

Beyond the Blank Blue Sky

An Ascension Day Sermon

John D. Witvliet

First Reading: Acts 1:1-11

Sermon Text: Revelation 5

Heidelberg Catechism, QA 49

Introduction: The Tragedy of the Blank Blue Sky (Acts 1)

Today, Ascension Day, is a day of celebration. Jesus is Lord! The one who once was crowned with thorns is now crowned in glory. So today is a day for singing “Rejoice the Lord is King.” “Lord, I lift your name on high,” and “Crown him with many crowns.”

Still, it’s a mighty perplexing day. Who would ever have guessed that it would end this way? The disciples this day make their journey with Jesus to the Mount of Olives, just as they had so many times before. Only this time they end their journey staring at a blank sky. Just days before, Jesus had showed them the nail marks in his hands. Now he slips mysteriously into heaven. The disciples are speechless. An angel has to come along and prompt them to move on.

Philip Yancey, a deeply committed Christian writer, calls this whole scene one of the greatest struggles of his own spiritual life. He reflects on this in a chapter about the ascension that he entitles the “blank blue sky.” As he writes it, “the reality of this material universe tends to overwhelm my faith in a spiritual universe suffusing it all.” So often, it is as if “I look into the blank sky and see nothing” (*The Jesus I Never Knew*, 230). Yancey’s phrase, “the blank blue sky,” sums up the working theology or worldview of a lot of us. We realize that Jesus lived a remarkably good life. And we have a sense that God is up there somewhere. But it’s all pretty fuzzy.

Most of time, this “blank blue sky theology” isn’t something we think much about. But sometimes we can’t avoid it—especially when tragedy strikes. After 9-11, rock star Bruce Springsteen, issued an album entitled *The Rising*. It features a poignant song, entitled “You’re Missing,” about losing a loved one. The song ends with a little “blank blue sky theology.” The words of the refrain go this way: “God’s drifting in heaven, devil’ in the mailbox/ Got dust on my shoes, nothing but teardrops.” How is that for a vision? God is like a benign cloud floating aimlessly in heaven. What’s delivered to our address is not the comfort of God’s Spirit, but the work of the devil. And we are left with nothing but tears.

Springsteen’s logic is actually pretty good here. This kind of blank blue sky theology does leave us without hope. It’s the kind of worldview that generates so many of our biggest spiritual anxieties: Does God have any clue what I am going through? Is there any point to daily living if everything ends up in a kind of amorphous spiritual sea? Is there anything beyond what we see? Will our embarrassing little lives ever merit heaven? These are questions that hospital and nursing home chaplains hear every day. They are questions that are front-and-center after tragedies like 9-11. But they are never far under the surface for any of us.

In light of all this, it’s interesting to note that Jesus’ ascension was a frequent subject of preaching after 9-11. And throughout the history of the church, the Ascension has actually been

a source of great comfort to people in crisis. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from a Nazi prison, he picked Ascension Day as the day of all days to celebrate. Our Heidelberg Catechism question today makes the case that the Ascension benefits us. How can this be? What benefit can we find in the blank, blue sky?

Encountering the text

Well, when the church explores this mysterious event, it has so much more to offer than a blank sky. That's because the Bible offers not only Acts 1 but also Revelation 4-5. Together, these texts are like having multiple cameras to give us multiple viewing angles, both on Jesus and on heaven. Acts 1 is the view from below, what seems like blank-sky view. Revelation 5 is the view from above, a vision of heaven where Jesus is. And the view from above makes all the difference.

Now what we find in Revelation 5 is not a postcard from heaven. It's not a verbal photograph, with literal descriptions of everything. Rather, it's an evocative vision, a word-painting—the kind of description perfectly suited to stoke our imaginations. All we need to realize that it is not a literal photograph is the description it offers of Jesus. We know that the Bible teaches that Jesus ascended in his resurrected body. Yet here he is depicted not as a human, but as a Lion, and then a Lamb. The best human words John could find to describe Jesus were picture words.

The vision actually begins already in chapter 4. It is a vision of indescribable beauty and majesty. John compares his view to the most exquisite jewels, the most awe-inspiring thunderstorm, the most triumphant music. And we pick up the vision here at chapter 5, right when the focus turns to Jesus—now ascended into heaven.

