

THE RIDER ON THE CLOUDS

PSALM 68

ASCENSION SUNDAY | MAY 24, 2020

COMMUNITY CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH, KITCHENER ON

Sisters and brothers in our Lord, Jesus Christ, there are some things that are just easier for us to deal with if we pretend they simply don't exist. This is true in many areas of life, from relationships to politics to health to religion. A 2014 study by researchers at Duke University called this phenomenon "motivated disbelief." Their research looked at people with firmly held political beliefs and tested how people reacted when presented with information or data that their ideology had trouble solving, and what it found was that people were more likely to deny the problem than to rethink their ideology. For example, when free-market advocates were asked whether they thought government restrictions on carbon emissions could help slow climate change, their response was most often to simply deny that climate change was happening. On the other hand, when gun control advocates were asked whether having armed police officers patrol neighbourhoods helped to prevent violent crimes, their response was most often to deny that violent crime was a problem at all. When a solution to a problem didn't fit their ideals, people didn't try to find a different solution. They just pretended that the problem didn't exist.

I think that we do this sometimes with the Bible, with the church, and with our faith, too. We pretend that some things don't exist. Like the violent, military language used to describe God in this Psalm. We often just avoid these texts. We don't read them; we don't talk about them; we don't preach on them. And when they do pop up, we're caught off guard. "That's in the Bible?!" we think to ourselves in disbelief.

And there is good reason why Christians tend to avoid these kind of violent and military depictions of God, because the truth of the matter—another thing that we like to pretend never happened—is that Christians throughout history have used these texts of conquest and victory and corporal punishment to justify horribly brutal violence of our own. The crusades, of course, is the go-to example, probably because it's a thousand years removed, but Christians have twisted the words of scripture to justify such horrors as slavery, war, torture, executions, and genocide, all in the name of God, to this day.

Usually these kinds of psalms that describe God as a conquering king or victorious general start and end with more generic praise and thanksgiving language, so it's easy for us to just read the beginning and the end and focus on nicer, gentler sentiments of scripture. But Psalm 68 goes at it right off the bat. "May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may his foes flee before him." We don't get a chance to cut anything out of this psalm. It is unrelenting, from beginning to end.

But enter into the imagery of the world of this psalm with me for a moment. The psalmist provokes us with this image of the great and mighty God who rides on the clouds, his chariot thundering across the sky, so powerful that the heavens pour down streams of water and the mountains leap like startled rabbits. He scatters his enemies and terrifies his foes. And what does he do? Verse 5: *A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.*

This psalm goes straight to the tender heart of God for the marginalized, the oppressed, the vulnerable. As the pastor and scholar Carolyn Townsend Gilkes puts it, Psalm 68 "connects a personal God who cares about the individual's circumstances with a powerful liberating God" who has the power to change those circumstances. Or as the biblical scholar Beth Tanner says, Psalm 68 teaches us that "the great warrior God cares for those who struggle in a system where they have no voice."

The psalmist invites us to tag along, as this great and mighty God, the Rider on the clouds, rides out to lead a people through the wilderness, a people who will become his people. He causes the skies to rain down on the desert, transforming it into a bountiful inheritance where the poor know no want. Women, in a mighty throng, announce his coming, proclaiming his Word, singing of the great things the Mighty One has done—scattering the enemies of his people, creating a dwelling place for himself on the earth, ascending to the heights with captives in his train to take up his throne, bearing the burdens of his people, saving them even from death, bringing them up from the heart of the earth, from the depths of the sea, to join the triumphant victory parade as it marches into the City of God, where all nations bring tribute and sing the praise of the Lord.

This might seem like a strange psalm to bring us to the Ascension of Jesus Christ, but I think these two parts of scripture have more in common than we might realize, because

the Ascension of Jesus is another one of those things that we sometimes just kind of pretend never happened. Especially in this time of social isolation, of self-imposed quarantine, when we *long* to see each other so much that it hurts, it seems strange to think that Jesus *chose* to leave us. You can almost hear the longing, the pain, in the disciples' voices as they ask him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

I had a friend in seminary who did a research project studying the theme of the ascension in songs for Christian worship, and she wasn't surprised to find that many songs, both ancient and recent, simply skip right from the resurrection to the outpouring of the Spirit, straight from Easter to Pentecost. The biblical scholar N.T. Wright says that most contemporary Christians seem to imagine Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost all mashed up into a sort of spiritualized Jesus mulligan stew—that Jesus was crucified, died, and buried, and then his spirit was raised up from the dead and somehow now he's present with everybody everywhere in our hearts. Maybe I don't need to tell you how problematic that is but I will anyway. Because, you see, the ascension of Jesus into heaven is a physical ascension of his physical body. And the reason that is so important is because Christ's physical, human body lives now in the presence of God the Father, which means that, by his power, we, too, in our physical, human bodies, can live together with God. Because the story of scripture isn't about our souls going to heaven when we die. It is about how God is preparing the whole cosmos to be renewed and restored, so that God can dwell among his people, among us, in our physical, resurrected, New-Creation bodies.

