop us from asking. Because he will always hear us. And he will always have the power to intervene in any situation.

And so second, the ascension and session of Christ should lead us to a life of prayer because of what it means for Christ's power.

So we see the implications of Christ's presence. We see the implications of Christ's power.

## **Pathway**

Third and finally, the ascension and session of Christ should lead us to a life of prayer because of what it means for Christ's pathway.

Right before he ascended to heaven, Jesus called for disciples. A disciple is one who follows. Someone's disciple seeks to follow in the footsteps of that someone.

Jesus called for disciples – for those who would follow in his path.

And where did that path lead?

Well, we see it right here: Ultimately, Jesus's path led to the presence of God. Jesus's path led to heaven.

In the ascension, Jesus made his way from earth to heaven. And as he did, he called on others to follow him.

Now central in Matthew 28 is that he called us to go out and gather other followers for Jesus – other disciples. And that is, of course, its own sermon.

But implicit and assumed in that is that we ourselves should be disciples – we should be followers of Jesus. And if we are, he will lead us too into the heavenly presence of God our Maker.

What we see is that in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus forged a pathway for us into the presence of God. And recognizing that should lead us to prayer.

It should lead us to prayer because we need Jesus's help as we follow the path that he has set. We need his grace to place our faith in him. We need his encouragement to walk where he has trod. We need his confidence to trust that the path we are on as we follow him really will lead us to God. We need his strength to persevere in following him even when the path seems hard.

But most of all, seeing the pathway Jesus has made for us towards God, should lead us to prayer, because we will quickly see that it is the pathway he has created, and not we ourselves, that ultimately makes it possible for us to enter God's presence.

Because in forging a pathway, Jesus didn't just give us an example, or even a map. Rather he made a path where there had been none. He forged a road where there had been only barriers. He made a way of life where there had been only death.

In forging the pathway of our salvation, where there had been brambles and barriers, he cut a path through the woods ... where there had been cliffs and canyons, he built a bridge ... where there had been seas and rivers, he provided a boat ... it is not ultimately our fortitude or our strength by which we will enter into God's presence, but it is by the pathway Jesus has forged and built and provided for us, with his perfect life, his shed blood on the cross, his resurrection power, and his ascension triumph – it is his work that has made a pathway for us to God.

And so, the ascension of Jesus should lead us to prayers of praise and prayers for faithfulness: Praise, because Jesus has made a way for us to God when no other way was possible. And prayers for faithfulness, as we ask him to help us to stay on the path of faith that he has forged for us.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus is present with us. Jesus has the power to act and to change things. Jesus has forged a pathway for us.

All of these truths are proclaimed in the ascension of Jesus Christ.

And all of these truths of the ascension should drive us to lives of prayer.

Brothers and sisters, consider this morning what Christ has done for you. Consider what Christ is able to do for you. Consider that Christ is with you.

And then speak to him in prayer: Make your desires known to him. Confess your sins to him. Thank him for his mercies.

Pray “Help me.” “I’m sorry.” “Thank you.” and “Wow!”

He is right by your side. And he is always eager to hear from you.

Amen.

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### **This sermon draws on material from:**

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. New York, NY: Crossroad, 1989.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.