Now this part of the picture is so rich that we can't begin to exhaust this picture today. This chapter is like one of those art works at a museum that experts and patrons return time to and time again, always seeing something new. But today, using the Catechism as our guide, we focus especially on three particular details in this vision. Think of them as three brushstrokes in John's painting of heaven, three details that address some of our deepest spiritual anxieties, and make all the difference in the world for how we live and die.

Brushstroke 1: The Lion-Lamb/Benefit 3: Our own flesh in heaven

The first brushstrokes we will ponder are John's words to describe Jesus himself. At the center of this vision of heaven is the ascended Lord. And how is he pictured? As a cosmic Rambo? Braveheart? Hardly. In an image that has astonished readers for nearly 2000 years, John pictures this Jesus as this "lion of the tribe of Judah." It's a phrase that inspired C.S. Lewis to create "Aslan," the lion-king who was gentle enough to be your best friend and powerful enough break through the deepest mysteries in the cosmos. And John then pictures Jesus as a "lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered." Lambs were those animals sacrificed back in Old Testament temple worship. The image suggests Jesus' role in fulfilling all the requirements of sacrifice. And what is so striking about the picture is that the marks of Jesus' passion are still present. The lamb looks "as if it had been slaughtered." Jesus had showed Thomas his nail-scarred hands back on earth. Now we now that these marks survived the heavenly ascent.

What is astonishing about this picture is that it calls attention not just to Jesus' divinity, but also to his humanity. When Jesus ascended into heaven, the true human, the firstfruits of humanity, complete with the scars of suffering, was seated at the right hand of God. The catechism says it this way: "We have our own flesh in heaven."

All the way through, one of the surprises of New Testament teaching is that salvation comes in concrete, flesh-and-blood terms. God redeems all things. God redeems each aspect of who we are—body, mind, and soul. Flesh and blood counts. In Jesus, God took on flesh and blood. Our bodies count; they are temples of the Holy Spirit. Back on Christmas, we celebrate the incarnation, the fact that God became human, dealing with us in flesh and blood. The ascension tells us that God deals with flesh and blood not just on earth, but in heaven. The ascension means that this flesh-and-blood, bodies-matter-as-well-as-souls perspective is carried all the way into heaven.

Part of the force of this is to say that heaven is no inhumane place, like the Arctic on a cold day. It's a place made for us, just like earth is. We belong there. We will be at home there. The ascension tells us that heaven is the sort of place fit for humans—a perfect home for people who have been "raised with Christ." In fact, Jesus tells us that he was going to heaven for just that reason, to prepare a home for us (John 14:1-4). As the catechism says, "Christ our head will take us, his members, to himself in heaven." Hymn writer James Brumm captures it this way:

"Christ has gone up, still bearing wounds, still bound to race and gender;
his royal robe all crimson blood, his triumph all surrender.
Now we, though bound to who we are, can follow with our pain and scars,
To Love's eternal blessing" (*Sing! A New Creation* 154, st. 2).

Now picturing Jesus in heaven, still bearing the marks of his suffering, is quite a different picture than a blank blue sky! And part of the difference it makes for us is in how we pray. This is especially clear in the book of Hebrews. The writer of Hebrews tell us: "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Hebrews 4). Without these signs of Jesus sufferings, we might be tempted to think that the perfection of heaven would be indifferent to our suffering. With them, we are bold to think of Christ as one who continually sympathizes with our weakness. Heaven is a place that is in touch with our suffering.

Brushstroke 2: the seven spirits of God/Benefit 3: Jesus sending the Spirit

But the description of Jesus doesn't stop there. It continues with a second of John's brushstrokes. Jesus is pictured (there in verse 6) as "having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth." Now it's important to remember that this, too, is word picture. There is no reason let the imagery scare us. The point of "seven eyes" is not that Jesus is frightening! The point is that Jesus sees us. He connects with us. How? By "sending his Spirit to us as a further guarantee" (HC, Benefit no. 3). These seven eyes are a way

of thinking of the “spirits of God who go out into all the earth.” Here “seven”—scripture’s most significant number—means “complete.” The text conveys that the “in-every-sense-complete Spirit of God” is sent out into all the earth.

This helps us see that Ascension Day is not really about the power of Jesus vanishing into heaven. It’s about having that power unleashed into all the earth. While on earth, Jesus affected those right around him. After he ascended, this powerful presence was unleashed on the whole globe—the whole cosmos. One theologian (Walter Wink) once noted that killing Jesus was like trying to destroy a dandelion seed-head by blowing on it (Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, 226). Christ was the light of the world all right, but “now that light, as if hitting a prism, would fracture and shoot out in a human spectrum of waves and colors” (Yancey, 228). There is “no place that we can go to flee from his presence” (Psalm 139), nowhere we can go to separate ourselves from God’s love (Rom. 8).

