

“An Imperishable Future”

Reading: John 17:1-11; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

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The other day, Elon Musk, the billionaire co-founder of Paypal and Tesla Motors, unveiled the second version of the Dragon spacecraft, which is built by SpaceX, which is a private company currently flying cargo ships up to the ISS. Assuming everything goes according to plan, the new Dragon will have capabilities beyond any other spacecraft ever made; it is a reusable craft that will carry up to seven people into orbit and be able to land using rockets practically anywhere. Meanwhile, Richard Branson, the billionaire founder of the Virgin Group of companies, is testing his own spacecraft, SpaceShip Two, which will carry paying tourists on suborbital space flights for \$250,000 apiece. And at the same time, Jeff Bezos, the billionaire founder of Amazon.com, has his own space tourism company called Blue Origin, with their New Shepard spacecraft.

So apparently what this means is that once you reach the point where you have more money and power than anyone could possibly know what to do with, you set your sights on space. On the one hand, it's exciting to live in this era of new energy being devoted to space exploration, and I have no doubt that there will be many substantial benefits from investment in space exploration, and if I had that much money of my own, I'd probably buy a spaceship, too. But on the other hand, it makes you wonder whether you can get to the point in your life when one planet isn't enough for you. When you already have anything on earth that you could possibly want, where do you go from there?

It's not just a question for people with limitless fortunes and limitless ambition. Most people are quite content to live their lives without their own personal spaceship parked in the back yard, but there remains the question of where we go from here. What comes next, and how should I get there? Is this all that there is; is there nothing more? Call it ambition, call it restlessness, call it boredom, call it the human condition, call it whatever you like. It doesn't have to be prideful to yearn for something deeper and wider and grander in life, and in fact the church has always proclaimed the message that we were created for something deeper and wider and grander in life.

The question is what that thing is, and how we get it. If you had the entire world in the palm of your hand, what would come next? And what would come after that? And after that? Would you be satisfied with the world? Because eventually comes death, no matter how much you had in life. Shelley's famous poem "Ozymandias" tells of a broken monument in the desert of a long dead, once great king named Ozymandias, and yet from the perspective of history, the only thing that echoes from that monument is, "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" The greatest empires will eventually turn to dust. Is this all that there is? Is there nothing more?

Entropy, waste, corrosion, corruption, futility, and decay seem to rule in this world. Build your empire, whether you want your empire to span continents or you simply want an empire of a family living in a nice home with a white picket fence, but despair because your empire will not last. Build a fleet of spaceships and conquer the galaxy, but still you will wonder if this is all there is.

The good news is that there is indeed more, and there is more after that, and more, and more. But it's not what most people expect or look for, and you can't get it using the methods most people use. This past Thursday marked the fortieth day after Easter, which is the day the church sets aside to

commemorate Jesus' ascension. It happened rather unexpectedly from the perspective of Jesus' disciples; they were just asking Him if now was the time when He would bring all things to their conclusion and God's plan would be complete. Suddenly He's giving them a mission to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth, and He's taken up into heaven right in front of their eyes. And they begin to realize that God's work among them is far bigger than they expected. There's more coming. Each time they think they're nearing the end, they are suddenly shocked into seeing that there is far, far more in God's plan.

Ellsworth Kalas said, "Our Lord's ascension is, as I like to phrase it, 'Easter's exclamation point.' It tells us that the resurrection of our Lord is not simply a miracle, something to astonish us as with thousands of other miracles; it is a re-shaping of the order of the universe; it is the death of death. It is not simply a lengthening of life; it is a re-definition of life." Jesus was not simply resuscitated from death to live for a while and then die for good; He was raised to an entirely different sort of life that will never end. And we begin to catch a glimpse of something more, something that will last, something that is truly eternal.

Our theme in this season between Easter and Pentecost has been "Imperishable," drawing on the imagery we find in the book of 1 Peter, where Peter reminds his audience of the hope they have in Christ. And he loves that contrast between our imperishable hope and the perishable way of life that we're called out of: one way leads to futility, while the other leads to an eternal hope that is worth more and will last longer than gold.

Remember that the central question of this letter is how to resolve the tension that exists between this message of an imperishable inheritance in the blood of Christ and the present reality of a hostile world. These people have responded to the gospel news that they are brothers and sisters with one another and with Jesus Christ because of what He has done, and therefore they are heirs of the Lord of the universe and operate in the kingdom of God rather than the kingdoms of the world. But because of this they are faced with suspicion, slander, and the threat of persecution from the people they once called their family and friends; they now live as exiles in their own communities. They are revealed as priceless heirlooms living in a junkyard. Their value in Christ is scoffed at, their freedom in Christ is ignored, their community in Christ is viewed with suspicion, and their gospel is slandered.

