

Ascension day

May 29, 2022

A Reflection on Memorial Day, Uvalde, and Ukraine

Before we get started into today's text, I want to mention something on the church calendar that may help us to tie our text to the world today: this past Thursday was Ascension Day. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to many of his disciples. Then, as we read in Acts 1, "After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." He was teaching them, commissioned them, and then was lifted up into heaven from in their midst.

We make mention of this every time we recite the Apostles' Creed: "He rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

Why is this important and why does it particularly matter **this** week? Jesus' ascension into heaven is important and it matters this week because it is the promise of God revealed to those who are living through the midst of brokenness and despair.

The war in Ukraine continues to rage. We grieve the death. We grieve the brokenness. Rightly so. God joins us in this grief. How long, O Lord, we pray. How long?

The massacre in Uvalde, Texas, breaks our hearts. We grieve the death. We grieve the brokenness. Rightly so. God joins us in that grief. How long, O Lord, we pray. How long?

War is horrible. On this Memorial Day weekend we remember those who have died in combat — standing up for others and giving their lives for others. We honor their sacrifice; we grieve that it has been necessary.

Murder is horrible. It is horrible today and it always has been horrible. God knows: think of the children in Bethlehem that Herod murdered after the Wise Men did not return to report the location of the newly born Christ child. Matthew reported about that massacre, "Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'" (Matthew 2:17-18)

Evil and hate and sin are awful. We are stunned that these things happen so suddenly. We are stunned that everything could change — and does change — in a moment. Ask any of our law enforcement folks who see all too often the shock and the horror and the despair that follow in the wake of evil and hate and sin.

The consequences and results of war and evil and hate and sin — any sin — are awful.

And, ultimately, whether we think about it consciously or not, we know the consequences and results of war and evil and hate and sin — any and all sin, including your sin and my sin — the consequence is God's judgment. We are rightly horrified by the war in Ukraine. We are rightly horrified by the demonic killing in Uvalde. We, however, tend to turn a blind eye to the horror of

our own sin. We know we are sinners and we regret that we are sinners, but we – and maybe it is just me – we do not dwell on the consequences of our sin because they are too much for us to bear.

We see the horror of that judgment being carried by Jesus to the cross and on the cross. He bore what was too much for us to bear. But as Isaiah wrote about Christ hundreds of years before Christ was born, “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”

To be clear: I am not suggesting that the people of Ukraine or the parents and families of Uvalde deserve what has happened. Nor do I think we should be urging the people of Ukraine or the parents and community of Uvalde to be doing anything other than grieving right now. I am saying that we hurt with them. I am saying we can offer words of solidarity: to them and with each other.

But, there will come a time and a day when we also have a word of hope to offer. What is that word? Death has been defeated. On Easter Sunday, we celebrate (and celebrate each year) the victory Jesus won over the grave.

Then, Jesus’ bodily – physical body, resurrected body, that is – His ascension into heaven shows us that God’s promise to redeem creation are true, too. Everything stained will be cleaned. Everything broken will be bound up. God’s good creation will be restored. Because the Risen Lord Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, it means that God’s material creation will be found perfected and perfect in the kingdom of God. Peter would later write to the early church:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:3-7)

Hold onto those thoughts as we get into our text today from John 8.