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Seventh Sunday of Easter | Ascension Sunday

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“Sitting on Top of the World”

As a kid, I spent hours exploring the world using globes and maps. I had one of those light up globes where you could look at picture slides of scenes from around the world. At the time, I thought that was cutting edge technology. You youngsters out there must remember I come from a time when there was no internet.

As you might imagine, I’m now a fan of Google Maps. Thanks to satellites and high-speed internet we can see just about every square inch of earth’s surface. And where there is civilization, you can get on ground level and walk down pretty much any street in the world. If you scroll by my house on street view, you can see me doing yard work!

Maps and globes give us a new or different or even enlarged perspective of the earth. For starters, I doubt we’d have any idea just how big the earth is without globes or maps. Even then, it is hard to us to fathom how big the world is – let alone how diverse her people and cultures are. From a geographical standpoint, we have a very limited world view. We tend to only focus on what is right in front of us – on our own street views.

When I think about the Ascension of our Lord, I imagine Jesus and our heavenly Father peering down on the globe as they dangle their feet from atop a cloud. While this is a primitive image of the Ascension, I believe it is a powerful point of entry as we discern why the Ascension is important in our life of faith. Fundamentally, this image of Jesus atop a cloud is an outward and visible sign of the spiritual implications of the event.

When the scriptures talk about how Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, the authors are speaking less about Jesus’ physical location and more about his position of authority. In other words, Jesus is King of heaven and earth. He fills all and all. There is no part of heaven or earth where Jesus does not have jurisdiction. He is sovereign.

In many ways, the Ascension reflects a compromise between God and humanity. What do I mean? On a basic level, we humans have a hard time believe in a God that, at times, seems vague and abstract. We humans prefer an earthly leader. We need something tangible.

Meanwhile, God tries to communicate that even the best earthly leaders will lead us astray. God tries to communicate that his ways are better than our ways. God also knows that we will turn these earthly leaders into substitute gods or idols. However, God knows that we need something more tangible to hold onto. What is God to do?

This tension between having a heavenly leader and an earthly leader is played out in the Old Testament. As the people of Israel grow into a nation, they notice what the other nations are wearing, and they want to shop at the same store. More specifically, they think they are the only nation whose leader doesn’t wear a purple robe and crown and who feasts sumptuously everyday.

In reply, God says, “I know it doesn’t feel like it, but I’m doing this for your own good. Plus, you aren’t like the other nations. You don’t need a king. I’m your Lord and King.” But like an adolescent, Israel’s growth as a nation has led to a blind confidence that has them

believing they know better than God. Again, Israel says, “But God, everyone else has one. Why can’t I?”

Eventually, God says, “Fine. You want a king? I’ll give you a king. But don’t tell me I didn’t warn you!” Israel’s king experiment doesn’t work out too well. After three kings, Saul, David, and Solomon, Israel is thrown into a civil war that leaves them vulnerable to other nations. They will soon face a common enemy that they fail to stop because of their internal struggles. A house divided cannot stand.

Our need for an earthly leader is understandable. We need that physical and tangible presence in our lives. As an embodied people, we need someone we can see and feel and hear. We need a leader we can relate to. Someone who has experienced what we’ve experienced. Someone who has our best interest at heart. Someone who can see the big picture. While God is all these things to Israel, they still want a king.

What Israel fails to see at this point is that even the wisest earthly leaders cannot see the big picture. The psalmist knows this saying, “Do not put your trust in the rulers of men. There is no help in them.” Even the most compassionate leaders cannot truly know what it is like to walk in our shoes. Not even the most altruistic people cannot truly do what is best for us all the time.

No matter who you are or where you come from, we all have a limited worldview. All of us have some kind of blinders on. We all have conscious and unconscious biases based on where we are in the world - geographically, socially, financially, politically. A democrat and a republican might say the exact same thing, but we’ll only agree with the one whose party we align most with.

An Auburn coach and an Alabama coach might make the exact same recruiting violation but only the coach whose team we pull for has a legitimate excuse while the other deserves to be fired. A rich man and a poor man might have the same great idea, but the rich man is the only one who benefits. We can be a hypocritical and arrogant bunch, can’t we?

I’ll never forget walking into the National Cathedral for the first time. I immediately felt overwhelmed by the sheer size of the space. While there are bigger cathedrals in the world, that was the largest one I had visited at the time. Upon further reflection, I was overwhelmed because I felt small.

Ultimately, I felt humbled. I felt insignificant. I was reminded that I don’t know half of what I report to know and half of what I report to know pales in comparison to all the things I’ll never know. I’m a numbers guy, so I think of it like this. Let’s say I think I know 40% of all there is to know. In reality, I know .000004% of all there is to know.

My world view is about x big. God’s world view is X big. Even after all these years, I still try to convince myself that my world view is superior to God’s view. Left unchecked by God’s Word, I’ll go on convincing myself that I know better. But thanks be to God for the gift of the Church that constantly convicts and comforts me with the Gospel.

The Ascension of our Lord tells us that we have access to God’s world view when we live in and with and through Christ – the living Word. Our collect for the day says that the Ascension opens the way for our hearts and minds to ascend into the living body of Christ.

Our participation in Holy Communion helps paint that picture. When we take of Christ's body and blood into our own being, we acknowledge that our hearts and minds are meant to be one with the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord.

In Christ, we are no longer confined to our individual street views. Our hearts and minds are opened to the bigger picture. More specifically, when we live in Christ, we are better able to see the world like Christ sees the world. And when we see the world as Christ sees the world, we notice a few things.

For starters, we notice that we are all made of the same blood. We are all made in God's image. Even more, we notice that everyone struggles – some more quietly than others. We notice that everyone sins in one way or another – some more deliberately than others. Everyone is somewhere on the ignorant spectrum – some more willfully than others.

Ultimately, we notice that the world is a bigger mess than we previously thought. We are all in need of the healing power of God's love. We notice that everyone is precious in God's sight regardless of their geographical, financial, social, and political location.

When we live in Christ and see the world as Christ sees the world, we will also notice that God's love is bigger and more powerful than any obstacle this world will ever know – even more powerful than sin and death.

At the end of the day, we will notice that the love revealed in the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord will help ground us in a fickle and finite world. This grounding empowers us to live with a posture of hope even when it looks like the world is falling apart. For in Christ, we will notice that all things are being made new all the time. Amen.