

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Sunday after Ascension Day – Year B

**RCL Readings** – Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; I John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

**ACNA Readings** – Acts 1:15-26 or Exodus 28:1-4, 9-10, 29-30; Psalm 68:1-20; I John 5:6-15; John 17:11b-19

**Seasonal Introduction.** One of the great festivals of the Church is the Feast of the Ascension. There are three times when clergy are required to be in attendance to serve the community, even if they are sick. They are Christmas, Easter and Ascension. Ascension Day always falls on a Thursday as it comes 40 days after Resurrection Sunday. Because it's a festival that occurs midweek it's also one of the least celebrated festivals of the Lord. Yet the ascension of Jesus into heaven is an incredible event to contemplate. Jesus now reigns in heaven at the right hand of the Father and intercedes for us before the Throne of God. Upon departing He promises us the Spirit of the Living God. Truly these things are worthy to be honoured and proclaimed.

**Common Theme.** The ascension is not the end of the story for the disciples. Through the Messiah, God has created a new community of Jews and Gentiles that will belong to Him and reveal God to the world. This task is not something we do alone; we do it together and with the gift of the Helper, the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit empowers and emboldens us to continue the redemptive mission of the Messiah through the body of Messiah.

**Hebraic Context.** Modern Jewish exegesis of the Bible rests on the principle of PRDS (פְּרָדָּס, pronounced Pardes). PRDS holds that every verse, word and subject in the Hebrew Bible can and should be interpreted in a minimum of 4 ways.<sup>1</sup> Simply put these are as follows:

P – *Pshat*, simple: the plain and literal meaning of the text.

R – *Remez*, hint: what is the text alluding to, what is it foreshadowing, and does the text have some deeper spiritual meaning? Often seen in allusion and allegory.

D – *Drasha*, study: exegesis of the text to make it practical and applicable to life.

S – *Sod*, mystery: after all the effort we put in trying to understand the text we acknowledge that we, as humans, cannot know everything and the Messiah will one day explain the mysteries of the text to us.

Jewish exegesis says that all interpretations and use of the text are valid as long they do not break the Pshat—that is the literalness of the text. For example Paul, in 1 Timothy 5:18, used a verse from Deuteronomy 25:4 which literally says; “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain” and in context applied strictly to animal husbandry. Yet in his epistle to Timothy he

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<sup>1</sup> The term, *pardes*, is a late term (13th century) that is the most popular Jewish mnemonic for understanding that the Bible can have multiple interpretations, as long as those interpretations don't disagree with the simple and literal reading. However, both Judaism and Christianity used this principle long before the mnemonic was developed. For instance, Jewish thought in Alexandria was known for it's allegorical reading of the Scripture with Philo (1st Century Judaism) and Origen (3rd Century Christianity). The Gospel of Matthew used many Scriptural passages in a way that was neither plainly literal nor simple, rather revealing a mystery of prophecy in the days of the Messiah.

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Sunday after Ascension Day – Year B

made use of that verse, not in the literal sense but in the exegetical sense, the Drasha. He made the verse applicable even though it was out of context. This is perfectly fine in Jewish exegesis as Paul had not broken the literal meaning of the verse. That is, Paul did not tell Timothy that he should muzzle an ox if he had one. The Biblical text then becomes timeless, speaking to every generation and to the world, transferable to peoples, places and ages.<sup>2</sup>

With PRDS as the backbone to Jewish exegesis there are additional methods of study and practical hermeneutics such as the 'Seven Middot' that are attributed to Hillel, a Jewish sage who lived a generation prior to Jesus. The Middot are the 'virtues' of how Jewish exegesis approaches the meanings and applications of passages of Scripture. The most basic hermeneutical methodology of the Middot is Kal V'HoMER; from the lighter to the heavier.<sup>3</sup> This is where you draw a conclusion from a minor premise to a major one. It means that what applies in a less important case will certainly apply in a more important one. The phrase has come to mean an inescapable conclusion. A simple example is: if David is stronger than Solomon and Solomon can lift 50kgs then David can also lift 50kgs and should be able to lift even more—kal v'hoMER should be very logical and straightforward. In the New Testament an example would be in the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 7:9-11 where He says, "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

**Acts 1:15-26.**<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of Acts, Simon Peter took the lead among the disciples, numbering at this stage around 120 persons. This conclave of disciples would include both males and females, friends of Jesus such as Lazarus and his sisters, and family such as Mary and the brothers of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Peter described the situation concerning the death of Judas and quoted two different Psalms as a proof-text that they should decide on his replacement as one of the apostles. The Psalm 109:8 simply says, "Let another take his office" without details of how that should be done.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> While we may not agree with every interpretation we hear and should check the '*pshat*', the simple and literal interpretation of the text first, it is important to notice that Jesus and the Apostles commonly made use of similar exegesis methods, as did the early church fathers.

