

*“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

One of the very great events in the ministry of Jesus often goes unobserved or is misunderstood by His church here on earth. We do confess this wonderful event in the creed, just as we did again this morning. We rejoice that Christ *ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty*. In some ways, this event is on par with the resurrection itself. As one pastor asked, “Isn’t the ascension of Jesus the greatest news you ever heard?” (Without Flesh, p. 29)

But for many, the ascension of Christ is not good news. They don’t see the blessing of the ascended Christ. In fact, many Christians see this as Christ leaving His church here on earth. Yes, we have the memory of Him. We have the blessings of the Word that He has left with us. We even have the Holy Spirit, whom He sent, just as He promised. But we think that Jesus—the Jesus who walked with the disciples; who laid His hand on the sick and the lame; who confronted the false teachings of the Pharisees is no longer here among us. If only the Lord was still here, orchestrating the life of the Church, continuing to speak with the authority and power with which the people of Israel heard Him speak! If only He was here to work His gracious miracles of healing among us and for us! If only He was here to deal with the divisions and questions that are raised by His followers on earth. We want to put Jesus’ picture on a milk carton, because so many feel He has gone missing.

My dear people, loved by God, nothing could be further from the truth! Yes, Jesus ascended into heaven, but He never left! Tomorrow we will begin our Vacation Bible School, looking at the promises of God. You know very well (or you should know) one of the great promises that Jesus made to you, to me and to His whole Church on earth: *“behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:20, ESV) This isn’t an empty promise. These aren’t empty words. This is the iron-clad assurance and guarantee of the Lord whose every Word is true. Even though He has ascended into heaven, Christ is with us. Christ is, as He says, in us. He surrounds us with His presence and all that means for us each and every day.

It doesn’t surprise me that we did have a request for a sermon on Christ with us and Christ in us. This always seems to be struggle for us. We don’t seem to have too much trouble with the idea that God is watching over us. And yet, we do struggle with that truth. We wonder, “where was God when...”, and you can fill in any disaster or uncertainty that comes to your mind. That question surely came to mind in the recent Texas floods that killed at least 160 people, including 36 children, with 173 still missing. The flood struck a Christian camp, drowning 27 little girls. Their parents and churches were praying desperately, but seemingly to no avail. Why would God allow such a thing? If the Lord were with us in the same way that He was with the disciples on the boat in the storm, wouldn’t things be different?

The whole discussion of the why of events like this would be the subject of another sermon. Let me just point out that these things are not part of God’s plan. This is not God’s will. Sin was not part of God’s plan. But sin is in us and all around us. Sin not only alienates us from God, it fully and completely corrupted the whole of creation itself. We live in the realm of sin and death. Thankfully, God has broken into this sinful world in Christ. Taking sin and death into Himself on the cross and rising from the dead, He saves us and redeems His creation, even though the final victory is ahead of us.

Until we enjoy the fulness of that victory, the Saviour who came to die and rise to buy us back for Himself is the God who continues to be with us in all things. He surrounds us with His presence, His grace and His power in all things. Jesus was there, in that camp, as the waters rushed in. He was there with those little girls. He was there with the other victims. He is there when a child is born with some sort of birth defect. He is there when cancer invades our bodies. He is there when things work out the way we want, just as He is there when they are all falling apart around us.

This is where the words of Paul in our text today become so important. Paul speaks of the *stewardship from God that was given*

*to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*” Christ is with us. Christ unites Himself with us. We are surrounded by the presence, strength and help of our God day after day after day.

Ignatius of Antioch, one of the early church fathers said: “Where Christ is, there is the church”. Jesus made this promise: ***“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”*** (Matthew 18:20, ESV) I think we can say this in reverse too: “where the Church is, there is Christ”. Wherever His people are, Christ is with them. But Paul takes this even further. He speaks in our text of *the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints*. Then he tells us what this mystery is: ***“which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”*** More than just the corporate presence of God with His people, we have the wonderful assurance to each and everyone of us individually that enables us to say, “God is with me”. To dazzle you with some theological jargon, we speak of this as the *unio mystica*—the mystical union. We know that God is omnipresent—present everywhere. As He says: ***“Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD.”*** (Jeremiah 23:23–24, ESV) St. Paul tells us ***“And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”*** (Ephesians 1:22–23, ESV)

But the mystical union of God with each of His people as individuals is different from this presence of God with all creatures. This is one of the blessings we have through faith. The mystical union is more than God simply giving us divine gifts. It does not make us God, as if everything is God because God is in all things. That is what we call pantheism. Rather, as the Holy Spirit leads us to faith, this faith assures us that God is with us and will be with us in all things.

Before His crucifixion, Jesus assured His disciples: ***“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”*** (John 14:23, ESV) How wonderful this good news is! Throughout Scripture we can find references to the Father being with His people; with the Son being with us and united with us, we have the assurance of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. We always need to remember that where the Father is, the Son is. Where the Son is, the Spirit is. Where the Spirit is, the Son and the Father are, too. God is not divided. Paul speaks of Christ in you, and that means the fulness of God is with you and in you. He surrounds you with His presence, even as He comes to make His home with you. He brings His glory to you, and assures you that you will share in His glory forever.

Paul tells us this good news to give us joy and comfort in our lives as His people. Yet for some this closeness of Christ is frightening. Think of Isaiah, given a vision of God and standing in the presence of the Lord. Isaiah’s first thought is: ***“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”*** (Isaiah 6:5, ESV) My dear, Baptist grandmother used to chide us when we got into mischief, saying, “would you like Jesus to catch you doing that if He came back right now?” I once made the mistake of reminding grandma that God is always with us. He already knows what we are doing. Our lives are far from perfect. Yet the reason Christ comes to us to bring us the forgiveness and life we need. Let’s be clear: God is never happy with our sin. It brings forth His judgement. It tears at His loving, fatherly heart. Our sin separates us from Him and brings forth death. Yet God loves us so much that He comes to set us free from that sin. In Christ, God takes all our sin into Himself. The holy One joins us in our sinfulness, that He might bring us the forgiveness that flows from His death for us and so that we may have the life that comes through His resurrection from the dead. Now, forgiven and blessed with His indwelling presence we can live to give honour to Him; to love our God as we should, and to live in love with our neighbour. His union with us leads us to be more like Christ in all we do. His union with us grants us to share in His glory, both now and forever. He cares for us, but not just from a distance. He comes to us. He comes to you today, and puts Himself in your hands and in your mouth as Christ gives you His body and blood in Holy Communion. He does this to assure you again that He is never—never—apart from you.

You, my dear people loved by God, are surrounded by His presence. You, dear saint of God, can be sure that He is with you and in you. Since I really can’t say this better than the psalmist did by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, let me sum it all up in the words of David in Psalm 139: (if you want to follow along, you will find the psalms in the front of the hymnal or in the pew bibles) We read the first 18 verses:

***“O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol,***

*you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you."* (Psalm 139:1-18, ESV)