

THE FESTIVAL OF THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD

MAY 21ST, 2020

PRAYER OF THE DAY

P: Lord Jesus, King of glory, on this day you ascended far above the heavens and at God's right hand you rule the nations. Leave us not alone, we pray, but grant us the Spirit of truth that at your command and by your power we may be your witnesses in all the world; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

GOSPEL OF THE DAY Luke 24:44-54

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

DEVOTIONS ON ROMANS 8:28-39 SHOWING US THAT THE ASCENDED CHRIST SERVES US AS PROPHET, PRIEST AND KING

Our government has three basic branches: the judicial, who interprets the law; the legislative, who writes the law; and the executive, who enforces the law. In the Old Testament times, the Lord established three basic branches. You had prophets like Elijah and Isaiah. They were to speak God's Word to the people. You had priests who served as the go-betweens, making sacrifices to God for the people. They also had kings who ruled, protected, and led the people.

Jesus work as our Savior has often been compared to this three part office of prophet, priest, king. On earth he was a prophet as he spoke God's Word to us. He served as our priest as he became the bridge between us and God and made the one sacrifice for the sins of the world, himself. He also served as a king to establish the Kingdom of God.

Tonight we celebrate the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven. We also learn he isn't on vacation. He is still serving as our Prophet, Priest and King. We will let Romans 8 show us how.

DEVOTION 1: JESUS IS OUR PROPHET

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified,” Romans 8:28-30.

Imagine how a gold fish feels. He really doesn't understand anything that goes on outside his bowl. His bowl is dirty and it is time for his owner to clean it, but he doesn't understand what is going on. First a giant net enters the water. Scared, he flees, but it captures him. Then the net leaves the water and he can't breath. Then he is thrown into a strange, foreign place, another bowl full of water. He is confused and in shock. The water tastes and smells different. There are no comforts of home like pebbles on the bottom or food; nothing. Then that net attacks him again where he can't breath, and plunged into his old bowl. Everything is clean, but he is so frightened and in shock after all he went through.

Imagine it is your gold fish. If only he understood what you are doing for him. You are making his life better by cleaning his bowl. It is for his good, yet he struggles against you and puts himself through so much needless stress and anxiety. If only you can tell him. If only he knew. It would be much easier for him. He would willingly go into the net and take a deep breath and hold it while he is taken out of the water. He would realize that the other bowl is only temporary, to keep him alive and safe while you clean his bowl. Then another deep breath as you take him to his home. He would then appreciate what you are doing and thank you repeatedly.

We are the goldfish. So much goes on in our lives. So much of it scares us, confuses us. If only we could understand. Unbelievers can't. They look at the world and conclude rather quickly that God is either powerless, mean or a figment of our imaginations. The evidence seems overwhelming—how can there be a loving God in the presence of COVID 19, cancer, child abductions, diabetes, war, divorce, and rape? Even Christians get confused. We easily, but wrongfully, conclude that trouble and pain are signs that something is amiss, that we have broken some great, secret law of God and he is punishing us.

If only God could make us understand. He tells us in his Word. On earth, Jesus spoke God's Word to us. He still does so today. In Ephesians four we are told that it was he, that is Jesus, who gave some to be prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. God inspired the writers of the Bible with the very thoughts and words they put down and preserved that word all these centuries so that you and I can have exactly what God wants us to know. Jesus is still being our prophet through this Word!

And what is God telling us? ***“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”*** If we take these words literally, and I hope we do, everything that goes on in our lives God uses for our good. And everything means everything. I am sure the goldfish may not fully understand how a net will be used for his good, but if he knows his owner loves him and is doing him good, he will let the net take him and deprive him of oxygen for a few seconds. We may not be able to connect all the dots or understand how, but God promises to use all things for our good, even painful, harmful things.

This is the case because the Lord has a plan for us. ***“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”*** Sure, there are good things the Lord works out for us whether it is the birth of a baby or marriage or getting fired so you can find a better job. But all of these are secondary. Note that the phrase that God works everything out for our good, it ends in a comma. He immediately explains what good he is working out for us. God's ultimate goal is to get us into heaven and will use anything, even if it hurts, to get us there.

This is where faith comes in. I can't always understand how illness can be for good, but then again, I am not asked to understand. I am asked only to believe and trust my God. The same is true for you. Maybe the goldfish doesn't understand why his tank needs cleaning. But if he trusts you, he will let you grab him by a net to where he can't breath and bring him back into a clean bowl.

The Lord may not give us every detail, but he does tell us why he will even let and use bad things into our lives. He is leading us to heaven. Imagine the people God used to put you in contact with his Word so he may call you to faith through that Word: parents who brought you to Baptism; a grandmother who

prayed for you; a Godmother who gave you a Bible for your confirmation; Sunday School teachers, pastors, neighbors, spouses, even children. It literally could be hundreds even thousands.

