

“ALL HAIL THE POWER”

Philippians 2:5-11; Acts 1:1-11

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Images of the Ascension are probably not among our most-frequently-brought-to-mind pictures of Jesus. We Presbyterians tend to be more drawn to the stories of Jesus' life: we envision him teaching, healing, feeding people, walking or eating with his friends. We like pictures that show Jesus' caring. We appreciate the hope and vulnerability in images of the infant Jesus, and some of us even find pictures of Jesus on the cross compelling and meaningful, as reminders that understands what it is to be human and suffer and die.

But the Ascension – very big in Eastern Orthodox theology and spirituality – doesn't play as big a role in Protestantism. However, the Ascension story is a perfect starting place for our summer sermons series in which we will be reflecting on our faith as it's expressed in some of our hymns and songs.

Ascension brings us face to face with a particular aspect of who Jesus is – not the teacher, healer, or example of loving service; not the Jesus who shares and understands our suffering; not the Jesus who is our good Shepherd or friend... but Jesus who is Lord, sovereign, majestic, eternal, powerful, mysterious, holy, exalted... other. This Jesus is harder to relate to, harder to get our minds around. This is not the Jesus who 'walks with me and talks with me' or who I ask for help to find a parking space. To see Jesus this way is to move into the realm of awe, reverence, worship, praise.

“All Hail the Power of Jesus Name” is a hymn often, and appropriately, used for Ascension Sunday. It calls on us to honor the power in Jesus' very name. Even the angels ought to fall to their knees in adoration, says the hymnwriter.

The imagery of this hymn is all pomp and circumstance – the pageantry and trappings of monarchy. It's not a part of our culture or frame of reference of course, but that needn't prevent us from grasping the gist of it, or the emotional impact: Jesus is the ruler of all things, and we are to “crown him” as the Lord of our lives, too.

The hymn doesn't get into the details of exactly what that means. That's for each of us to ponder and it's likely to mean something different in your life than in mine. But the call is clear, and it's a present-tense imperative. This is something we have to do in the here and now (again each day, maybe) but we are also doing it along with all the believers who have gone before us, and with all the other people who also worship Jesus, wherever they are on the globe. We are part of a mighty song of praise and worship that will never end.

I don't think we often see ourselves that way anymore than we regularly see Jesus as the mighty and sovereign Lord ascending on the clouds to rule over the universe.

We don't even, really sing all that many songs and hymns like this one. This hymn is almost purely praise. It's not about our love for God, or God's for us; it doesn't tell a story; it doesn't celebrate faith or the happy feeling of community; it doesn't even say much about gratitude for God's blessings. It just simply says that praise and worship are due to Jesus because of who he is.

Praise is hard for us, I think.

For one thing, our work ethic, our striving, our sense of self-reliance and individual autonomy get in the way. Praise of the divine is not, even a little bit, about us, so it involves some letting go of ego. It requires a certain humbling and yielding of ourselves to One who is greater. Naturally, we resist this; it's hard for us to kneel, even metaphorically. But we aren't God; we aren't even in control of as much as we think we are in control of. And we'll never be at peace until we accept this.

For another thing, though it's not *about* us, true praise comes from somewhere deep within us – you might say from our hearts, or from our souls. But Presbyterians tend to be more comfortable in the realm of minds and hands than hearts and souls. We learn and think, we give and serve... but expressing feelings and attending to our spirits feels a bit foreign. We can be suspicious of anything that seems "too emotional," and praising God does, indeed, sometimes seem "too emotional." You have likely heard as I have, complaints that some songs of praise don't have any "content" or that certain forms of worship are "just emotionalism." Justified though that may sometimes be, we would do well to remember that sometimes in the presence of Christ it's right to be in an attitude that has nothing to do with ideas, theology, ethics, reason, and so forth, ... but is simply the heart and soul – and voice – lifted in praise. It is ok to let our thinking and striving go, and just lose ourselves in mystery and wonder.

Many things happen when we sing, especially when we sing together. Singing is good for your health, it reduces stress, it relieves depression. Music helps us both connect to our feelings – sorrow as well as joy – and express them. Singing together unites us as the body of Christ. And the beginning and end – the heart of the faith we sing is praise, which is (Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says) the rendering back of our whole self, our whole life to the mystery of God.

There are other ways to praise God, of course, but there is something about *singing* our praise that really frees us to give ourselves over to the mystery that is God. When you are singing praise to Christ, you can't at the same time be managing the world around you, commodifying things, or giving your allegiance to any part of the human-constructed world. Strangely, when we focus our whole selves on who Jesus is... we find ourselves freed from other things that threaten to enslave us and keep us from our true selves. Singing praise to God – especially together – is an antidote to hubris, individualism, idolatry, apathy. Our lives – and our hymns and songs – encompass

many other dimensions and callings. But coming back, again and again, to praise grounds us in the crucial acknowledgement that we are not God, that God is God, and that we live our lives in the presence of God. I hope that's a truth our graduates can take with them as they go forward from today. I believe that's a truth we all need in our lives.

“All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name”

All hail the power of Jesus' Name!
Let angels prostrate fall;
Bring forth the royal diadem,
And crown Him Lord of all!
Bring forth the royal diadem
And crown Him Lord of all!

Ye chosen seed of Israel's race,
Ye ransomed from the fall,
Hail Him Who saves you by His grace,
And crown Him Lord of all!
Hail Him Who saves you by His grace,
And crown Him Lord of all!

Let every kindred, every tribe,
On this terrestrial ball,
To Him all majesty ascribe,
And crown Him Lord of all!
To Him all majesty ascribe,
And crown Him Lord of all!

O that with yonder sacred throng
We at his feet may fall!
We'll join the everlasting song,
And crown Him Lord of all!
We'll join the everlasting song,
And crown Him Lord of all!

Resources:

Walter Brueggeman, *A Glad Obedience: Why and What We Sing*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2019.