Because that's another thing that's all too easy for us to pretend doesn't matter, isn't it? Physical bodies. Especially the physical bodies of the kinds of people that Psalm 68 tells us the Rider of the clouds fights for. The physical bodies that this pandemic has exposed as the human cost of our global economic system. The physical bodies of cooks, cashiers, delivery drivers, and personal support workers, whose "essential services" can't earn them a living wage. The physical bodies of those who make our food and clothes, labouring in fields and factories under conditions that we have long known were inhumane. The physical bodies of those who languish in old age homes that we have long known were understaffed and underresourced. The physical bodies of those in our own country who live on reservations, who we have long known have no direct access to clean water. The physical

bodies of refugees displaced by war and violence, packed together in camps that we have long known were unlivable long-term conditions.

We call these people the “marginalized” because they exist in the margins of our vision, so far from our attention that it is all too easy, in normal times, for us to forget they are there. But sometimes something comes along that opens our eyes in a new way, to see reality for what it is, in the truest sense of “revelation,” to reveal the things to which the powers of this world have made us blind and numb. Something like Psalm 68, to shake up our sense of who God is. Something like the Ascension, to make us dig deeper into what Christ truly means when he promises to be with us always. Something like a global pandemic, to strip away any illusion that we live in a just and prosperous society.

The Psalmist tells us that the Lord of Heaven cares for these physical bodies on the margin, these beloved children whose bodies are bruised and wounded by earthly structures of sin and injustice. When Jesus ascends into heaven, he isn't giving up the fight. He isn't tapping out, asking his disciples to take it from here. He isn't even passing the torch, his followers having satisfactorily passed their initiatory training. Jesus ascends into heaven for a purpose, and that purpose, as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, is to take his rightful place as head of the church and ruler of all. From the Father's right hand, our Lord sends forth his Holy Spirit, to pour out his heavenly gifts on his people, and by his almighty power, he defends us in our walk on this earth, and keeps us safe from all our enemies, until he comes again.

The Apostle Paul points to the powerful reality of Christ's ascension as the centrepiece of his teaching to the church in Ephesus about the unity and power of the church by quoting Psalm 68. In Ephesians 4 the Apostle writes: *To each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.” (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe). So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

Jesus ascends to heaven for a purpose. In taking up his rightful place as ruler of all, he pours out his gifts on the church and protects us from our enemies. Jesus isn't leaving the fight for justice and peace in this world, he's taking the fight to a higher level. The King of heaven came down to earth, and was lifted up again.

I'm reading through the autobiography of Nelson Mandela, the South African revolutionary and anti-apartheid activist who eventually became the President of South Africa, and I'm at the part where he's being held as a political prisoner, a chapter of his life that will last for 30 years or so. As he reflects on his time in prison—sometimes in hard manual labour, sometimes starving, sometimes in absolute isolation—he writes about how difficult it is to stay true to one's principles in a system designed to break your spirit. He writes about how difficult it is to keep up the fight when it seems like your actions don't make a difference in the grand scheme of things. And so to keep himself and his colleagues motivated, he started to imagine his situation in a different way. Rather than thinking about how much more effective he could be for the cause of ending the racist system of apartheid as a free man, he started focusing on the cause with what influence he had, filing complaints and grievances about the way black prisoners were treated, appealing to international watchdog organizations to improve prison conditions, making applications for changes to the rules to allow prisoners access to study materials, reading materials, the library system, desks, glasses, protein, visitors. The fight is never over, and no matter what the situation, you are not out of the fight, unless you choose to leave it. Do what you can, where you are, with what you have.

I think there is great wisdom here for us today. It can be all too easy for us, especially in this time of upheaval, to think to ourselves that there's not much we can do until things are back to normal. If only we could meet together, then my faith would be strengthened. If only I could sing in church, my spirit will be uplifted. If only we can pay off our mortgage, I'll be able to give to missions. If only... If only... If only... But our Lord invites us to imagine a better world, even now, where we are, with what we have, and thanking him for the bountiful blessings he has poured out on us, to live courageously, trusting in the promises he has made. Our Lord gives us the gifts we need to serve him even in these strange and unprecedented times. The psalmist invites each and every one of us to imagine and live into the world of justice that the Lord of the ancient heavens fights to build, the Kingdom of

Peace that our Ascended King prepares us for even now. We step forward with assurance and hope, in the power and strength of the Lord.

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