

“What Does Jesus Do All Day?”

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Exodus 28:1–4, 9–10, 29–30; John 17:11b–19

We celebrated the Feast of the Ascension this past Thursday and today is the one Sunday between the Ascension and the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So in this tiny season of Ascensontide we are looking toward the coming of the Spirit and then back at the Ascended status of Christ our King.

Our Gospel readings for the past few weeks have come from John’s Farewell Discourse, the section of teaching Jesus offers at the Last Supper to prepare his disciples not just for the period between the crucifixion and the Resurrection, but for his ultimate departure at the Ascension.

We are learning in the Ryden house that separation can be hard. After a long weekend of family travel, four straight days where one of us was with Charlie for the whole of the day, returning to our routines of work and childcare were not as smooth as we would have liked them to be. But thankfully, Daniel Tiger is there to help us!

If you are unfamiliar, Daniel Tiger is the PBS show that is the successor to Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. Mr. Rogers’ beloved puppet Daniel, now in animated form, learns the same sorts of lessons that Mr. Rogers taught to previous generations. Daniel Tiger has an excellent little song called “Grownups Come Back” that has been very helpful

in those moments when Charlie doesn't want to be apart from Brittany or myself. It is a helpful reminder that although there is a parting for a while, reunion comes.

That is an important lesson in this season of Ascensiontide - our Grownup is coming back! And our situation is even better, because we do not have a mere babysitter to sit with us, but God the Spirit, promised by Jesus and descending on the Church at Pentecost. But even still, the Ascension makes us long for our Lord's return. It also makes us wonder what he's been doing all this time.

I am not sure what concept Charlie has of what his mom and dad do all day. He knows that Mama works at school and Dada works at church, but I am sure there will come a day when I can better explain the importance of what we are both doing in our 9-5, and furthermore, how that 9-5 provides a roof over his head and bunny grahams for his snack.

"What does Jesus do all day?," we may be inclined to ask. Even as that question displays misconceptions about a divine sense of timing, it is something that we can feel in our hearts, especially on the days when he may seem distant from our struggles. From the way that Jesus talks about his departure in John, it seems like he had to convince the disciples that it really was a good thing that he would depart. We may feel the same way too. We're the small child holding on to Mom or Dad's neck to prevent them from leaving. What does Jesus go to do that keeps him away from us?

There is more than one theme emphasized at the Feast of the Ascension and this brief season that follows, always only one Sunday. Many Ascension sermons will focus on Jesus' lordship and rule of the universe. If you were here for our celebration of the Feast of the Ascension on Thursday, you heard an excellent sermon from Fr. John emphasizing how the Ascension is Jesus acting as our great High Priest on the Day of Atonement, purifying the whole world so that God can once again dwell with his people. Our readings today draw out another theme from the Ascension - how Jesus ascends to intercede to the Father on our behalf. That's what Jesus does all day. We begin with our Gospel reading, Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, as the prayer it turns to those who follow him.

I'm going to take a slight detour that I think helps us grasp this scene a little better. If you have had someone call you by mistake, and you probably have, you know the frustration of those first few seconds, where you still think it is an actual call. But then the background noise kicks in and you realize that this conversation is going nowhere. What you may not have experienced is the situation I found myself in a number of years ago - I picked up a call from my Dad, answered, and pretty quickly realized it was an accidental dial. Then I heard my name. That's right, I had the good fortune of getting a pocket dial happening at the exact moment when I was the subject of the conversation, this time a conversation between my Dad and uncle who were having lunch together. What I should have done was hang up right away, but the temptation was just too strong, and after all, at least as I justified at the time, it is not really eavesdropping if the person called you. So of course I listened! But things went about as mellowly as you could guess. Yes, the subject of the conversation was a disagreement between my Dad and me, but everything I

overheard was something he had already said to me and was tempered by the love and care that you would expect from him. So I didn't get any dirt or ammunition, and with that, I decided it was time to quit while I was ahead, and I hung up the phone.

It's a common desire I think to hear what people say about us when we are not around. Whether it is from insecurity, just simple curiosity or a mix of both. I think we have this notion that if we could hear what people said about us when we aren't around it would let us know what they really think of us, as if what we hear from them directly is not to be trusted. Why that is is probably the subject of a different sermon, but I do want to draw our attention back to our gospel text. If you want to know what Jesus really thinks about you, you are in luck, because we have an extended prayer between God the Son and God the Father, while Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before he is arrested. We're listening in on a call about us!