And Peter's central message to them is that they must choose the middle way of Jesus Christ: if they lord their inheritance over others, if they insist on having the honor that is due them, if they claim their rights for themselves, then that is what they will get. But they will be disappointed, because that way is not the way of Christ. And likewise, if they shrink and shirk and abandon their place as exiles and foreigners, if they decide that the pressure is too much and they'd be better off to leave the world and go form a holy commune in the wilderness, if they forsake those who are their enemies, then again, that is what they will get, and they will be disappointed, for that is not the way of Christ, either.

No, the way of Christ is different. He humbled Himself, glorified His Father, and loved His enemies, and therefore He was in turn glorified by His Father. And so if we cling to our pride and glorify ourselves to our enemies, we will miss out on the greater glory that will be given to us by our Father, because "God opposes the proud." And the same thing will happen if we cling to our pride in a

different way and forsake our enemies. God opposes that kind of pride, too. The answer to the deep question of how to live as priceless heirlooms in a junkyard that doesn't recognize your value is to overcome evil with good, to bless those who curse you, and to love your enemies.

And so as we come to the last chapters of the letter, Peter is reminding them that their suffering for Christ's name is not a sign of failure or a reason for despair. Suffering does not necessarily mean that we have failed God or that God has failed us. Instead, when we suffer, and especially when we suffer because we have chosen to follow Christ, we have the opportunity to participate in the sufferings of Christ. As He chose to be faithful to His Father and was rejected and scorned, so we also have the opportunity to remain faithful to our Father in the face of rejection and scorn. Even when we face suffering that doesn't come as a result of opposition or persecution, we have that chance to choose to continue placing our trust in God.

It comes down to this, as Peter says in 5:6: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time." It is God's mighty hand that makes this work imperishable. Because of the power of our God, this lifting up will be of eternal value. This is the persistent paradox of God's kingdom: those who humble themselves before God will be lifted up in the end, while those who lift themselves up in spite of God will be humbled in the end. If we seek our own glory, we might just get it in this life, even up to having the whole world at our disposal. But we will be doomed to ask, in the end, "Is there nothing more?" But if we humble ourselves and seek God's glory, He then will be faithful and will glorify us in the end, and there will always be more.

This is at the crux of so many stories of God's people. I think of Saul, the first king of Israel, who started out well by following God but soon gave in to his own pride. He had a kingdom but died in shame because his focus was his own glory. Or David who followed him, who started out in humility, grew in pride and sinned before God, and again humbled himself when he was confronted, and we remember him as a man after God's own heart. Or King Rehoboam, whose concern was his own appearance of strength as a ruler, and God took most of his kingdom from him. Or the many other kings whose pride led to their downfall. Or Jonah, the prophet who refused to proclaim God's hope to his enemies, and was brought low in the belly of a fish until he was willing to humble himself. Or, of course, Jesus, the prime example of one who was willing to set aside His own glory, humble Himself, give of Himself for others, and was therefore given all authority in heaven and on earth.

Glorify yourself, and you will spend your life wondering if this is all there is. Humble yourself before God, and there will always be more for you. What more will there be? For generations, God's people were promised to live in their land with God dwelling in their midst. When they strayed from God, the call was to humble themselves and return, and God would bring them back to their land. But there was more; God gave them a Messiah to save His people and bring His kingdom, and the work of Jesus their unexpected Messiah opened the call of God to all nations on earth. He healed the sick, He opened the eyes of the blind, He forgave the sinner, He fed the hungry, and He proclaimed freedom for the captives, and the result was that He was betrayed and executed as an insurrectionist. But there was more, because God raised Him from the dead, and now this unexpected Messiah is an eternal Savior. But there was more, because Jesus commissioned His followers to be His church, His body at work in a hurting and lost world. But there was more, because He ascended to His Father's side, where He now remains to intercede for us, pouring out blessing upon blessing for eternity upon the humble.

But there is still more. Jesus ascended so that He could send the Counselor, our Advocate, His own Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, to guide and empower and fill His church. He did not leave us alone; He gave us *more*. We live in a world that is always searching for more, even to the point of searching the stars, and it almost always searches in the wrong place, using the wrong means. Looking for more of your own glory will always leave you wanting. Instead, humble yourself under God's mighty hand, and He will give you Himself. Our cry as a church is to be deep, beautiful, and fearless people of God: to continually go deeper in Christ, to reflect the beauty of God as we experience His grace, and to go out in fearless mission as we are transformed by God's work. And if this is truly our cry, then there is always more for us. We can always go deeper in our life in Christ, there is always more of the beauty of God to behold, there is always more of the beauty of holiness for us to accept, and we can always go further in our fearless mission.

Today we look back on the ascension of Jesus and look forward to the promise it gives us of *more*. We look forward to our celebration of Pentecost next Sunday, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church and God's people were propelled into the *more* that God had for them. The outpouring of the Spirit came to the church in the context of their gathering in prayer. They prepared the soil of their souls to receive the planting of God's Spirit, and they prepared through prayer. That same Spirit is available to us as well, and so in this week, let us prepare ourselves for His arrival through prayer, and see what more God has for us.



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