

## Montague Pastoral Charge

May 12, 2024 – Ascension Sunday, Mother’s Day

Acts 1:1-11

### Sermon: “Flight of the Phoenix”

If any of you are astronomers or engineers, you’ll probably remember the summer of 1977 when the two Voyager spacecraft were launched. Their mission was to fly by the giant planets on the far side of our solar system: Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune, take pictures, and then to proceed out of our solar system into the great black beyond of interstellar space. Voyager 1 is now over 15 trillion miles from earth, going at a speed of about 38,000 mph. That makes it the farthest manmade object from the earth. Although, even so, it will be about 40,000 years before either of the Voyagers comes into another solar system, at which point they, like each of us, will have long since lost their ability to send back useful information. Still, perhaps some distant life-forms in the constellation Ophiuchus will pick up Voyager 1, or some curious Andromedans will pick up Voyager 2, and they’ll know how to find us (we left them a map).

The two little ships have been doing an admirable job: they sent back some amazing pictures of the outer planets, much valuable scientific data, and they’re now hurtling away into interstellar space just as planned. Perhaps disappointingly, however, although not unsurprisingly, they have not yet sent back any pictures of heaven, nor have they yet encountered Jesus out there, on his own ascension-journey up into the great beyond.

I would guess that there are two main problems people have with the Ascension. The first is the sheer absurdity of imagining Jesus going up like that, the true rocket man, burning out his fuse up there alone, or the first Buzz Lightyear – to infinity and beyond. We might be OK with the Ascension if we can spiritualise it, but the notion of his physical body going up to heaven seems downright silly to us moderns. We know about the atmosphere and the solar system; they didn’t back then. That’s not their fault, but do we really need to claim that Jesus literally went up?

Well, trying to visualise the ascension into heaven at all is probably a bad idea, and there may be a reason that even Luke doesn’t give us too much detail; it will always look absurd if you try to picture it. “How can the fact that he went there be described?” says Karl Barth. “Again it was only Christian art which unfortunately was not afraid to try to depict it.” In the Louvre in Paris, there’s a great hall of sculptures, some famous, some less well known. And on one of the walls they have an old Italian sculpture of the ascension. It’s quite nicely done in blue and white glazed stonework. You see all the disciples gathered around at the bottom, and then some blue sky with angel faces poking out, and then right at the top, a little above the level of your head, you see Jesus’ two feet, sticking out of a cloud in the most undignified way. I couldn’t help laughing when I saw that, it just seemed so comical to be looking up at Jesus’ round big toes. Whatever the Ascension means, surely it mustn’t be as crude as that?

The second problem we might have with the Ascension is maybe a bit deeper, and that’s the problem of the theology. Because it almost seems to be a theology of good-bye, of Jesus abandoning the world, saying farewell and escaping off to heaven. As if he’s done his job, and now he’s going away into paradise, while we suffer on, here below. Put the two together, and the Ascension seems antiquated, unrealistic, irrelevant, and maybe even a little offensive. But I think

we can address those concerns, and in fact I'm prepared to argue that the Ascension is not only relevant, not only critical, in fact, but that what's more, it also has something to do with Mother's Day!

The first thing to do is to remind ourselves what heaven is in the biblical worldview. "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth..." That's how the Bible starts. Heaven, in other words, is part of creation. It's the part of creation that is beyond us, it's the "god-ward side of creation" you can say, it's the part of creation where God sits and from which gets things done. That means that going up to heaven in the biblical cosmology doesn't mean abandoning the world below, it is more like going up to the CEO's office on the top floor. Jesus is taking his place up there in the place where the big decisions are made: decisions for the sake of everyone and everything that lies below. The most important point about where Jesus "goes" in the ascension story is that he goes to be beside God, "at the right hand of God the Father almighty," as it says in the Apostles' Creed. Right into the CEO's office, into the White House, into Buckingham Palace...however you want to imagine it.

That doesn't make the story seem any more scientifically plausible, but it does make a difference in the theology. Now we can go deeper into that theology: why does it matter that he ascended into heaven? Why does it matter that Jesus' body – notice, his physical *body* – is up there in the president's room, so to speak? Well, because he doesn't go empty-handed. Like a great fishhook cast down into the bottom of a murky lake, he brings a catch up with him, when he breaks the surface and rises into the air. And what he takes with him up into heaven, into the presence and the right hand of God, is our whole humanity. He has dredged the depths of human experience and lifted it all up out of the water. Ascension is the final movement in the Easter story, the resurrection story. To change the metaphor, Jesus is getting our broken-down human nature up into the air like the crashed plane in the old Jimmy Stewart movie, finally lumbering back into the flight with the engines roaring. And it's a glorious moment.

