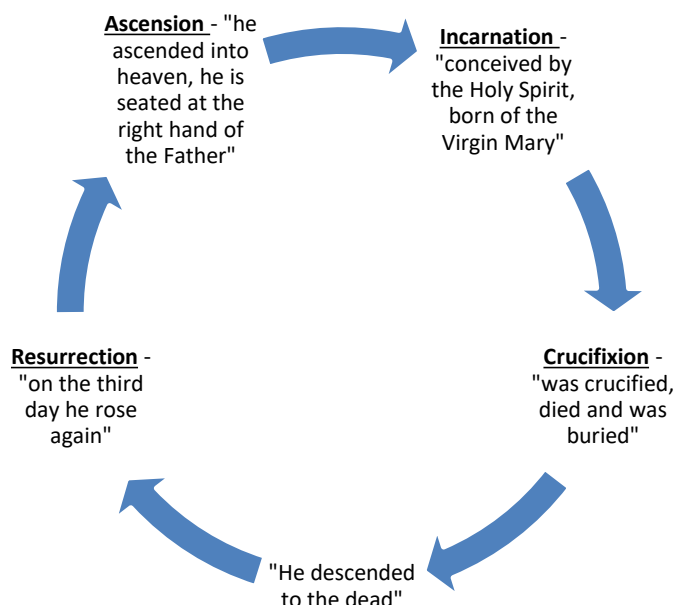


COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS ABOUT THE LESSONS FOR ASCENSION SUNDAY - MAY 21, 2023



Acts 1:1-11

- This week we celebrate Ascension Sunday instead of the Seventh Sunday of Easter. We normally do not celebrate the Ascension as it falls 10 days before Pentecost, so that it is always on a weekday. The ascension is only mentioned at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. It is perhaps the least talked-about of any doctrine, and in many ways it should be more problematic for our modern age. After all, we understand the universe in a very different way than the biblical writers. Heaven is not “up there.” So, what do we do with Jesus ascending, “going up,” into heaven? Do we need to believe in the Ascension? Do we just do away with this belief? I would claim that the meaning of the Ascension is vital for our faith, even if the *literalness* of the event is not. The graph above illustrates that meaning. With the world understood as a three-tiered universe - defined as heaven, earth, and “under the earth” – we see the movement of God and Jesus. In Jesus, God moves down to earth (incarnation). By dying, Jesus goes under the earth, to the place of the dead or hell (crucifixion). God raises Jesus from under the earth to the earth in the resurrection. God raises Jesus again to heaven in the ascension. So, there is no place in heaven or on earth or under the earth where we do not find God’s work in Jesus. All of creation is brought into God. This movement expresses the conviction of the Psalmist who declares, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” (Psalm 139:7-8)
- Even here – at Jesus’ ascension! – the disciples are caught in old ways of thinking about the Messiah: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus does not resolve the issue. He reminds them the Spirit will come and empower them. God is not looking for those who “get it right.” God is looking for those who are faithful and are open to God’s calling.

Psalms 47

- Perhaps the misunderstanding of the disciples can be appreciated when we read the psalm. Here we hear about God “who subdues the peoples under us, and the nations under our feet.” It seems like a call for God to give greater expanse and dominion to our particular nation. How can we re-read this psalm in light of the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims? What will it then mean for God to subdue the peoples? Subduing under peace? Subduing under justice? Subduing under love?

Ephesians 1:15-23

- Paul speaks directly to this redefining of what Jesus is doing in dying and rising again. By being raised to heaven, Jesus has put all things under him, and through his body, the Church, he fills all in all. Paul describes here what I attempted with the graph above. God seeks in Jesus to fill the entire universe, the entire created order, with the divine presence. This is the knowledge and the hope we are called to. This is the promise given to us. How can we be open to realizing this knowledge and this hope? How can we have the “eyes of [our] heart enlightened”?

Luke 24:44-53

- In the only other recording of the Ascension, we hear the call of the original disciples as our call as well. We are called to be witnesses. We witness to what Jesus has done in the past – suffering, dying and rising – and what Jesus is doing with us – changing our lives, turning them around, forgiving our sins. How are you called to be a witness?