

Rider of the Clouds

Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35

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As the church keeps time, this is the last Sunday in the season of Easter. The season started with a bang – literally, to the sounds of timpani and trumpet, but it ends today on a much quieter note. Maybe this strange season of unchecked celebration coupled with uncomfortable silence, a season marked by resurrection appearances and recurring doubt, should end on a quiet note before the Pentecost storm arrives next Sunday.

But before we bid the season of Easter a calm adieu, there is a date we have missed on the calendar – Ascension Day. Arriving forty days after Easter Sunday, Ascension Day is the church's attempt to celebrate "he ascended into heaven" in the Apostles' Creed, to announce that the work of redemption is complete, that the risen Jesus has joined God in glory.

Ascension Day, or as our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers call it, "The Feast of the Ascension," is tucked far away from most everyone's sight. It falls on a Thursday, and for most Protestants at least, it is a celebration that we rarely observe, and when it is observed, we rarely attend. For most members of the Christian family, Ascension Day came and left this past Thursday without one exchange of Ascension Day presents, without one Ascension Day meal, and without the singing of one "Happy Ascension Day" song. This holiday is so obscure in the church that you can't even shop for it on eBay!

So, for all of us who missed the missing festivities last Thursday, the worship staff would like to invite you to a grand and glorious celebration of Ascension Sunday. Well, actually, our celebration this morning will not be especially grand – the timpani and trumpet were already booked – and it will not be all that glorious either – we just couldn't figure out the right palette of flowers to use to surround the sanctuary, so we didn't use any.

To make the celebration potentially even less grand and glorious, the assigned Psalm for today is Psalm 68 and only portions of it, at that. If you poll regular readers of the Psalter, Psalm 68 will not ascend to their "favorites" list, especially when read in full. It is way too raw, too filled with mythical language, too violent, especially for our sedate, rational, and peace-loving ways. Replete with cosmic and bizarre images, it is almost as embarrassing to stand up and read this psalm in worship as it is to sit here and celebrate an up, up, and away church holiday.

Maybe, then, today is the day for a really short sermon – call it a "meditation." We can sing an extra hymn or two, pronounce the benediction early, and call it a day. You should be so lucky! Settle in, because I happen to love to celebrate Ascension Day and think Psalm 68 – all 35 verses – should be pulled out of the church's recycling bin.

In Psalm 68, God fights against anything and anyone who would destroy God's good creation. The God we meet on Ascension Day and in Psalm 68 is not a timid, impotent remainder of all our Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment math, who hides in the clouds. Ascension Day is not a timid celebration of the church, even if we are

timid about celebrating it, and Psalm 68 is not timid, and because it is not, we have exiled it.

Early in Psalm 68, we are asked to: “Sing to God, play music to God’s name, build a road for the Rider of the Clouds, rejoice in Yahweh, dance before God. Father of orphans, defender of widows, such is God in God’s holy dwelling.” Gerald Wilson reminds us that these are fighting words, because in the popular theology of the day – Canaanite theology – Ba’al, not the Lord God of Israel, was the cloud rider.

What better Psalm to read at the end of the Easter season, lest anyone doubt that our God is a fighter and expects as much from us. Ascension Sunday features the image of “Rider of the Clouds,” hardly a serene image that we conjure up while gazing skyward. It is a military metaphor for a God who will not be defeated by the most advanced arsenal of evil – be they the gods of the Canaanites or the gods of our own devising. Isn’t the Ascension a metaphor for the same thing?

In Psalm 68, we meet the same God who fights non-violently from the cross, reminding us to work against evil and in the face of evil to pray, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” In the view of the world from the cross and from the eyes of the Ascender into the Clouds, we see, as Psalm 68 declares, that our God does not sit passively on high and watch with sympathy or delight the machinations of the human comedy.

