



Ascension
2017
Psalm 110

Ascension Smashes Expectations!

“Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!”

His mother murdered her own husband to assure he would rule the world at age 17. Eventually he had his mother stabbed to death and his wife beheaded. He then displayed her head for his mistress, whom years later he kicked to death while she was pregnant. He blamed the Great Fire of Rome on Christians in 64 AD. His name was Nero. He convicted Christians of *“hating the human race,”* then disposed of them in the most gruesome of ways like tying them up in wild animal skins to be gnawed to death by dogs or as human torches to illuminate his garden. Peter and Paul were said to be executed during his reign. Now I ask you: If you were a Christian living under Nero, what would your expectations for Christianity be? It would be hard to have hope since the enemy seems to have all of the weapons.

Fast forward 20 years. He enjoyed catching flies and stabbing them with a pen. He liked to watch gladiatorial fights between women and dwarfs. He was the first emperor to give himself the official title, *“God the Lord.”* His name was Domitian. And when Christians balked at praising him, he turned his crazy on them! Domitian would round up hundreds of Christians, tie them to a tree, cover them with tar, and after a couple of days he would light them all on fire. He took Christian pastors and would tie each limb to four horses, smacking the horses and let those pastors being torn into 4 parts – it was called being *“Drawn and Quartered.”* Now I ask you: If you were a Christian living under Domitian, what would your expectations for Christianity be? It would be hard to have hope since the enemy seems to have all the weapons.

And we could keep going, couldn't we? We could keep going all the way through our present day and talk about China cracking down on house churches and removing crosses. Or Isis fighters beheading Christians in Libya. Or Christians who can only worship safely in the outhouse of a prison camp in North Korea. Or the dozens of countries that actively persecute Christians all around the world. If you were living in one of those countries, what would your expectations for Christianity be? It would be hard to have hope. The deck seems stacked against us.

Even here and now. We may not have prison camps for Christians in this country or task forces charged with hunting us down, but I'm sure you've noticed that the deck seems stacked against us. In a recent study on the state of Christianity in this country done by our Synod's Commission on Congregational Counseling, it found that over the last 25 years the WELS has lost about 40,000 members. If you broaden the search, you'll find that Christian churches have been bleeding hundreds of thousands of members throughout the country. Yes, Jesus tells us that the gates of Hades will not prevail against his Church and it's not as low as the 7000 that God had reserved in Elijah's day, but at the rate we're going it doesn't seem like it will be long. And it doesn't seem fair. It's like a game of rock, paper, scissors where all the weapons are pointed against you. Our weapons of the Bible, natural knowledge and reason seem as useless as a toy cap gun compared to the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature. You used to be able to appeal to the truth of Scripture, but even major Christian denominations have rejected its inerrancy and non-Christians view its rules as outdated as the writing of it. Reason has completely left the country when murder in the womb is defended as an inalienable right. And natural knowledge? More and more deny the existence of God based on science even though it changes from age to age. So what are your expectations for Christianity today? Satan, sinful nature, world...shoot! We lose, right? It doesn't seem fair.

It's why we need to remember Ascension. It's why we need to read a Psalm like the one before us today. Because then we'll see what to expect and how Ascension smashes expectations. Under inspiration, King David wrote this about Jesus and what you can expect: ***“The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’ The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies. Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy majesty, from the womb of the dawn you will receive the dew of your youth. The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’ The LORD is at your right hand; he will crush kings on the day of his wrath. He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth. He will drink from a brook beside the way; therefore he will lift up his head.”***

Speaking of Jesus, God declares, *“You are priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”* It kind of seems like a strange picture to use in the midst of declaring Jesus' total domination over his enemies. A priest prays. A priest sacrifices. A priest doesn't fight. When looking to overthrow enemies, a priest seems like a weak option. But what looks like weakness can actually be your greatest strength.

