



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Ascension Day Psalm 47

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June 2, 2011 — Ascension Day

We recited together Psalm 47 a few minutes ago. Let's look at those words of the "Sons of Korah" again:

O clap your hands, all you peoples:

and cry aloud to God with shouts of joy.

For the Lord Most High is to be feared:

he is a great King over all the earth.

He cast down peoples under us:

and the nations beneath our feet.

He chose us a land for our possession:

that was the pride of Jacob, whom he loved. (vv. 2-5)

There's a reason why for more than a thousand years this Psalm has been connected with the feast of Christ's Ascension. These first four verses celebrate God's provision for his people. This is worship—and a perfect model for our worship. This is God's people singing out over the mighty deeds of God and the salvation he brought to them.

We live in a day where we give little thought to God—to his mighty deeds, to his perfect character, to who he is—even in the Church. We live in an age in which sin is downplayed. We live in an age where the Gospel has been turned into a self-help message. But friends, without the reminder that apart from Jesus we are sinners bound for hell, we'll never really be moved to true worship. If we don't dwell on the Gospel message during the week,

we'll never be really prepared to offer *real* praise on Sunday. If there's no *depth* to our understanding of God—his holiness, his majesty, his righteousness, his lovingkindness—and if there's no depth to our understanding of just what an amazing thing it is that Jesus did in coming to earth as one of us and dying for us, we can never truly sing out in praise the way these ancient Hebrews did in our psalm. They saw God act and they responded with spontaneous and genuine worship. And friends, on this day when we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus to his throne in heaven, we should be moved to worship in the same way. We've been through Christmas and seen our Lord born. We've been through Epiphany and seen him manifested as God's Son. We've been through Good Friday and Easter and we've seen him die for our sins and rise to new life. And finally now that he's redeemed us and completed his mighty acts of salvation, he's gone to take his throne as our King. How can we not be moved to worship?

Let's look at Psalm 47 in some more depth. It was written during the events that we read about in 2 Chronicles 20. David and Solomon had brought the eastern kingdoms—Moab, Edom, and Ammon—under their control, but after the kingdom of Israel broke up and the kings became weak, those eastern pagan kingdoms broke free—and they resented Israelite control. So during the reign of Jehoshaphat they allied together and came as one huge army against Judah. No one knew what to do. The army was too big; before it they were helpless. And that's when Jehoshaphat gathered the people, got on his knees, and prayed. And when he had finished praying, one of the priests there prophesied:

Thus says the LORD to you, 'Do not be afraid and do not be

dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God's....You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.' Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed. Tomorrow go out against them, and the LORD will be with you.' (2 Chronicles 20:15, 17)

Right then and there, the king and the people bowed down in worship—they trusted God would do what he said. And so the next day the army assembled with the Levites, they marched out of Jerusalem, formed ranks...and then they started singing:

Give thanks to the LORD, for his steadfast love endures forever. (2 Chronicles 20:21)

That was probably the craziest battle plan ever, but the text tells us that when they started singing, God himself ambushed the army of the Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites, throwing them into confusion, and they destroyed each other completely. The king and his people went down into the valley—a place they named the Valley of Beracah, the Valley of Blessing—and it took them three days to gather up spoils. And as they marched back up to the city—back up Mount Zion—they sang those words: **O clap your hands, all you people; and cry aloud to God with shouts of joy!**"

God has gone up with the sound of rejoicing:

and the Lord to the blast of the horn.

O sing praises, sing praises to God:

O sing praises, sing praises to our King.

For God is the King of all the earth:

O praise him in a well-wrought psalm.

God has become the King of the nations:

he has taken his seat upon his holy throne.

The princes of the peoples are gathered together:

with the people of the God of Abraham.

For the mighty ones of the earth are become the servants of God:

and he is greatly exalted. (vv. 6-10)

It's a Psalm of Ascent—one of the psalms that was later sung by the people as they went up to the city and to the Temple during the festival seasons, but it was inspired by the mighty and saving act of God—it was sung by men and women who had been saved from destruction, saved from an enemy before whom they were powerless, and now as they carried his ark—the visible symbol of his presence with them—as they carried it back to the temple and to the Holy of Holies, they sang the praises of their King.

Can you see why we sing this psalm to celebrate the Ascension? Those last few verses point to our time. They give us a prophetic vision of the gentiles, led by their princes, entering the kingdom of God, and the Messiah enthroned as King over a Church made up of both Jews and Gentiles. And that's just what we celebrate today.

Just like Jehoshaphat did 2800 years ago, we face an enemy over whom we can never triumph. But this time it's not an invading army—it's worse. The Moabites could kill the body, but our enemy—sin—kills the soul. And so King Jesus came down to save us on the battlefield of Redemption. On the field of Calvary he conquered and despoiled our Enemy.

But the King, as we read in last Sunday's Gospel, can't stay here. He has to return to his throne. And as we'll see the Sunday after this next, in fulfillment of his promises, he won't leave us alone while he's gone. But today we're reminded that Jesus is in fact our King and today he ascends to his throne—just as, having conquered the Ammonites, the Moabites, and the Edomites, the Ark of God went home, back to the Holy of Holies.

That alone should move our hearts to true praise of our King—just like it did for the Sons of Korah in the days of Jehoshaphat. But brothers and sisters, we have even greater reason to give him praise. The people of Judah could only follow the Ark so far. When the priests carried it into the Holy of Holies, it was gone from their presence. They were still sinful men and women, the only glimpse they got of the tangible symbol of God in their midst was when he chose to come out to them. They could never enter his holy presence. And yet when Jesus ascended to heaven, he gave us an invitation to follow. His earthly work of redemption is done. He's accomplished our salvation, by his blood he's washed us clean, and now we can not only enter the holy of holies, but Jesus actually invites us to come in with him. It's just a matter of time. He's gone to prepare a place for us there and someday he'll come back to take us there physically, but in the meantime he invites us to ascend with him spiritually. To cite another psalm, Psalm 67:18-19:

**You ascended on high,
leading a host of captives in your train...**

**Blessed be the Lord,
who daily bears us up;
God is our salvation.**

Have you ever wondered why we begin the liturgy of the Lord's Supper with those words: "Lift up your hearts"? This is why. Not only do we offer our hearts to God as an offering of ourselves, but we lift our hearts heavenward as an acclamation and profession of our faith in the saving work of Jesus at the cross and in acknowledgement that he now reigns as King at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly Jerusalem, our true home and the place of our heavenly citizenship.

But brothers and sisters, there's a practical reality in those words too. "Lift up your hearts." "We lift them to the Lord." Consider what that means—consider the commitment we make when we really do lift our hearts to the Lord. It's more than just singing songs on Sunday. It's about a changed life offered to God in thanksgiving—a changed life made possible by the mighty and saving acts of Jesus. Father Parsch wrote, "Sin does not accompany Christ into heaven; rather it is the chain that keeps us bound to earth. We must break this bond. We must ascend into heaven with our hearts and our wills and our desires, we must 'live with our minds in heaven.' Then in God's good time we will follow the Lord Jesus with both body and soul glorified."

Let us pray: "Almighty God, as we believe that your only begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven; so grant that in our hearts and minds we may also ascend there and dwell continually with him, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."