<sup>3</sup> The opposite principle is also included, from heavier to lighter.

<sup>4</sup> During the season of Easter, leading up to Ascension Day and Pentecost, the lectionary often replaces the Old Testament reading for a section from the Book of Acts.

<sup>5</sup> Later, James would also take a position of leadership. However, prior to James seeing Jesus alive following His death (I Corinthians 15:7) James had not been a disciple of Jesus. Meanwhile, although Peter remained a prominent leader of the early Church, Luke focused on the call to go out from Jerusalem and so wrote more on Paul rather than Peter or James.

A separate work, the apocryphal work called *Acts of Peter*, possibly written by Leucius, a purported companion of John the apostle, recorded the deeds of Peter. *Acts of Peter* includes the tradition that Peter was crucified upside down.

<sup>6</sup> Both Psalm 109 and Psalm 69, Psalms of David, spoke of what should be done to the wicked—foes of David. By their natural and literal readings neither would seem to precisely fit what Peter was speaking

**Sermon Notes from the Church’s Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Sunday after Ascension Day – Year B

Acts records that Matthias was chosen as a replacement for Judas via lot. There is much about this event that raises questions. The calling of Matthias is unique in that he was not chosen directly by Jesus to be an apostle and he was appointed before the Holy Spirit fell at Pentecost.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this is the reason for the casting of lots as they asked for God’s guidance.<sup>8</sup> Matthias would be a witness of the resurrection, and like the other Apostles, would be martyred according to several Church traditions.<sup>9 10</sup>

**Psalm 1.**<sup>11</sup> The opening verse of Psalm 1, “Blessed is the man,” sets the tone for the entire Book of Psalms. The Hebrew word translated “blessed” is בֵּשֶׁר *asher* and can more literally be translated as “happy”.<sup>12</sup> The phrase בְּשִׂמְחַת רֵעֵי וְאֵתְרֵי is in the plural form—that is, there are multiple contentments or “happineses” that await the man, not just one! To begin with, happiness results from the careful choice of community, friends and peer group influences. Choosing bad or wicked friends will often diminish our witness for the Messiah and likely lead us astray from

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towards. In fact, Peter even changed the pronoun in Psalm 69 from plural to singular. Nonetheless, Peter’s appeal to find another to take the office of the wicked and deceitful (in this case, Judas) was met with agreement. The practical application of these Psalms, the *drasha*, that Peter made was not seen as being opposed to what David originally wrote.

<sup>7</sup> The disciples seem to already have the Holy Spirit, as Jesus breathed on them in John 20:22 and told them to receive the Holy Spirit. Although some argue that this was a promise, such as in John 14:26, 15:26, and 16:7, either way, there is something special about Pentecost that seems different from the giving of the Holy Spirit in other instances.

<sup>8</sup> We should remember that Acts as a genre is not a gospel—it is sacred history. So we should be careful of creating doctrines or dogma from sacred history. This is not how most of us choose our shepherds anymore. Instead, we have Biblical commands on the type of person we should choose—people of godly character. Today, we also prefer them to have attended Bible colleges and have some formal education as one characteristic (although not the most important one) is that they can teach. If Jesus had chosen His disciples via lot in the Gospels or it was commanded in the Epistles then we may have cause to create a ‘doctrine of the casting of dice’. As it stands, this is the only example of chance (albeit by the will of God) used to discern the Lord’s will in the New Testament.

<sup>9</sup> The use of μαρτυρα, (*martyr*) witness as martyr (someone who dies for their belief) was not a common use of the word. Nonetheless, there was the beginning of this association in the Maccabees, Josephus, and the New Testament. It became much more common in Christian writings as those who witnessed Jesus’ resurrection also died for that witness.

<sup>10</sup> According to Hippolytus, an early 3rd century Bishop of Rome, Matthias may have been one of the few apostles that was not killed because of their belief.

<sup>11</sup> Psalms are poetry and songs. They are also prayers. The book of Psalms is the prayerbook of the Jewish people. There are both individual and communal prayers, thanksgivings, wisdom poetry, laments and prayers of praise.

<sup>12</sup> When Zilpah gave birth in Genesis 30:13, Leah named the child Asher, for she considered herself happy and was blessed.

