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Acts 1: 6 – 14

Psalm 68: 1 – 10, 33 – 36

1 Peter 4: 12 – 14; 5: 6 – 11

John 17: 1 – 11

“Beam me up, Scotty!” I have never been a “Trekkie,” but even I know this catchphrase that is connected with the *Star Trek* television series and movies. A perhaps little-known fact is that, this exact phrase is never actually spoken in any of the episodes or movies. There are a number of times when it is very close, but never exactly like this. Be that as it may, it comes from the command which William Shatner’s character, Captain Kirk, gives his chief engineer, Montgomery “Scotty” Scott when he wants to be transported back to the *Starship Enterprise*.

Today is the Sunday after the Feast of the Ascension, and, in the reading from the Book of Acts, we hear Luke’s version of Jesus’ departure from his disciples. It is forty days after the resurrection. Jesus has made many appearances among his friends and followers. In some of his last words, he orders his disciples to stay close to Jerusalem and wait for ‘the promise of the Father,’ the baptism of the Holy Spirit, whatever that might turn out to be. Apparently, even with the resurrection, some of his followers still just don’t get it. They ask Jesus, “Is now when you’re going to return Israel to its former glory?” They are still waiting for a knight in shining armor to come riding in on a white horse. They still haven’t grasped what kind of a Kingdom Jesus is really bringing into the world.

Jesus, perhaps with a deep sigh of frustration, perhaps not, simply says, “God only knows. *You* don’t need to know.” He reminds them one more time about the coming gift of the Holy Spirit and then, it’s up, up and away, and Jesus is lifted up and transported back to God. As a child of the ‘60s and ‘70s, I can’t help but think about “Beam me up, Scotty!” as Jesus returns from whence he came.

The Feast of the Ascension always falls on the Thursday between the 6th and 7th Sundays of Easter. It is not one of the more well-known feast days on our calendar, but perhaps it will take on new meaning as we look at it more closely.

First of all, the Ascension is all about God. Not about the laws of physics and gravity. Not about whether heaven is really “up,” let alone a physical place. And even though it comes near the end of the church season of Easter, it is more closely tied to the Feast of the Incarnation – Christmas, when God comes to dwell with us. At Christmas, the Divine becomes human. At the Ascension, the Son of Man, the resurrected body of the human being, Jesus, returns to be a part of the Divine for all eternity. The life lived here on earth is forever inextricably united with the life of God, Creator of heaven and earth. Irenaus, one of the early church fathers from the 2nd century, and bishop near what is Lyon, France, perhaps said it best when he remarked, “Jesus became what we are so that we might become what he is.”

For centuries, popular theology has held that when the body dies and is buried, the soul goes flitting off on its own to the Kingdom of God. Part of that goes all the way back to the Greeks and their dualistic thinking that the material, the physical, the body, is bad and the spiritual, the soul, is good. But that isn’t what Scripture tells us at all. It is the gloriously resurrected body, complete with scars on hands, side and feet, that reappears to Jesus’ disciples. It is the physical body, albeit changed in some ways, that eats and speaks and drinks with them, not some disembodied spirit wafting around. It is the physical body, not merely an essence, that somehow ascends into the clouds, returning to be a living, breathing part of God. And God has never been the same since.

If it is important for God to become human, and important enough to incorporate that experience back into God, then what does that have to tell us about the value of humanity? Seemingly unlike much of the rest of creation which seems to be quite comfortable in its own fur or feathers or fins, we human beings have a hard time accepting ourselves as the physical creatures that we are. We are often uncomfortable with or embarrassed by what our bodies need or desire, and how they function. We struggle with our finitude and our mortality. We grapple with relationships, both individually and corporately. We are often distressed when our emotions and the chemical messengers within our bodies hold sway over us. A part of us, like those Greeks, still wants to separate our physical selves from our minds and spirits, and so we treat our bodies in ways that negate their holiness.

However, the Ascension and the Incarnation both tell us that being human is good. Not that we don't do bad things sometimes, but that our created nature is good. Our physical bodies are wonderful, glorious, and sacred, first because God created them, and now because they are an essential part of the Godhead. Another way to say that is that the fullness of God includes the human experience. What it means to live and move and have our being is so very valuable to God that God has taken and made it part of the Divine. The Ascension and the Incarnation tell us that being human is so important that God chooses it.

The Rev. James Liggett gives us another way to look at just how amazing this really is. Suppose, he says, that we believed that all fish are created in the image of God. And that one fish, a particular one, had become a part of God. How would that affect our attitude towards fish, Liggett asks. We might consider all fish as holy and there might not be any Pepperidge Farm goldfish because they would be considered graven images! We might not go fishing. Red Lobster and Captain D's and the Boiling Shrimp might have to go out of business. And we would perhaps approach all fish with a sort of reverential awe.

Well, that we know of, God has not become a fish. As far as we know, there is only one creature in all of Creation that is, now and for always, a part of God, and that is humanity. So perhaps we should revise how we understand ourselves and one another. Perhaps we should have that same sort of reverential awe for our own sense of being as we might for the fish. There is a Jewish tradition that a procession of angels precedes each of us, wherever we go, proclaiming, "Make way for the image of God!" Our holiness is to be taken seriously. We should treat ourselves and one another with the greatest of respect. Akin to the marriage vows, being human is never to be abused or taken lightly.

The Ascension also tells us that, again, to the best of our knowledge, God knows what it is like to be a person – a person who itches, who blinks, who swallows, who hungers, who gets tired and lonely, who gets both exasperated and overjoyed, who sees blue and tastes cinnamon and hears a middle C. God knows what it is like to be a person in a very different way than God knows what it means to be anything else in Creation. God knows, because God remembers. And in Scripture, 'to remember' is for God to have special regard for someone.

That in turn means that when we talk to God, and when we listen to God, when we share our life with God in prayer, we need to remember that God remembers. Our concerns, our joys are not just abstract constructs, they are what God remembers. God remembers what it is like to live and to die. God has already been down the path that we trod. God has already been where we are.

Yet, God is the God of the Cosmos, the transcendent Creator of all that is, seen and unseen, the ruler of Heaven and Earth, from before time and through all time. Yes, God is also the immanent One, the breath that gives us life, the ground of our being, who has lived our life and shared our death. The Ascension – and the Incarnation – assure us that we are able to approach God, to reach out to God even as God is reaching out to us, and to seek the presence and the will of God with both confidence and joy. As we approach God, we draw near to the one who knows us best, inside and out. We draw near to the one who loves us more than we can ask or imagine. As we approach God, we approach our true home. Beam us up, God! +

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