

Today, the church commemorates the Ascension of Our Lord. Our hymns reflect the glory of this day. And we see that the Disciples themselves rejoice and worship at the Ascension. Luke tells us, at the very end of His Gospel, “While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.”

This was not a day to mourn. They didn’t lament Christ’s absence. The work that Jesus took on during His incarnation is now complete. And the Disciples acknowledge that Jesus has returned to His rightful place.

Our own *Formula of Concord* says it this way, “We believe, teach, and confess that the Son of Man really is exalted. He is (in deed and truth) exalted according to His human nature to the right hand of God’s almighty majesty and power.”

Very simplistically, we can say that Jesus is in heaven. He has entered paradise. He stands in our humanity before God the Father—as our Advocate and Mediator. He is at the right hand of the Father, where He rules and reigns over the Church—and all creation.

But this doesn’t somehow limit His presence with us. Remember His promises. In John 14—our Gospel reading for this last Sunday—Jesus says, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” And at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel—which will be our Gospel reading in just a few weeks—Jesus says this, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Tonight, I want to talk about how Jesus is with us. Now, we like to say that God is everywhere—He is omnipresent. True enough. There is nowhere that we can hide from His presence. But this doesn’t mean that His grace is available everywhere. The presence of God in creation shows us “His eternal power and divine nature” according to Paul. But it doesn’t show us His mercy. In fact, this general revelation takes away all our excuses as sinners.

We also like to say that He lives in our hearts. And there is a sense in which that is true. Again, in John 14, Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit residing in those who love Him.

And in Colossians 1, Paul says, “To them (meaning His saints) God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

But if you read this verse from Colossians in Greek, you see that the “you” is plural. Christ is among *us*—He is in *us*—and in a specific way. Not so much in our hearts—but in the Church—in the means of grace. He comes to His people—mysteriously, sacramentally, truly—and He does so until He breaks through the clouds one more time at the end of the age.

So, I want to make the case for Christ’s presence among us in worship—in the Divine Service. And really, all of heaven comes down to us. And this gives us a compelling reason to be here on Sundays—and the occasional Wednesday or Thursday. And there is a line in our liturgy that should capture our attention in this regard.

Now, the liturgy is immanently useful. With it, we sing Scripture into our hearts. We put God’s Word on our tongues. We stand in a grand tradition of worship that goes back to

the very beginning of the church. And in this way, we are freed from the tyranny of the novel and trendy.

The liturgy unites us with all the saints who have sung, spoken, and chanted these words through all of church history. The liturgy binds us together with the Christians who have gone before us—and with one another. But something even more is going on.

In the Preface, we pray, “Therefore with angels and archangels and with the whole company of heaven we laud and magnify Your glorious name, evermore praising You and saying...” And then we go right into the Sanctus.

And as you remember, the Sanctus hearkens us back to Isaiah’s Temple experience. This is Isaiah’s commissioning as a Holy Prophet. But what we especially notice in this context is that heaven comes down to meet him as he worships. This was always the purpose of the temple—right worship. God would come to His people—especially with His grace—forgiveness, life, and salvation. Isaiah’s account goes like this.

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!’ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.”

When we keep reading, we find that Isaiah confesses his sin—and then is absolved. Just like we do in the Divine Service. Isaiah says, “‘Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!’ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.’”

And here’s my point today. When we gather for the Divine Service—for Word and Sacrament—the exact same thing is happening. Not only have we modeled our worship after this heavenly worship—as important as that is—with Isaiah, the throne room of God is actually present all around us.

Now, unlike Isaiah, we can’t see the throne of God. We can’t see the Seraphim. Now, we might think that is too bad. But clearly, Isaiah was terrified. These are fiery heavenly beings. He is convinced that because he has seen the Lord, he is going to die. He takes the encounter very seriously.

For us, the glory of the Lord is not tangible in the same way. But it is still present. Worship is the reception of heavenly things. It is participation in heavenly things. Christ comes down to us. We put ourselves in a place where His presence is promised—through Word and Sacrament. We worship right alongside the angels. And we are as close to the kingdom of heaven as we can possibly get—at least until the end.

And Isaiah helps us to make sense of the heavenly worship we see in Revelation as well. And a heart for worship is what we should get out of this book. Revelation is not a timeline of near-future events in modern Israel. It is not John looking forward and doing

his best to describe modern technology. Revelation's "mark of the beast" is not facial recognition software.

Instead, John gives us an apocalyptic look into what's going on in heaven while we live on earth. Remember that the book is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. And it all begins with John saying, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet." And with these words, he describes Sunday worship on the Greek Island of Patmos.

Then John says, "I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest."

The Son of Man is Jesus, of course, and He is speaking to John. But notice where Jesus stands. He stands in the midst of seven golden lampstands. And as we keep reading, Jesus tells John that the lampstands are actually seven churches.

This is where Jesus is during the age between His two Advents. He stands among His churches. He stands there in full glory in the middle of those gathered in His name. Jesus will next address letters to His churches—seven sermons to seven churches, which John serves as Pastor and Bishop.

And then after this, John is caught up into heaven. He says, "After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.'"

And the first thing John sees when he is caught up is worship. The language is full of imagery from Mt. Sinai—where God spoke to His people—and the heavenly encounters of the Prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah.

"At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne....Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'"

Notice that this particular scene of heavenly worship includes 24 elders—which symbolize the 12 Patriarchs and the 12 Apostles—God's chosen people of both the Old and New Testaments. And they pick up the words of worship and proclamation of the Seraphim from Isaiah's vision. There are nine scenes of worship in Revelation. There are nine hymns. And the church has integrated them into our liturgy from the beginning.

In Revelation 5, in one of those hymns, the heavenly worshippers cry out, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor

and glory and blessing!...To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!. And here, the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Jesus has ascended into heaven. That’s what we celebrate today. And heaven worships by proclaiming what Christ has done. And we have the privilege of gathering around Word and Sacrament—to receive from God—and to participate in heavenly things. We are as close to heaven as we are going to get—at least until we are with the Lord. This is what the Divine Service of the Gospel is all about—receiving good gifts from God—and worshipping with angels and archangels and the whole host of heaven.

We can’t see them. The church service might even look pretty ordinary. But the Prophet Isaiah and the Apostle John help us to look beyond what we can see—to what is real—to the realities of heaven—and all that is happening there—even right now.

This is our theology of worship. It is apocalyptic—Jesus is revealed. It is receptive—Christ comes to us. And it is heaven on earth—with angels and archangels and the whole host of heaven. Christ connects us with eternal things as His Word is preached and His Sacrament is received. Christ stands among the lampstands. He comes to us in His church.

And let’s finish where we began in Luke’s Gospel. “While Jesus blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+