

Ascension Of The Lord - Haley Fahrner

Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Ascension Sunday—we can look at this a couple of different ways. On the one hand, we have a sunny story of Jesus' coming back after his death, reassuring his disciples that his death had a purpose, and now they have an important job to do, and that the Holy Spirit is coming. That's what we base a lot of faith on these days, and we tend to hear this as a sort of, 'It all worked out, the problem was solved, and it's on the up and up from here on out.' On the other hand, though, we have these disciples, and their experiences. Their best friend, the best thing that's ever happened to them in their poor, oppressed lives, was slaughtered in front of them. Then, he comes back, tells them that it was good that it happened, but a mystery, and that they will be blessed, and they have to go out and devote their lives, risk their lives, to challenge people to believe and understand what happened (a task that kills them violently); then he leaves them bewildered again. And they probably don't miss him any less after that second time.

These are two extremes, and I'd like to find a helpful middle ground. To simply celebrate this story as a Jesus-victory grossly downplays the real suffering that happens, and to focus only on the suffering ignores the fact that it was good somehow.

The theme that stands out to me in all of today's texts is the enthronement of God over chaos and suffering. This *enthronement over* suffering is uncomfortable, in that it doesn't explain the how or why, but it also doesn't downplay God's majesty or suffering's reality. Let's look back at our psalm, Psalm 93—verses 3 and 4, particularly. "The floods have lifted up, O LORD, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the LORD!"

The Hebraic understanding of chaos is water. So, a beach on the Mediterranean or a cliff beaten with waves seems beautiful to a lot of us, but to the original hearers of the psalms, waves of ocean water and flooding rivers are akin to complete disorder and confusion. Even in Genesis, God's creation from chaos isn't *ex nihilo*, out of nothing; it's separating roaring water into peaceful places. This psalmist isn't talking about just being nervous. "The floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring." And we don't get relief from this, really. No stopping the flood with divine intervention, no scooping up the bystanders before the flood comes. The next line just says that God is more majestic than the flood, and is on high above the flood. It's so matter-of-fact. It would be frustrating to me if I weren't convinced it's the truest way to explain our suffering.

This is chaos that nearly all of us can relate to. I've felt it most when my best friend was killed in a car accident, but the nature of suffering is quite dynamic in that it is found in any life, under manifold circumstances. That might be one of the only constructive parts of intense suffering, that it is universally relatable. I can remember feeling as though the chaos was spinning and growing inside me, and raking my every nerve across rocks in waves that would inevitably consume me. And I especially remember feeling that

however much pain was trying to fit itself inside of my body was breaking out of the whole event, rippling out unstoppably so that the chaos went on and on, just pain unconstrained by a physical body and running wild without any existential limits—hurt that stretches all encompassingly across the expanse of existence. It's that feeling that whatever is hurting, or causing the hurt, will continue to grow and expand across all of existence; it can be nearly impossible to understand why it's happening, or what could make it make sense.

I remember that when this was most intense for me, I thought, "God." It was not a prayer, per se. I wasn't addressing anyone. It was more like the thought occurred to me, as though I were remembering something. It wasn't, "God is with me." It certainly wasn't "God is in control" or "God will fix this" or "God did this for a reason." It was just the recollection of God as a concept. In a second I was aware that the pain that I was experiencing, and the pain that was rippling out of what had happened, all existed within God—that the event was devastating, that real anguish radiated from the loss I was experiencing, and that it all existed within God. There wasn't utter chaos and destruction spreading unstoppably. There was chaos and destruction and indescribable anguish that was all contained within God, and eventually it would run up against peace.

I think that's the point today. It's not 'all the loose ends get tied up.' It's not 'God causes our suffering for this or that.' It's not that we don't love Jesus enough and so we suffer from life's hardships. It's not any explanation for or relief from suffering at all. The point is that our anguish runs up against the peace of God, and God's peace surrounds it all. God is loving and present, even if we fail to remember or cannot believe that God is loving and present. And Jesus confirmed this with his ascension.

Today's readings from the lectionary make it clear to me that this story is not mainly about the miracle of Jesus' being transported upward in grandiose fashion. It is about what this act represents—that he is enthroned at the right hand of the Father, has full authority in heaven and earth, and is a personified confirmation of God's encapsulation of our experiences. Even with Jesus' personal, verbal explanation of his suffering's purpose, and even with his promise of blessings to come, both we and the disciples don't have a clear picture of what it was all for, or what will or should happen next. We just know that God was there, and will remain there, present and loving, with outstretched peace to contain any and all things. The disciples are told to be content with not knowing, and so are we. We've been invited into the suffering of the disciples, their real and affirmed confusion and suffering, and we're now offered the same promise of inexplicable peace and blessing they receive—as much or as little comfort as it may give us. Then we're finally pushed to go with the disciples on their call to trek into the new, dangerous unknown.

So what now? How do we live with the peace that seems just outside of reach, or really far out of reach? What do we do in the meantime? We do what those devastated, joyful disciples did. They went on anyway. They preached about chaos and peace, they went ahead into what they didn't understand. So must we. We have to keep going anyway. We get out of bed when we don't understand why we should. We drink our coffee, we share

our experiences, we talk with our friends, we contemplate what's outside ourselves, we continue to seek God and to love with all we can, we experience awful things, we have some good moments too, and we keep going until it kills us (which it will). We might not all be martyrs, but we'll certainly be killed by however we pursue life, before we have all the answers we're looking for, and before we know what it was all for. That's how it's supposed to be. We don't exist in order to figure out why we exist. We exist to exist. Take comfort in that, maybe—that our job is to live until we die, and to know that we won't know why, and trust that peace exists around it.