**Sermon Notes from the Church’s Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Sunday after Ascension Day – Year B

God.<sup>13</sup> Many of the laments in the Psalms, particularly by David, also speak of the wicked men who condemned him. They would bring anguish, shame, and even fear and anger.

Verse 2 reminds us that the blessed man has “his delight is in the law of the Lord”. Thus blessing and happiness are also found in the daily study and application of the Word of God. The phrase תּוֹרַת יְהוָה the ‘law of the LORD’, along with similar phrases, was used throughout the Psalms to refer to all that God taught, not only the five books of Moses.<sup>14</sup>

The psalmist used the metaphor of a firmly rooted tree with ready access to fresh water to describe the status of blessed man. The person who does not follow the ways of the wicked but instead follows the way of God can be confident that he will produce good fruit of faithfulness for God. The last verse reminds us that faith is an action, for God knows “the way of the righteous.”<sup>15</sup> Not only does he know the heart of the believer, but also the path that the believer walks. We do not walk alone—we walk as part of a community, so we should choose our communities wisely.

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<sup>13</sup> We are called to be salt and light to the world, but we should remember that at the same time as we touch the world to influence it for God, the world also influences us.

<sup>14</sup> Torah, as used to delineate the five books of Moses from the rest of Scripture, is found as early as Joshua 1:8 but generally the word was used to speak of the guidance, instruction, and occasionally the commandments of God. The תּוֹרַת יְהוָה, ‘law of the LORD’, isn’t simply a book, but the words of God to His people on how to live.

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 1 may have been one of the large influences on the concept of walking in the way of God. The walk of faith (or the way to walk out your faith) is called הלכה *halacha*, derived from the verb to walk. In the Hebraic mind *halacha* is the practical application of the commandments of the Lord—how we do our faith. The alternative here in Psalm 1 is walking in, or practically applying in our life, the ways of the wicked.

Paul (like many of his Jewish contemporaries) used the term “walk” throughout his epistles. In Colossians 1:10 Paul exhorted the community to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God”. This is very reminiscent of Psalm 1. And if one is walking, the path (*derech*, road or way) one walks becomes important. One road is narrow and leads to life but the other path is broad and leads to destruction.

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Sunday after Ascension Day – Year B

**John 5:9-13.**<sup>16</sup> John uses a Jewish rhetorical device called *kal u'chomer* קל וחומר, from the lighter to the heavier, often signalled in the teachings of Jesus by the phrase “how much more.”<sup>17</sup> John begins by asking rhetorically; If we receive human witness as valid—and we all do in some form every day, otherwise we would never believe anything that anyone ever says—then how much more valid should the witness of God be? God is truth, and we can have confidence that what God has witnessed to us about Jesus is also true and that he has given us eternal life.

When we think of the term “eternal life,” we often relegate that to the afterlife. That is, we will get eternal life only in the future when we die. In Jewish thought, the afterlife is termed *olam haba*, “the world to come.” Eternal life is something different; it is not life in the world to come. Instead, eternal life is a life lived in relationship with the eternal and living God. That is something that is lived out right now, something that is present and continuous. The relationship with the risen and ascended Lord, which is something we all have access to right now, will also continue into the world to come. The basis for eternal life through the relationship with Jesus is conditioned to ‘continued’ belief in Him. As John says: “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may *continue* to believe in the name of the Son of God.”

**John 17:6-19.**<sup>18</sup> Jesus began His prayer with a petition for Himself. But Jesus quickly turned His attention to intercession for His disciples. God is at work in the world but the disciples were also faithful, “they have kept your word.” The disciples studied, meditated on, and applied the

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<sup>16</sup> ACNA reading includes I John 5:6-8 and 14-15.

John uses the terminology of ‘water and blood’ to describe the physical resurrected Jesus as more than a spirit. Contrary to the skeptics of the resurrection Jesus is a physical being of flesh and blood, or as Luke 24 describes Him as having “flesh and bone”. Gnostic belief influenced parts of the early church, leading to the belief that the resurrection was only a spiritual event and not a physical or literal event. Jesus was spirit, water, and bone—even after His resurrection He maintained His own physical body, even to the point of retaining the scars on his body and having the sign of God’s covenant with Israel into eternity.

Arguments over the trinity may have also influenced the KJV reading in I John 5:7, “There are three that bear witness in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.” None of the early Greek manuscripts include this phrase. It seems this phrase somehow was added to the Latin Vulgate and then translated back into late (15th) century Greek New Testaments. The phrase also doesn’t appear in Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian or Old Church Slavonic manuscripts. While the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one God, now and forever, is testified to in Scripture, I John 5:7 isn’t a verse that we should rely on to prove the Trinity.