Maya Angelou closes her powerful poem, “My Guilt,” with this line, “My sin lies in not screaming loud” (*The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*, p. 45). The psalmist commits no such sin. He screams in holy rage in the name and for the sake of the Rider of the Clouds who notices things that others miss, who sees people that others pass by. That’s why the church cannot afford to consign Ascension Day to liturgical obscurity. On this day we not only give thanks for the Rider of the Clouds, but set our sights anew on the Ascender into the Clouds.

You can read Psalm 68 with its militaristic language, “let his enemies scatter, let his opponents flee before him” as just another example of silly, superstitious religious bravado that offends pacifistic sensitivities. You can dismiss this psalm as being out of step with our more sophisticated theological ruminations about God. Or you can take a deep breath, give thanks for the Rider of the Clouds and the Ascender into the Clouds and let out a scream that will pierce the ears of evil.

Lots of ink is being spilt today about the decline of the church, especially in the mainline, but now also the mega-churches are experiencing a significant loss of membership. New books come out each month telling pastors and congregations how to turn this trend around. They describe how to be an “Emergent” church, how to do contemporary worship, how to brand our share of the church marketplace. Like Chinese food, I read these books and I’m hungry again an hour later.

What I am waiting for is an Ascension Day book that will speak to the heart of the issue of why so many people yawn when the word “church” is mentioned. While the Rider of the Cloud watches for us to act and listens for us to speak, we have grown lethargic and hoarse. It’s not that we no longer fight. We do, but most often it is a family feud that keeps us preoccupied with ourselves while the evil about us grows unchecked and largely unchallenged.

Psalm 68 knows nothing about such a timid, distracted, and unengaged god, but knows everything about God, the Rider of the Clouds, who is also the Father of orphans and widows, of any and all who are the most vulnerable prey of evil. Maybe Ascension

Day is a day to read Psalm 68 – all of it – and hopefully to find our voice again, just as Lutheran pastor Heidi Neumark found her voice fighting Molech, an ancient god in a modern outfit, who is alive and well and working its deadly ways in the South Bronx:

“Do you renounce all forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises?” These words are also part of our baptismal liturgy. It is impossible to pronounce these words and send the children out like lambs to the slaughter. It is impossible to anoint their foreheads with scented oil and rich promise: “You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever,” and do nothing as they go off to substandard schools that virtually seal their failure to survive in today’s economy. We put a lighted candle in each waiting hand: “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works . . .” Why must the church fight and work for better public schools? There is no better reason than the baptism of these children. Are we going to stand by and allow Molech to snatch them from us as so much prison fodder? Once we’ve said no to the devil, we need to keep saying it: Hell no. (*Breathing Space*, p. 12)

What if Ascension Sunday became our annual service when we rededicated ourselves to “screaming loud” in the name of and for the sake of the Rider of the Clouds, the Climber of the Cross, and the Ascender into the Clouds? What if we were to begin our worship with confession for the ways we have been complicit in the abuse of the most vulnerable that God has given to our charge?

I walked up to our night shelter last fall, and one of the guests started a standing ovation for me, saying, “He’s the one who makes it possible for us to be here.” His words were an undeserved and grace-filled compliment, but taken literally, they spoke way too much truth.

How does the psalmist describe God in Psalm 68? “God gives the lonely homes to live in.” In part, because you and I are not “screaming loudly” enough in Congress and across the street at the State Capitol on behalf of those consigned to streets and shelters in this society that you and I are the responsible ones.

What if we were to reclaim Ascension Sunday as our annual bookend to Easter Sunday with the cadences of Psalm 68 beating throughout the service? What if we reclaimed the biblical image of God as a street fighter, a non-violent street fighter, who will fight to the death rather than remain silent before the evil around us and within us? What if Ascension Sunday were our annual wake-up call one week before the spiritual tsunami of Pentecost?

Maybe then, the Spirit of God, the Rider of the Clouds, would find us ready, really ready, for a fresh, life-transforming breath of wind.

Happy Ascension Sunday!