

Sermon for the Solemnity of the Ascension
Sunday, May 29, 2022
“Bedazzled”

Text: Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

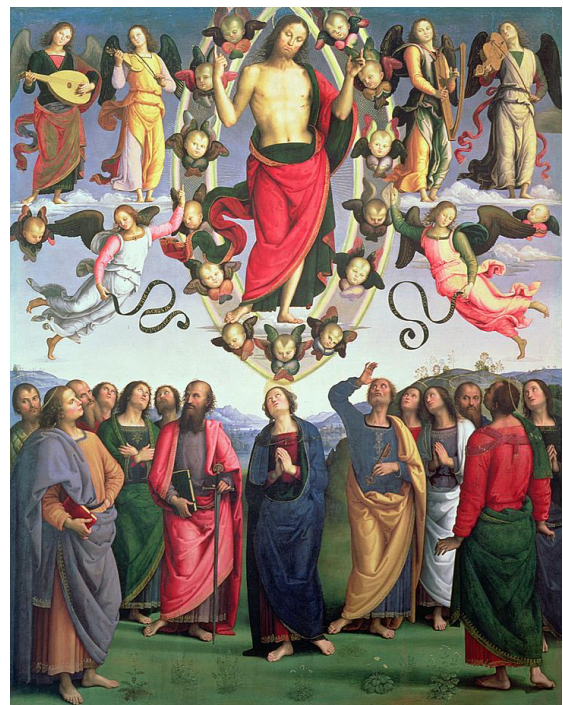
This morning, we are celebrating and commemorating a major event in the story of Jesus and a major holy day in the liturgical life of the church. The Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ is the penultimate, the next to last key event connected with God’s self-revelation to humanity. (The last will occur, of course, next week when we will celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.) The actual date of Ascension Day was this past Thursday, which is forty days after Easter. Jesus remained on earth for forty days after his resurrection. Forty is a very important number in the Bible—so important that it occurs 159 times. The number forty is often, but not always, associated with trials, temptation, and judgment. In the Book of Numbers, God called forty years a generation. Forty is the number of days and nights of the Great Flood and the number of days Noah waited before he opened the windows of the ark. Moses spent the first forty years of his life living in Egypt in the house of the Pharaoh, then another forty years in Midian, and the final forty years leading the Israelites out of Egypt toward the Promised Land. Forty is the number of years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt and they were sustained by manna those forty years. Moses spent forty days and nights with God on Mt. Sinai, and he did that twice. Later in the Book of Judges, the Israelites were held in captivity by the Philistines for forty years because of their evil ways in the sight of God. Goliath taunted Israel for forty days and nights before being vanquished by David. Eli was a judge over Israel forty years, and three great kings of Israel—David, Solomon, and Joash—all reigned for forty years. The prophet Ezekiel lay on his right side, as directed by God, for forty days to bear the iniquity of Judah. Jonah told the city of Nineveh they had forty days to repent, and they did. For forty days, Jesus fasted and was tempted in the wilderness at the beginning of his public ministry. And for forty days Jesus remained on earth after his resurrection to show the mighty power of God over death, to demonstrate humanity’s ultimate fate, and to prepare his disciples to take over his ministry and be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Forty is associated with important displays of God’s movement in the lives of humans. The Ascension marks the completion of God’s incarnation here on earth when Jesus went back to the place where he came from, just like he said he would. The second nature of the Trinity has returned to the Godhead. We signified the departure of God’s light among humanity by extinguishing the Paschal Candle after the Gospel.

The Ascension is a major milestone in the story of the Resurrected Christ, but it seemed to take the new band of faithful apostles by surprise. They were completely dazzled by his ascension. Dazzled, but also dazed and bewildered. Jesus had given them instructions in what to do next, how to tell the world all that they had seen, and how to

show the world all the things he had done, but they weren't ready for him to go. In their minds, there was unfinished business. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" The apostles felt that Jesus hadn't finished the work that the Messiah was supposed to do. They were expecting some ultimate display of God's power on a cosmic scale that would restore the Kingdom of Israel. But Jesus told them that wasn't what they should be concerned about; leave God's business to God and focus on the charge that I have just given you. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When God sends us on a mission, or when we are in the midst of God calling us to some purpose, it often takes us by surprise, we don't feel prepared, we want God to do most of the work and wait until we're ready.

Then, suddenly, as they were watching, the story from Acts tells us, "he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." The cover of this morning's bulletin is a painting by Pietro Perugino, painted in the year 1510, and lives in a church in Tuscany, Italy. It shows the Ascension. Look at the faces of the people in the story. Clearly they are dazzled. They are in awe at what they are witnessing. Note the three central figures on the ground: on the left, the guy with the sword is Paul; on the right is Peter, who holds the keys to the kingdom. Both men will be of central importance in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ in the world and giving birth to the Christian Church. The woman in the center dressed in red and blue is the Blessed Virgin, her eyes and head



fixed on the ascending Christ directing our attention to Christ, as she always does. Of course, this depiction is a bit anachronistic, meaning there are elements that wouldn't have occurred at the same time; Paul was not at the Ascension, as he had not experienced his conversion yet. (If you notice in the painting, Paul is actually *not* looking at Jesus ascending, because he didn't witness the Ascension.) But the message of the painting captures the message of the Ascension. As Jesus was lifted into heaven at the Ascension, so are we; God had come down to earth to help lift up humanity to be in closer, deeper relationship with him. And those three saints (Peter, Paul, and Mary) are our guides and examples for spreading the good news to the ends of the earth.

The Ascension left the disciples in awe, but it also left them scared, because they felt that Jesus left too soon before he fixed the ills of the world. But the world was broken when God became incarnate in the world, it was still broken when he ascended

back to heaven, it is still broken over two thousand years later, and it will continue to be broken until he returns.

The Ascension story is our story. As Jesus was lifted high into the heavens, so he lifts us up. God became incarnate and lived among us in the person of Jesus Christ to show us how to live in the image of God more fully, even in this broken world. In taking human form, Jesus experienced the things that we experience. He experienced the best and the worst that humanity had to offer. But, when Jesus ascended into heaven, he didn't leave everything all fixed. He didn't clean up all that was wrong in the world and then leave when the clean up was done. No, he came into a broken world, and it was still broken when he left, but in his time with us on earth instructed us and showed us how we can deal with the brokenness, how we can live in the messiness of the world, and in the end rise above the messiness and get a glimpse of heaven while here on earth. The good things that God has done and is doing for us should dazzle us in the midst of the turbulence of our lives. The world will continue to bear down upon us; events will still befall us that are beyond our control. But the Ascension reminds us that God gives us what we need to rise above it.

The work of bringing about the kingdom of God on earth is up to us. We are the hands and feet of God—his eyes and ears and mouth ready to tell the story, ready to pick up where Jesus left off. We have big shoes to fill, but if we can tell our story, about how God has dazzled us at critical points in our lives, then we might leave someone else totally amazed, much like the apostles as they witnessed Jesus going up into heaven with a merry noise and a triumphal shout. The world wants to hear that, with God's help, it can rise above it all. That message is what the world so desperately needs. We need to be dazzled by the mighty power of God. Alleluia! Amen.

Resource: *Feasting on the Word* for Ascension of the Lord (Year A, Volume 2)