

Yet at Present
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
May 29, 2022-AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
Hebrews 2:5-15

I spent a good deal of Tuesday working on a sermon for ascension Sunday. At the time, I was planning to preach on those beautiful words from Colossians 1. That's the hymn-like passage where Paul celebrates the absolute supremacy of Jesus. "He is before all things and in him all things hold together! He is reconciling all things to himself!" It's a great ascension day text. It proclaims Jesus' rule over time and space.

But then Tuesday happened. At 4pm or so, news about the shooting in Texas started to trickle in, and along with that came the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. And that sick feeling just got worse as the death toll climbed the rest of the evening and into the night until it settled at 21—nineteen children. Two teachers. A massacre of the innocents. Another one. Lord have mercy.

On Wednesday morning the day after the shooting, you could feel the weight of the thing. All the morning newscasts were somber. When we saw each other at the office, it was the first thing we talked about. My wife Linda woke up early wondering what she would say to her kindergartners and her parents. I walk my dog early in the morning and usually no one is up. Every house is dark when I walk by. But on Wednesday as I walked by, there were lights on and televisions flickering in multiple households. As I sat down at my desk and looked at my notes for my sermon, I thought, how can I preach an ascension day sermon when I'm so full of lament? How can I preach a major-key sermon of triumph on a day when everyone is under a cloud? I prayed about that and the Spirit pushed me towards a completely new text.

Why is this a good text for today? First of all, this is an ascension text—it talks about Jesus being crowned with glory and honor and having everything under his feet. In fact, the ascension of Jesus is a big theme in the entire book. Jesus our great High Priest has gone ahead of us into Heaven, and he has opened up the way for us! There's no book of the Bible more ascension focused than Hebrews. So our text is a great ascension text.

But it also has that little phrase in verse 8. "Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him." Jesus is Lord, 'yet at present,' we do not see everything subject to him. Jesus is Lord, yet at present, there are people and things that do not recognize his rule. Jesus is Lord, yet at present our families still suffer terrible things. Jesus is Lord, yet at present we see broken people in the streets around our church building. Jesus is Lord, yet at present we have to live with days like Tuesday. "*Yet at Present...*" There's a lot contained in that little phrase.

The author of Hebrews puts that phrase in there because he knows that the church he's writing to is feeling the weight of their disappointments. Hebrews was written to the second generation church. These aren't new Christians who are full of the joy of conversion, these are people who've been following Jesus for a while and they realize that it's not easy. The community isn't always friendly. Their businesses have suffered, As Erin read earlier, some of them have had their property seized (Hebrews 10:34). They've found out that their faith hasn't exempted them from death and disease and personal tragedy. They've probably been through their share of church squabbles—it's not all Kum Ba Ya anymore. If you read Hebrews 10:25, some of them are discouraged enough that they've stopped coming to church. They're tired, and everywhere they look they see things that "yet at present," are not under Jesus' feet.

The preacher of Hebrews addresses this discouragement. The whole book of Hebrews is a sermon of encouragement. It calls for them for them to keep going. It calls them to persevere. What does the preacher say to them to get them to keep going? How does he encourage them and encourage us to keep going in the face of our disappointments? The preacher tells us to look at the ascended Jesus. “At present we do not see everything under his feet, but we do see Jesus, Jesus who was made a little lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with Glory and honor because he suffered death, so that, by the grace of God, he might taste death for everyone.” The preacher says, look I know you see all these things that are not as yet under Jesus’ feet. And I know these things wear you out, but remember, you also see the ascended Jesus.

How does seeing the ascended Jesus help us after a day like Tuesday? I would like to share two things with you this morning. First, it helps us see the true end of the story. Part of what happens after a day like Tuesday is that we feel like nothing is ever going to change. You heard that sentiment expressed a lot. This will be on the news for a couple of weeks and everyone will talk about it. People will say, ‘we have to do something,’ and the same old battle lines will be drawn up, the same old talking points will be made. We’ll argue with each other. There will be a whole lot of social media posts and nothing will change. And somewhere down the road it’ll happen again and we’ll do the same dance all over again, except this time we will be a little more cynical, a little more calloused, a little more pessimistic. I’m sure you’ve heard people express these sorts of feelings, right? It’s a story of hopelessness.

What drives that story? Fear and anger and pessimism. Fear of the violence that seems unstoppable. Anger at the people who have different opinions from us. And when fear and anger get enough airtime in our hearts, they eventually lead to pessimism-pessimism that says, ‘this world is going down the drain.’

Our passage has something to say about the fear-anger-pessimism story. According to the preacher, who’s story is that? Fear-anger-pessimism is the devil’s story. Verse 15, “Jesus breaks the power of him who holds the power of death – that is the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” It’s the devils story. If you spend your days with your mind running in circles from fear to anger to pessimism, you are inhabiting the devil’s story.