I'm reminded of a story about a 10-year old boy who had lost his arm in a car accident. Thinking he needed something to do to get back to life, he decided to study judo. The boy did well, but he couldn't understand why after 3 months of training, the master had only taught him one move. The boy asked, "*Sensei, shouldn't I know more moves?*" But the sensei replied, "*This is the only move you'll ever need.*" Not quite understanding, he continued to train and the sensei eventually took him to his first tournament. Surprising himself, the boy won his first three matches easily. Now in the finals, his opponent was bigger, stronger, and more experienced. For a while, the boy struggled and appeared to be overmatched. The ref even called a time-out fearing the boy would get hurt. However, when the match resumed, his opponent dropped his guard for a moment and the boy used his move and pinned him. The boy was the champion! On the way home, the boy discussed the tournament with his sensei and mustered the courage to ask what was really on his mind: "*Sensei, how did I win the tournament with only one move?*" "*You won for two reasons: first you've almost mastered one of the most difficult throws in all of judo. And second, the only known defense for that move is for your opponent to grab your left arm.*" The boy's biggest weakness had become his biggest strength.

God had promised in the garden of Eden that he would send a Savior who would crush Satan's head. Finally, after thousands of years, God sent...a baby. This baby grew up in a house where even siblings didn't think there was anything special about him. As a man, he lived a poor man's life teaching others wandering from place to place. He looked weak. Finally, he rubbed the wrong people the wrong way and wound up being tortured on a cross. And for the soldiers who crucified him, he only prayed, "*Father, forgive them.*" He looked weak. The devil looked like he had won this round. Until you realize that Jesus came to be your priest. It was just the first step in Jesus' foot being lowered onto the head of Satan. You see priests sacrifice. Seeing nothing that could be laid on the altar before God to satisfy him, he laid himself on the altar of the cross and gave us the thing that Satan, the world and our sinful nature tries to rob us of: forgiveness. And since Jesus' priesthood is forever, so is his sacrifice. What seemed to be Jesus' greatest weakness in life was his greatest strength. And it's ours as well.

10-year old Myriam was forced to flee from her home last July with thousands of other Christians from Mosul, Iraq, when ISIS threatened to kill them. Her family lost everything. Her father had lost his job. The family had lost their home. They had no money and no possessions. She looked weak. A reporter found Myriam in a refugee camp and asked her if she hated ISIS for what they had done to her and her family and if she wished them dead. Her response was beautiful. She said, "*I will only ask God to forgive them. Why should they be killed?*" And the devil felt the pressure of Jesus' foot on his head.

Do you see our weapon? A couple of weeks ago, my daughter wanted to play "*Rock, paper, scissors*" and so I went through the motions of pounding my fist and saying, "*Rock, paper, scissors...shoot.*" I picked my weapon of scissors and she shouted out "*Jesus*" with her hands spread out in the air. I said, "*But that's not fair!*" And she said very matter of factly, "*But Jesus wins.*" She's right. "*Satan, nature, world...Jesus!*" It almost doesn't even seem fair.

From the tomb, our Jesus walked away with a smile and a swagger and said to his enemies, "*Is that the best you've got?*" 40 days later, with disciples watching and everything accomplished, Jesus ascended into heaven to take his rightful place at God's right hand and heard the Father say, "*Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.*" That was an ancient custom in which the conquering king would place his foot on his vanquished foe's head as a display of his triumph. How does that happen?

It happens when a young wife and mother whose sinful nature convinced her that she was going to hell and Jesus had nothing to offer, heard about a priest who offered a sacrifice that can't be nullified. And her sin felt the weight of Jesus' feet smashing its head. It happens when a Hmong woman who was caught in Satan's lie called Shamanism heard about her Jesus' love and it changed her heart. And Satan felt the weight of Jesus feet crushing his head. It happens when a tattooed from head to foot man who was dragged down by the world's promise of pleasure through drugs and alcohol received his priest's sacrifice in water of his Baptism. I'll never forget his tears. Those were tears of victory. And the world felt the weight of Jesus' feet smashing it's head.

Friends, Jesus is a priest forever. He's your priest forever. The LORD has sworn it. So what can you expect? Satan, sinful nature, world...Jesus. Ascension smashes expectations. He rules all for the good of his church now. One day soon we'll see our ascended Savior face to face. Come, Lord, Jesus, come. Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!* Alleluia! Amen!

***"The LORD's right hand is lifted high; the LORD's right hand has done mighty things!
I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done. Amen."***

(Psalm 118:16-17)