And think of how God twists and turns bad things into good. Think of how the brothers sold Joseph into slavery where he then ended up in prison where he then ended up second in command of Egypt. At the moment Joseph had no idea what God was up to, but in hindsight he saw how twisted bad into good, putting him in a position where he could save the lives of millions including his own family.

Like the goldfish, we are confused. But God tells us in his Word to calm down. He will work it out for our good. Trust him, and you will not be disappointed. Amen.

DEVOTION 2: JESUS IS OUR PRIEST

“What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us,” Romans 8:31-34.

Is it a good idea to let children drink red juice in the living room? Experience tells us, “No.” It must be something in the dye used in making it red, but once spilled on carpet, it is almost impossible to get out. You use carpet cleaner, scrub, shampoo the carpets, and you just can’t quite get it out.

The Bible uses three words for sin. First there is transgression which means we cross over the line between right and wrong. You have iniquity. Iniquity means you pour liquid in a glass but you don’t have enough. You need two cups of milk, but you only have one. So we don’t measure up to God. Then you have sin which literally means “missing the mark.” God tells us to shoot a bullseye and we don’t. Often we miss the target altogether. In order to understand, appreciate, and even believe that we are going to heaven, we first have to understand what sin is and what it deserves. That takes humility. Pride keeps us from confessing our sins. Selfishness, does, too, because it wants something so bad, it will do and justify anything including sin. Adam and Eve sinned. When God confronted them on it, they still didn’t get it. “It was the woman who made me.” “It was the serpent who made me.” Sin is when we do wrong. It is when we cross that line between love of neighbor to love of self, and love of God to love of things.

And sin damns. We deserve God’s anger. The problem is, we can’t get rid of it. Like a stain of red juice, every sin we commit stays in the carpet. The only way you can pay for it is to die in hell.

But there is another kind of stain that goes away. It is the stain of justification. Think of it like a wonderful coat of paint that covers old blemishes. ***“Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”***

Justification means we are not guilty of our sins. And like a stain, it can’t be removed. The devil wants to accuse us of sin. And he has a lot to work from. Every day we sin. But when he goes before God with his list of sins, the result is always the same: not guilty. God did not spare his own Son, but gave him as a sin sacrifice for us all. Sinned yesterday? You are forgiven. Sinned today and tomorrow? Forgiven. Jesus served as our High Priest by offering himself as a sacrifice for our sin.

And he still serves as that High Priest today. We are told that Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for us. Therefore no one can condemn us. This is the gospel. This is the good news. Even if you sinned, you are forgiven. This is how Jesus serves us as our high priest. He intervenes for us.

DEVOTION 3: JESUS IS OUR KING

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are

considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We know how the Bible describes us as the sheep and Christ is the Shepherd. We love that picture. But like sheep we are helpless and we seem vulnerable. Back in the Roman Days, the emperors and citizens sometimes took out their frustration and thirst for blood on Christians. Numerous persecutions were launched against them and countless thousands died for their faith. It was easy to attack Christians, almost too easy. The crowds that gathered in the coliseums to watch Christians torn apart by wild animals sometimes went home disappointed; those Christians didn't run around screaming and begging for mercy; they just sang hymns, prayed, and then died.

Christians still appear weak and helpless today. It's not macho to be a Christian because we don't hit back. It must not be fun to be a Christian because we don't get drunk or fornicate. Christians settle arguments instead of showing how strong they are in a fight.

And we must look as helpless as sheep to Satan. Sheep have no sharp teeth or talons or thick skin. They are nearly blind, dumb, and defenseless. On our own we cannot defend ourselves against the devil. As Paul reminds us in Ephesians, our conflict isn't against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces. How he must laugh each time we stop resisting and give in to sin.

But we are not defenseless. We have God's promise that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. War, nakedness, persecution, not even death can ever tear us away from God or from his promise of eternal bliss in heaven. Nothing, not even the devil.

One of the government's top jobs is to protect its citizens. Jesus is our King as he protects us. No matter what the world does, it cannot take away our faith and hope.

Ascension means Christ has gone to heaven to the right hand of God the Father. But it also means he is coming back for us. Until then Christ still serves as our prophet, priest and king. Until he returns Christians will hurt a lot. But our pain points to the joy that awaits. When a runner breaks the tape at the finish line, he is full of joy. Though his legs hurt and his muscles ached during the race, that pain only led up the joy of winning. So with you and me. We will cross the finish line. We will win and the joy will simply overshadow the pain we face now. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.