This “seven eyes” image also helps us see that the Spirit that energizes that church is intimately connected with Jesus. The Spirit is so integrally connected to Jesus that it’s fair to think of the Holy Spirit as Jesus’ own eyes. The Spirit and Jesus are distinct, but inseparable. This is enormously helpful in a world where there are many spirits, including several that look like imposters of the Holy Spirit. How do we know that a given spirit we sense is the Holy Spirit? Well we know that a given spirit is the Holy Spirit, if that Spirit bears witness to Jesus and makes us love Jesus more. The Spirit we affirm and pray for is not just any spirit that makes us feel good. We pray for the “Spirit of Christ.”

This “seven eyes” brushstroke has one other effect. It suggests how close heaven and earth really are. There’s a boundary between heaven and earth all right. You and I haven’t crossed that boundary yet. But this text tells us that the Spirit “gets through” that boundary from the other side, coming toward us. The Spirit can see right through the heaven-earth boundary.

And that’s not all that gets through. In verse 8, our prayers appear in heaven as incense, having successfully crossed the boundary. And listen once to verse 13: “Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” It all sounds so symmetrical that we miss the force of it. From heaven, John could hear everyone in heaven (no surprise there), but also on earth and under the earth and in the sea. That is, John could hear us—every “holy, holy, holy” sung from vast cathedrals and little mud hut churches, every “holy, holy, holy” sung in nursing home chapels and college campuses and military bases, from churches in Baghdad and Athens, Tokyo and Moscow, rural Tennessee and urban Seattle.

Reflecting on all this, N.T. Wright says it this way: “Heaven is not a place thousands of miles up, or for that matter down, in our space, nor would it help us if it were. It is God’s dimension of ordinary reality, the dimension which is normally hidden but which we penetrate mysteriously, or rather which penetrates us mysteriously, in prayer, in the scriptures, in the breaking of the bread” (*For All God’s Worth*, 85). In a blank blue sky view of the world, heaven may or may not exist; but if it does, it is not close enough to make any practical difference in our lives. But in the Bible’s picture, heaven not only exists, but is also—in the Spirit—close at hand. The

heaven-earth boundary is crossed all the time, by the Spirit and by our Spirit-prompted praise and prayers.

Brushstroke 3: Jesus deals with God as our representative/Benefit 1: Jesus pleads our cause

But this sense—the sense that heaven is close at hand—can very easily be a source of anxiety. A lot of us would like heaven to stay pretty far away, at least until we clean up a few parts of our lives. We frankly worry about meeting our Maker because we have a lot of embarrassing stuff going on.

Well, John's vision of heaven speaks very directly about that worry. John tells us that our ascended Lord, this Lion-Lamb, the one whose Spirit see all, is our perfect representative before God. Jesus accomplishes what none of rest of us can do.

John tells us about this in quite a dramatic way. The drama is introduced with a little bit of tragedy. There in verse 4, John tells us that he weeps right in the middle of heaven—struck down by the terrifying thought that all this beauty and majesty of would end up being off-limits to us. Is there anyone to open the scroll? Will all beauty and joy be ultimately unattainable? John's tears seem as real as those of Bruce Springsteen. And like Springsteen, John's weeping was only because he didn't yet see the whole picture.

What the whole world needed was a representative, someone to open the scroll—God's answer book—to unlock the mystery of creation. And that is exactly what we have in Jesus. He stands on our behalf as our perfect representative before God. He takes the scroll when none of us could. No one else we've ever met—no poet, no philosopher, no sports hero, no musician, no soldier, no CEO, no astrophysicist—has unlocked the mystery of the cosmos. And no one like that has ever “made us into a kingdom and priests serving God” (vs. 10). But in Jesus we find just the right person. In Jesus, the tragedy has a happy ending.

Now here in Revelation 5, Jesus, the perfect person to deal with God on our behalf, is pictured as one who approaches God to open the scroll, to unfold the mysteries of God's plan. In other chapters, scattered throughout the New Testament, another aspect of Jesus' work as representative is described—Jesus' work as the eternal, heavenly pray-er. This is the other great benefit of the Ascension: knowing, in the words of the Catechism, that “he pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of his Father.” In I John, John tells us that “Christ pleads for us.” The writer of Hebrews depicts Christ as the great high priest who represents us before God. (I John 2:1, also Rom 8:34, Heb 7:23-25, 9:24).