Jesus takes everything that makes us human – our love, our pain, our feelings and needs, even our flesh – up to God. If you want to find a less crude, less silly-looking depiction of the Ascension than the sculpture that has Jesus' big toes sticking out of the cloud above your head, you can find them in Christian art. There are some elegant paintings of the ascension. But in a way those ones do a worse job, because in them Jesus has gotten so glorious and transcendent, when he takes his place in the sky, that you can hardly recognise him as the same person. But when you stand in the shadow of Jesus' glazed stone toes sticking out of a terracotta cloud, and if you stop giggling at how silly it looks, you notice something. You notice the two holes the old Italian sculptor put in the stone feet, and then the beauty of the ascension hits you – the crude beauty of it. Jesus takes it all with him, even his wounds. It's the broken body he lifts up, our wounded humanity, to take its place at the right hand of God.

Now what does this have to do with Mother's Day? One of the most fascinating modern theologians was Robert Jenson, an American Lutheran theologian. Jenson made the radical claim that what we call the Second Person of the Trinity – the "Eternal Son," the "Word of God," doesn't just become a human being at some point, but that forever, eternally, this person of God's triune being is Jesus of Nazareth in all his crude particularity. He is "Mary's boy and Pilate's victim" forever. That's the constant in Jenson's theology, and it's like the constant speed of light in the theory of relativity. Space, time, and everything have to be twisted around this central truth: that the human story of a Galilean Jew, Mary's boy and Pilate's victim, is the

structure of God's own life; it always has been and it always will be. For Jenson it isn't that there is who God is out there in eternity, in heaven, and then God plays something out in human history, but rather God completely and eternally self-identifies with this particular human story from Mary's womb to a garden tomb. It's hard to explain in a few words just how radical that is, but it allows Jenson to make a claim like this: "God really has a mother, who needn't be a goddess to achieve this."

Our Protestant hair might start to bristle when we hear a claim like that, but if we take the ascension seriously, we can at least begin to appreciate why Roman Catholics can talk about Mary as "mother of God" and Eastern Orthodox folks talk about Mary as the *Theotokos*, the "God-bearer." We may not use that language, but we should at least notice: how everything that makes us human, from the nursery rhymes that were sung to us, right down to the mitochondrial DNA that we inherited from our distant mothers – all of it soars up to heaven with Jesus. He called God his "Abba," his dad. He would have called Mary his "Ima," his mum, and she doesn't stop being his Ima when he rises any more than she stopped being his Ima when she watched his body slump off the cross as they pull the nails out. Even the experience of having a human mother – a loving, grieving, proud human mother – even that (and especially that!) is sitting, now and forever, at the right hand of God the Father almighty. Jenson could be right: God really has a mother, who needn't be a goddess to achieve this.

In 1977 when the two Voyager spacecraft launched from Cape Canaveral, even people who aren't particularly interested in space exploration were excited – do you remember why? Because on each of the two Voyagers they included a copy of a Golden Record: the Sounds of Earth. It's a record much like you'd play on a turntable, although it's made of copper and gold-plated so that it will last thousands of years. We included a needle and cartridge, with visual instructions and mathematical definitions, so that just in case some advanced alien people should happen to pick up the spacecraft, they will be able to play the record and hear a taste of the sounds of Earth. If they do, what they'll hear is an eclectic mix: they'll hear everything from a Beethoven string quartet to Johnny B. Goode by Chuck Berry to a Navajo night-chant to panpipes from the Solomon Islands. There's a message from then-President Carter, there are greetings in 55 different languages, there's the sound of elephants, birds, crickets, and frogs. There is the sound of a baby boy crying and his mother kissing him. They also encoded pictures on the record: cities, villages, and landscapes, autumn leaves and snowflakes; there are chemical diagrams of DNA, photos of athletes and fishermen, dancers and singers, children of every colour. There's a picture of a human birth, and another of a mother from Malaysia, nursing her baby.

Everything we could fit that makes us human, and especially the beautiful mysteries of life, birth, and motherhood; we packaged it up and sent it out into the great black beyond. In 40,000 years or more, if it should happen to fly past some intelligent life-forms, they'll know the most important things about us. Who knows how the human race will have changed down here by that time, or whether we'll even have the wherewithal to be here still. If we are, I'm sure things will look quite different from those pictures from the 1970s. But, on the other hand, the most important things won't have changed: the sound of crickets, the sound of a baby's cry, the sight of a nursing mother.

And even if this world should pass away entirely, those things will always be alive, because Jesus lived them, died with them, rose with them, and ascended with them. He has shot

them up beyond anywhere Voyager 1 or Voyager 2 will ever reach. Our brother – Pilate’s victim, Mary’s boy – has brought all our family treasures into heaven, safe with God until he come again.