In this place, sitting under that picture of the ascended Christ, we are people of hope. Yes, we see the trouble, but we are people of faith and hope and love. We believe that Jesus shall come again to judge the living and the dead. We believe that the blood of Jesus and the power of the resurrection will one day make all things new. We believe that though the wrong seems so strong, God is the ruler yet! The fear and anger story is a pretty strong story right now. It’s easy to get caught up in it. Here in this place, at this family gathering, let me remind you, that is not our story. Because we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor and his story is a story of faith, hope and love. So the vision of the risen Jesus reminds us of the true end of the story and that helps us keep going—that’s the first point.

The preacher of Hebrews doesn’t just show us the end of the story; he also shows us how to walk down the path of discipleship toward that triumphant ending. He shows us how to represent the king in the face of those things that are ‘yet at present’ not under his feet. Look at verse 9. It proclaims the end of the story. It describes Jesus crowned in glory and honor, but it also tells us about the path he took to get there. First, he was made lower than the angels for a little while—he humbled himself and was born in a stable and walked with us through the struggles of life. And then, he finished his journey by suffering death so that by the grace of God

he might taste death for everyone. Jesus' path to his Father's throne above was a path of humility and sacrificial love.

What can we do to shine the light of Christ's rule in the face of things that are 'yet at present' not under his feet? We can be people who proclaim his rule through words and deeds of sacrificial service.

There are things we can do. Some of those things are right in front of us. We don't know everything about the shooter and his crime. It's too early. But we do know this: The shooter was a troubled kid, a marginal kid who lacked human connection. We also know that this crime has traumatized children all over the country. All of you parents know that our kids have to go through mass shooter drills at school. Little kindergartners have to be told, okay this is what you do if a bad man with a gun comes into the school. Every other month kindergarten teachers take their little ones into closets and bathrooms and teach them to be quiet. They sit quiet for ten minutes in case a bad man comes. We have a program right here in our church that could help enfold a marginalized child and calm the fears of anxious kids. Our Kids Hope program. Every week 30 volunteers from our church go to Congress school. We spend an hour with a child who the school identified as someone who could use some personal time. It's not hard. You play games, you learn about their life, you try to encourage them. It helps marginalized kids feel like they're ok. It helps anxious children feel a little safer. It helps them feel like there is love in this world and it comes from Jesus. So we can do deeds of love and hope. We can also speak words of love and hope. We can tell the story of hope and love and hold it up against the story of fear and death. We Christians have that with things like pornography. It's still mostly socially unacceptable to be using pornography in our society. Porn is legal in this country but Christians have stigmatized it. Porn damages the soul of the person who consumes it and it does worse to the person objectified. Can we do something similar to the glorification of violence? Is there such thing as a pornography of violence? In movies. In video games. In the obsession in some circles over military paraphernalia. Do regular human beings need body armor? Police need it. The military—for whom we are genuinely thankful on Memorial Day weekend—certainly need it. But do ordinary citizens need body armor? Until recently there were billboards all over town advertising body armor as part of their merchandise. Why do we need body armor? I get that we have the constitutional right to it, but we also have the constitutional right to porn too. Doesn't mean we shouldn't speak out in love and ask hard questions.

Finally, I will say that it is when we follow Jesus path, acting in love and speaking in love, that in the Jesus story, God will make the power of his Lordship break through the pessimism and the fear.

A month ago there was another graduating class from the Calvin prison initiative. And around the time of graduation, Calvin sent out a story from one of the participants in the program. His name was Val. Val grew up in Grand Rapids and as a young man he got involved in the drug trade, so involved that he ended up committing murder. He killed a young man named Jeff Riley. Val was tried and he was convicted of first degree murder and drug charges. Life in prison without parole.

At the sentencing hearing, the victim's mother, Jerline Riley, was invited to speak. She shocked the courtroom and shocked Val by offering forgiveness to her son's killer—forgiveness in Jesus' name. That offer hit Val between the eyes, but it didn't make him repentant. He was still angry. He went off to federal prison empty and confused. Every year he was there Jerline would reach out to Val's family and say, "Tell him to call me. Tell him I forgive him." Val's response? Radio silence.

At some point Val was moved from federal prison to Handlon prison in Ionia. His life had started to change. He had accepted Christ. He was leading Bible studies and doing ministry, but still he couldn't bring himself to contact Jerline. For her part Jerline kept reaching out. She persevered. "Come on Lord!" She would pray, "Work in his heart!" Finally, one day Val's brother, who knew Jerline's and knew about her prayers, sat him down and said, "Bro it's time." Val picked up the phone. "I called her, and I just said 'Mother Jerline, I'm sorry, I'm sorry for taking Jeffrey's life'" Jerline was overjoyed. "You don't know how many years I have been waiting just for you to say that." "Hey, got me another son, Lord," says Jerline of that day. Now Jerline talks about Val as her adopted son. She visits him talks to him. They support each other and they're working on a program to facilitate victim-offender reconciliation within the prisons.

As mother Jerline looked around at her life after her son was shot, she could have easily chosen the path of fear and anger and grievance. She could have let all those "yet at present" things overwhelm her. But she didn't. Why not. "Because she saw Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." That's an ascension story for last Tuesday, and for all the Tuesdays to come.

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