This is hardly a blank blue sky view of heaven. No, the Bible teaches us to think of heaven as a place where Jesus not only relates to us, seeing us and guiding us through the Spirit, but as a place where he is relating to God on our behalf. Jesus both takes and scrolls and presents our prayers. He is the prophet and priest. He makes our dealings with God smooth and shameless. And this makes heaven very different from some vague, passive, ethereal place. It's a place for active relationships. For connecting. For re-connecting God, the world, and all of us.

A Christian Life “Oil Change”

So, Revelation 5 gives us a vivid imaginative picture of heaven. Jesus is there at the center. He is the perfect representative for us. He sees us through the Spirit. He sympathizes with our weakness. He prays for us. But now, what are we to do with all this?

Well, for a moment, leave the realm of heavenly visions and think about something that may not seem very heavenly. Think about your car—and this blunt comparison. Cars need maintenance to run well. They can't run well with murky, cloudy oil. You can't drive a car for 75,000 miles without changing the oil. Well, just like that, you can't live a joyful Christian life with a vague, blank blue sky view of heaven. Everything else—hope, prayer, forgiveness, praise, mission—breaks down and becomes ponderous, joyless, and burdensome. One of the most seasoned Christian writers working today, Dallas Willard, goes so far as to say that confused understanding of heaven is probably the source of the most significant anxieties and problems we face.

Running the Christian race without a clear picture of heaven is like trying to run a car on old, dirty oil. What we need is a big exchange, a new way of seeing. We need to set aside our cloudy, murky way of thinking about heaven—one that reinforced by all kinds of bad Hollywood movies and bad greeting cards. We need to replace it with the vivid, clear account the Bible itself gives us.

- We need to exchange the blank blue sky view that isn't sure where Jesus is, with a view that Jesus is at the center of it all, right in the middle of heaven, at the heart of the universe
- We need to exchange our view of heaven as a kind of ethereal place to a view of it as perfectly suited for us humans, the kind of place Jesus already is, not only in his divinity, but also in his humanity.
- We need to exchange this sense that heaven is light-years away, marked off with a boundary no one can cross, with a view that the heaven-earth boundary is crossed all the time, by the Holy Spirit, by our prayers, by our singing.
- We need to exchange the fear we might otherwise feel when thinking about meeting our Maker, with a confidence that Jesus himself is the perfect representative who makes our relationship with God smooth and shameless.

This exchange of perspectives is part of Paul meant when he said “set your minds on things above.” (Col. 3:1). It's part of what the writer of Hebrews meant with the words “fix your eyes on Jesus,” the ascended Lord (Heb. 12:1-2). It's part of what the catechism means when it says: “By the Spirit's power we make the goal of our lives, not earthly things, but the things above where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand.” This heaven is not just about when we die. It's about how we live—even today.

When you are bored to tears in your nursing home room, when you can't stand the pain any more in your hospital room, when you watch the evening news and simply can't stand all that violence and pain anymore, when you face the terror of tragedy or crisis, or even when you admit that some of your own spiritual anxieties are keeping us up at night in the middle of ordinary days, what you need to call to mind is not a blank, blue sky theology. It's this vision of heaven as a place for connecting, for restoring relationships, for overflowing praise. This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer celebrated Ascension Day from the middle of a Nazi prison. And this hopeful vision is right here in the Bible for you and for me claim as their own.

And when we do, we have our own song to sing in the face of tragedy. It's like Bruce Springsteen's song in one way—in frank honesty about the world's problems. But it is also full of Christ-centered hope. Probably four or five generations ago, to a group of struggling believers on the American frontier, here is how the song went.

My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation.
I hear the real, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.
No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing;
It sounds and echoes in my soul; how can I keep from singing?
No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing;
All things are mine since I am his; how can I keep from singing?
No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

—Traditional American hymn

When this song was sung in faith around a campfire on a cold and threatening night, it doesn't stretch the imagination to suppose that the choir directors of heaven heard it loudly and clearly, in perfect tune with the heavenly harmony. On Ascension Day, and every day, this is song of hope that the church invites all of us to echo.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.