This prayer goes beyond our reading for today and so I encourage you to read it in its entirety sometime this week, but the portion we have not only shows Jesus' love and care for us, but also is instructive as to what we need to live the life he intends for us. Think about it this way - this is the person who knows you better than yourself, asking for things on your behalf for your good to the Father who he knows is able to deliver on those promises. I have said when preaching on this passage before that these things that Jesus asks for us serve as a good model for our own prayer, since he knows our needs better than we do. So consider that too as we look at Jesus' words here. What does he say about us and what does he say that we need?

The first thing that jumps out from this prayer is that the disciples and, by extension, all of us who have become disciples through their teaching¹ are beloved and cherished by the Triune God. Look at all the verbs Jesus uses to describe how he has acted or is asking the Father to act in relation to his disciples - keep, guard, fulfill, sanctify. These are not ways you act towards things or persons you do not value. You do not protect the ones you do not care about. We are listening on the line on a call between Jesus and the Father and here he is advocating for our protection and holiness, because he values us.

Somewhere along the way, we may have received the message that God thinks we are trash, worthy of discarding. If you have heard those messages, it is time to put them away. Listen to Jesus' words here. You are worthy of keeping, guarding, filling with joy, sanctifying. We have been deemed worthy, through Jesus, of God's name.

What can we learn then about what we need from this prayer? From the beginning, Jesus' words make it plain that we are in for trouble on this side of his return. We are in the world and so we need protection. We are in the world and so we need to be kept in God's name. The forces of compromise are strong. And you might expect the first thing for Jesus to say regarding the trials of living in the world would be that we would be tough and strong, that we would have the power to resist, which we certainly need, but notice what he says: "But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves."² Have you ever thought of joy, true holy joy, as a tool of standing against the lies of the

¹ John 17:20 would imply that Jesus' prayer extends to all of us, I am taking v. 20 to mean the preceding verses are about us as well.

² John 17:13

world? The kingdom is not built by the clash of swords, but by the crash of joyous laughter. So this prayer turns our attention to joy.

This prayer also reframes how we view our struggles with the temptations and false idols of the world. Some have decided that the world is too far gone, that the only option is to cloister off in pockets of faithfulness and watch as it all burns down. But hear the words of Jesus: "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."³ Jesus asks not that we be taken away from the world, but that we be preserved from the evil one and his work. Why? Why not just round us all up and get us out of here? Because there is work to be done, New Creation work to partner with, beloved image bearers who need to hear the gospel. One of the guiding principles of Tom Wright and Michael Bird's new book of faith and politics is the belief that the gospel of God's kingdom is not *from* the world, but that it is *for* the world.⁴ Jesus doesn't want us to be escapists, but rescue workers, agents of healing in a sick world that was created for goodness and health.

It is appropriate for us today to focus on the role that Jesus continues to play as he ascended, not just as king of the universe and redeeming high priest, but as our advocate to the Father. It is precisely this middle time, that we need this reminder of who we are and what we need from his prayer in the Garden, a prayer that shows us what sort of advocacy he still offers for us now.

³ John 17:15-17

⁴ Bird and Wright, *Jesus and the Powers*, 7.

There is a striking detail in our Old Testament reading for today that you may have missed in your read-through-the-Bible plan. It could be taken, at least on its face, as yet more detailed instructions for the worship of Yahweh by his people, the major subject of the back half of Exodus. A people coming out of slavery at the hands of a pagan nation needed instructions and discipleship on how the true God ought to be worshiped. What Exodus offers is a lot of details, even down to material lists and size specifications. It is easy to get lost, but there is beauty in these details. Today's reading from Exodus 28 shows the instructions for the making of the breastplate of Aaron, who was to be the priest. This is what Aaron was to wear when he would enter the presence of God. Listen to verses 9 and 10: "You shall take two onyx stones, and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel, six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth." We get the purpose of these instructions in verse 29: "So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to regular remembrance before the Lord."

The high priest has the names of God's people on his heart as he goes into God's presence. Jesus is our truer and better High Priest. We celebrate his Ascension because as he goes into the Father's presence, perhaps you've sung these words before, "My name is written on his heart." That caring, loving, powerful prayer in John 17 is what the Lord Jesus is offering for you as your name is sitting there on his chest. When the relationship fails, your name is written on his heart, when the bill comes due, your name is written on his heart, when the roof caves in, when the worst happens, your name is written on his heart. You are more precious to him than

any stone could ever be, you are his daughter, his son. He carries your name with him as he pleads to the Father for you.

Thanks to Christ's Ascension, our names have been in heaven long before we were ever born. What goodness, and love, and mercy, and grace he pours out on us. Alleluia, Alleluia, Christ has ascended into heaven. What wonderful news!