

The Ascension of Our Lord – 2020

Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

Esau was beside himself. Crestfallen, robbed, his world was in a twilight zone turmoil. He begged. He pleaded. He poured out his broken heart to his father Isaac. “Bless me, even me also, O my father!” (Genesis 27:34). He cried an exceedingly great and bitter cry. That’s exactly how it is written in Scripture. A blessing; Esau desperately wanted a blessing and what he received was a prophetic word of difficulty – scraps leftover from what Isaac had already given to Jacob. You see, Rebekah and Jacob had conspired to take by deception what was surely going to come to Esau. It’s one of the most heart-wrenching moments in the lives of the patriarchs. “Esau said to his father, ‘Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father.’ And Esau lifted up his voice and wept” (Genesis 27:38).

God’s blessing... do you want that? Do you pine for a benediction, a good word from the good Lord? God’s blessing... do you pray for God to bless you and your household, for Him to look with kindness and grace upon your family? In the midst of this crisis, have you prayed for safety, for stability and protection and for peace in your heart and your soul? Have you received that blessing? Have you been looking for it, trusting that no matter what should occur in your life, that God has indeed blessed you and kept you? Have you ever felt like Esau? Have you ever believed yourself to be a forgotten son, a forgotten daughter, one who receives nothing but the leftovers, that some contemporary Jacob and Rebekah have swindled you, done you dirty and left you barren of your rightful blessing? Has Esau’s forlorn plea ever been on your lips: “Bless me, even me also, O my Father”?

My mother and my wife only had a few things in common – deep Christian faith is certainly one of them, and a genuine love for your servant (for which I am exceedingly grateful), and both of them have a good heart. Both of them, when I have been down, directed me to a simple exercise, a simple but deeply profitable exercise. Count your blessings; that’s it – not complex. Have you done this lately? Count your blessings. Have you directed the fearful or the depressed to this exercise of faith? Do you ever feel **worse** after engaging in a sincere act of thoughtful appreciation for what God has granted you? This morning we are going to play a little game, a theological game, an Ascension Day game. The name of the game is Count your Ascension Blessings.

Here’s how it starts. Jesus is ascending into heaven. Forty days after Easter, forty days after His triumph over death that has rebirthed a humanity that was dead in trespasses and sins; forty days after the tomb was shattered and the Lord Christ strode out of His garden grave, Jesus is returning to His Father’s right hand. The eleven disciples are with Him on the mount; your brothers in the faith, who have testified about what they saw, are with Him. Jesus gives them His command to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them. And do you know what He does, as He is ascending do you know what He does? He lifts up His hands and He blesses them. The word is “eulogy” in Greek and “benediction” in Latin. He blesses them – all of them. The Scripture doesn’t record what He said. I’m going to take a guess. I suspect that He said this: “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be

gracious unto you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace” (Number 6:24-26). Does that sound familiar. It’s the Aaronic bless that you hear week after week.

A verbal blessing, pronounced by the crucified and risen Christ as He ascends, pronounced on His church. The words are anchored in His action. That is the key. His blessing is an extension of what He has done, what He was doing right at that moment. There’s a zillion blessings that flow from our Lord but this morning we are going to count four. Four blessings that are in your possession, four for you to remember and count, four blessings that are tied to the Ascension of our Lord. Here’s number 1: “He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). Your mind has been opened, enlightened. Christ has revealed to you His will, His mercy, His love and you have received it precisely for what it is. You understand the heart of the Scripture. You see your Lord crucified for your sins, you know that you have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. This understanding – He did this in you. You know that you are saved by grace, through faith, and this is not of yourselves, you know that it is the superlative gift of God, not a result of works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Upon you has come the wisdom of the ages. Upon you has come the immeasurable love of God. Upon you has come the knowledge of salvation. What a gift, what a blessing! The Lord Himself has been your teacher. You hear the living voice of Christ in His holy Word and He opens your mind to understand what God’s purposes are – count your Ascension Day blessings. “We have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). What a blessing!

Jesus said that one of the reasons that He ascends into heaven is that He goes to prepare a place for you. You are blessed because the Lord of heaven and earth ascends and gets your eternal home arranged perfectly just for you. He is the High Priest who ventures into the Most Holy Place with His own blood, His own sacrifice, to ensure that you are received like a beloved son, a beloved daughter when He calls you home. His death on the Holy Cross prepares heaven for you. Where you could not go, where you dare not go, the Son of God joyfully went (Hebrews 12:2) so that where He is now you may be also (John 12:26). This is temporary housing – this body, your house, this world – it will not last. God has something more for you. More! In that place there is no worry, no disease, no sin, and no death. You will be more who you are there than you are here, you will see His face, feel His embrace, enjoy all that is good. Because the crucified King ascends into heaven with your humanity, your place is prepared. Count your blessings, your Ascension Day blessings – that was number two.

Jesus takes His visible presence away from the disciples, but do you know what He said to them, what He says to us? “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). He is seated at the right hand of God, the place of authority and dominion. He ascends that He might fill all things (Ephesians 4:10). That’s what St. Paul writes in the book of Ephesians. He is among us as one who serves (Luke 22:27). He ascends that He might give you (serve you) His body to eat and His blood to drink. “I will never leave you, never forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). That is your Ascension Day blessing. Count it, luxuriate in it, let it be the response to the ill that you face in this world. He has not left us as orphans (John 14:18). He has given us the Holy Spirit who is our Comforter, our Helper. You are blessed. This reality is upon you day after day for the Lord is with you, continuously, perpetually with you, guiding you like a shepherd through this fallen world. Count your Ascension Day blessings – that was number three.

1. He has opened your mind to understand the Scriptures
2. He has ascended to prepare a place for you
3. He has declared: “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Blessings give courage. As you perhaps have noticed, I’ve been signing off my correspondence with the congregation during this crisis with a verse from the book of Joshua – Joshua 1:9. “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9). God’s Word does what it says. What God demands, God provides. But if we deny His blessings, if we turn our heart to our problems and rehearse them over and over, what do you suppose the repercussion will be? Fear, dread, a dark and foreboding perception of our future... do you have the ability to manipulate your own mind, your own heart, and the perceptions of others by magnifying our problems and reducing God’s work in our world? **That** is a sin. You do it. I do it. We are to repent of it. It is as though you take God’s blessings and deliberately put them in the trash can while you put your worries on the mantel for everyone to admire. Such an action weakens the body of Christ and the message that the church is to sow precisely at this hour. Blessings give courage. Our Lord’s ascension is the reality upon which our courage is based. It is *real*, it is the divine truth upon which enlivens our hope, it is an applicable truth that shines a heavenly light on the days we are presently living. Courage is a phenomenal blessing – how many of you have too much courage? Count your Ascension Day blessings. That was number four.

We are not of this world (John 17:16). Jesus said that. We don’t belong to this fallen creation. We are strangers here, pilgrims making our way home (Hebrews 11:13). That makes us a blessed people. Count ‘em. Count your blessings. In your home, if you are watching through the internet because you are vulnerable to the virus, or right here in this courtyard – count your blessings and remember where they are anchored. They are anchored to Christ, our ascended King. To Him be glory forever and ever.