<sup>17</sup> See Hebraic Context.

<sup>18</sup> The Gospels often mention that Jesus went and prayed or that He “explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.” Unfortunately, the Gospels don’t continue and tell us how Jesus prayed, what He prayed about, or what He taught. John 17 is one of the few times we hear Jesus pray at length.

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Sunday after Ascension Day – Year B

teaching (and example) of Jesus. They didn't always accomplish this perfectly nor did they always fully understand the mission. In fact, only hours later the disciples would flee.<sup>19</sup> However, they did not sit in the counsel of the wicked. They sat at the feet of Jesus and, by the grace of God, would bear much good fruit as a tree planted by fresh water.

In this intimate prayer, Jesus knew He was going to leave the disciples soon and that He would be "coming to the Father." This would prove to be a very testing time for the disciples. Jesus had previously sent them out two by two to preach the Kingdom, heal the sick, and cast out demons in His name. This they did and when they reported their exploits Jesus encouraged them by saying; "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18). Lovingly, Jesus did not want His disciples, or us, to be alone. And so He prayed for the protection of the Father, particularly protection against the evil one! This request is also included in the Lord's Prayer, "Deliver us from the Evil One."<sup>20</sup>

Jesus did not leave us in the world, rather He sent us into the world. There is a big difference between being abandoned and being commissioned. The world is not something God wants to abandon, as it is written, "For God so loved the world that He sent His Son." God loved the world so much He could not remain inactive but engaged and still engages with His creation. Sometimes in the midst of hardships that we endure, we would desire from the Lord to be "taken out of the world." Jesus Himself remained on earth until all that God wanted was accomplished.

Our role is not to withdraw from the world, though we may be tempted to do so in a culture increasingly hostile to the Christian faith. As disciples of Jesus, we are sent into the world, part of a growing community of believers seeking the relationship of unity that Jesus shares with the Father. We continue the redemptive work of the Messiah, not alone, but with God, the Spirit, and each other.

**Hebraic Perspective.** The word 'prayer' in English is derived from a Latin word '*precari*', an entreaty for granting a petition. Sadly, too often prayers only represent petitions and requests to God. The Hebrew word for prayer is תְּפִלָּה *tefilah* which comes from the verb להתפלל *l'hitpallel*. The verb to pray in Hebrew is a reflexive verb. A reflexive verb is something that you do to

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<sup>19</sup> We pray so often for those we love. Jesus provided us the example that we should also intercede for those who hurt us and betray us—particular among those in the Church. And we should not just pray that God would 'fix them'. We should give thanks for their faithfulness and how they serve God. We should pray that they be protected from the Evil One. And we should be eager to be in unity with them. They are our brothers and sisters and are important to God. The end of Jesus' prayer is that we will be unified.

<sup>20</sup> The Greek for evil, πονηρος (*poneros*), in the form used in Matthew 6:13, Luke 11:4 and here in John 17:15 (πονηρου), can mean either "evil" or "evil one" and is translated as such largely based on context.

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Sunday after Ascension Day – Year B

yourself.<sup>21</sup> How can prayer be reflexive? After all, we pray to God—not to ourselves. And God does listen to our prayers. Even Jesus prayed (and did so to the Father) as we find in John 17.

What does it mean then for a prayer to be reflexive? The Hebraic concept of prayer contains within itself the concept of self analysis and self evaluation while in communication with God. The goal therefore is not to try to influence God, rather the opposite, to let God influence you. Perhaps prayer is more listening than speaking. In declaring our thankfulness, we realize that we have so much to be thankful for. In declaring the mighty works of God, we learn to fear Him and depend on Him as our rock, our fortress, and deliverer.

Question: Does God need our prayers? The answer is of course, no. He does not need our prayers. He existed for an eternity without us. Whether we pray to Him or not He will still be God, He will still rule, and He will still have His Will done. He also already knows far better than we do what we need. Does God want our prayers? The answer is a definite yes! He loves to hear our prayers, He wants us to talk to Him and probably more importantly He wants to talk back. Our prayers, as the Scriptures state, are like sweet incense before the Throne of God. And, while God does not need our prayers, we do need to pray.<sup>22</sup>

### ACNA Readings

**Exodus 28:1-4, 9-10, 29-30.**<sup>23</sup> The Levitical priesthood was a position inherited by birthright and not gained by education standards or prompted through economic effort. Israel, too, was to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” but God still set aside a single family to be priests and levites before Him forever.<sup>24</sup> While the position was inherited by birthright and was not earned,

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<sup>21</sup> An example would be the Hebrew verb to dress or to wear clothing is ללבוש *lil'bosh*. The reflexive form of this verb, to dress oneself is להתלבש *l'hitlabesh*.

