

The Ascension of our Lord – 2022

Acts 2:1-11

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

There was war in heaven. The angelic host could not stand idly by; there was too much at stake. “Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back” (Revelation 12:7). Satan and his demonic followers were full of death. What had corrupted them? What unholy motive spun their spirits toward hell? We are not told. The origin of evil is a great mystery. The devil is a fallen angel. What God created was good. At the end of creation, which included the creation of angels, as the sun set at the conclusion of the 6th day, there was nothing *but* goodness. “And God saw everything that he has made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them” (Genesis 1:31-2:1). Evil exists. Evil is not a static thing; it is living and active. Satan’s influence is seen everywhere in the depravity of men.

There was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and the dragon and his angels fought back. Satan was defeated. A rhapsodic voice is heard in heaven: “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down... And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (Revelation 12:10-11). This war in heaven is put side by side with the great conflict at Calvary. The Lord Christ is lifted up on a tree and Satan unleashes his hellish tirade. Jesus seems supremely overmatched. No one comes to His aid. There is no last-minute rescue, only radical suffering. The Lord Himself saw the hunger of death growing when He was arrested: “This is your hour, and the power of darkness” (Luke 22:53). Vulnerable, Jesus opens Himself up to whatever onslaught that evil can marshal. All hate, all murder, all rage and spite and venom is unleashed on Him who is goodness incarnate. The sun was darkened. Light was being expunged. God Himself was being torn, His blood a sign of life’s defeat by all who loved and conspired with death.

In April 2007 a lunatic shot up Virginia Tech. It was horrifying. My sons were young at the time, 12 and 8. It was a time to teach. It was a time to teach boys who would become men. It was time to teach of Christ. We are called to reflect Christ, to defend life, to stop evil. In a world where evil will not alter its agenda, we cannot shrink from death. It is a timeless message that must be rehearsed at regular intervals. We must rehearse it today. Michael and his angels fought the dragon. Michael’s name is actually a Hebrew question which means, “Who is like God?” The Christian church is like God. Christians don’t follow a philosophy. We don’t simply study truth and become intellectually enlightened. The Christian church is not merely a social community that adheres to shared principles. We are *bonded* to the Son of God. His life is in us. His Spirit dwells in our being. His virtue animates our heart. Jesus’ death and resurrection define who we are. Our lives, our bodies are His temple. His love, His mercy, His resolve, His humility, and His strength abide in us. If you have any doubt about this, let St. Paul square you away with these words: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20).

We will not shrink from death. This is not some empty bravado uttered from a safe space in order to stir a sleepy congregation. Jesus said this: “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). If you’ve ever been to Point Loma you’ve likely seen the sea of markers for veterans on the hills of Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery. Many died in battle. They did not shrink from death. Even more idyllic is the American Cemetery in Normandy, France. The markers there are crosses. Who is like God? Those men who put themselves between evil and life. All those men could be named Michael. It needs rehearsing because we could be faced with some situation that demands action. We will not shrink from death. If something were to happen here, I know that the men would act. Steve and Loren and Dwayne and Thomas and Michael and Matthew and Nathaniel and Robert and Michael and Russel and John and Anthony and Joseph and Victor and so many more. Those men are like God because they follow Christ. But it is not just in an adrenaline moment; it is life lived every day.

Here are the words to one of our very best hymns:

Satan, I defy thee;
Death, I now decry thee;
Fear, I bid thee cease.
World, thou shalt not harm me
Nor thy threats alarm me
While I sing of peace.
God’s great pow’r
Guards every hour;
Earth and all its depths adore Him,
Silent bow before Him. (Jesus Priceless Treasure)

That is our frame of mind every day. Why? Because the Savior of the world is risen from the dead. The grave is empty. Death is defeated; powerless. Christ lives. He brings life and light to your soul and has ascended into heaven. He has taken your humanity there, to the right hand of God. Your humanity; He became man for you, taking a very human body so that He might prepare a place for you in heaven. As man, He kept the law in all of its parts; completely; perfectly. He loved God above all things and He loved His neighbor as Himself and that love is a total victory. By faith, His righteousness is credited to your account. In Christ, you are perfect. This Divine Savior came to take your sin. It was placed on Him, in Him. He died bearing it. Your sin was punished once-for-all in the person of Jesus Christ – you are forgiven. That is precisely what brought Him from heaven. His wounds are a testament to an eternal victory over evil. He presented those wounds to His disciples and their response was joy, wonder, faith. Jesus now places those wounds before His Father. Jesus shows His Father His victory and He speaks your name. His life frames our mind for living in this world. Heaven frames our mind. Defending life from evil frames our mind so that when we are faced with a challenge we will act intuitively, congruently with Christ’s life.

Satan was at work at Uvalde. Man failed to respond properly and that is a great sorrow. Satan will continue to bring disarray to us. False answers will be held aloft. Accusations and political bluster and self-promotion will bring a dense fog to a situation that cries out for clarity. Clarity

is found in God's Word. On the Holy Cross, the Lord Christ wasn't overmatched. When Jesus had His flesh pierced, nails pinning Him to the timbers of the cross, He was acting to defend what He loves. What He loves is you. He loves life. He loves children and the elderly and the poor and the rich and the tall and the short and the homely and the handsome and the white, black, olive, red and brown. On the cross Jesus made a public spectacle of evil – He triumphed over evil by allowing it to twist and tear Him (Colossians 2:15). He promised, as He ascended, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). He is with us to protect and defend us with His death and resurrection. He does not leave us when evil storms the gate. Our death is our security for the Lord Christ has disarmed death. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Jesus brings us home irrespective of what evil chooses. That is clarity. That is the Gospel which we rehearse over and over and over. How did Michael and his angels overcome the dragon? By the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.