<sup>22</sup> Jesus reminds us that it is not what goes into your mouth that is important, it is what comes out. What we pray about, what we ask the Lord for, and how often we do so is a reflection of how we truly think and feel about the world around us. Listening to our own prayers that come from our hearts gives us an insight into our own spiritual condition. Do we truly trust God? Do we care more for our own wants more than anything else? Do we think we know how to fix others? Do we believe that God truly forgives?

<sup>23</sup> This reading from Exodus is designed to be a historical backdrop, or perhaps a precedent, for the reading in Acts 1 where lots are cast to choose the 12th Apostle. However, there is much to learn about holiness, responsibility, and the priesthood in Exodus 28.

<sup>24</sup> Jeremiah 33:17 is a popular messianic prophecy, “David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel.” But Jeremiah 33:18 follows it up, “and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices forever.” While Jesus was a descendent of David, Hebrews is clear that, as Jesus wasn't a Levite but from the tribe of Judah He was a priest in the order of Melchizedek rather than of Levi or Aaron. But even as Exodus 19:6 states that all Israel should be a kingdom of priests and I Peter 2:9 states that those who were not the people of God were a royal priesthood, there will still be a Levitical priesthood that serves God in their own unique position.

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Sunday after Ascension Day – Year B

all four of Aaron's sons are named here although two would later die because they did not sanctify the name of God.<sup>25</sup> The responsibility of being a priest is a high-calling.<sup>26</sup>

Here we have the instruction from the Lord to make appropriate garments for His priests.<sup>27</sup> Those that made them were empowered by the spirit of wisdom. The clothing included the names of the Tribes of Israel positioned over the heart of the High Priest. The heart plays the central role in Hebraic faith. The command has always been and always will be "to love God with all your heart." The repentant prayer of David was a cry to "create in me a clean heart".

Another feature of the priestly clothing are the mysterious Urim and Thummim (which means 'lights and perfections'). Although we don't know how, these stones were some sort of communication device that helped the priests discern the will of the Lord.<sup>28</sup> Discerning the will of the Lord is not something to be taking lightly. Exodus and Leviticus note that the Urim and Thummim were also placed over the heart of the priest. "So Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel over his heart before the LORD continually". When the descendants of the

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<sup>25</sup> Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar were not even allowed to bury their kin. Leviticus 21:1-4 states that the priests were to remain clean (uncleanliness, as described in Leviticus, is not a sin—in fact, often it comes about due to something God considers good such as sex and childbirth or burying the dead) except in the case of close relatives. The High priest, however "on whose head the anointing oil is poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments" was not even to bury their relatives. While Aaron was the high priest and anointed (Leviticus 8:12), his sons were also consecrated and were even sprinkled with anointing oil (Leviticus 8:30).

<sup>26</sup> Too often we speak of all being priests and only having one high priest, Jesus—the one who intercedes on our behalf. There are even people who would argue that, as we are all priests and have the Holy Spirit, there is no need for authorities to be placed over us on earth. But seldom do we look at the responsibilities that are prescribed for the priesthood. Although we have not taken over as priests in the line of Aaron and are not under the commandments God gave to the Levites, Aaron, or their descendants, we should still acknowledge that God takes the responsibility of glorifying and sanctifying His name with holiness and obedience seriously.

<sup>27</sup> Many church leaders wear very distinguishing clothing from cultural norms, particularly in more orthodox and catholic churches. Some protestants find this practice to be odd, however there is precedent that those set apart to teach and lead the people before God should be distinguished. It reminds both the leadership of their responsibility and helps the people of God find the people God and the Church have designated as having authority. And, on a less practical level, God clearly enjoys beauty.

<sup>28</sup> An example is when David consulted God along with Aviatar, the priest who had brought the ephod. While I Samuel 23 doesn't specifically mention the Urim and Thummim we can infer that they were involved in the inquiry. Interestingly, the Urim and Thummim, while mentioned in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy and having obvious historical significance in the time of Nehemiah and Ezra, remain a mystery as they do not have any context or even descriptions of their use throughout the Bible. Sometimes mysteries should remain a mystery as we look at an awesome God far beyond our understanding.

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Sunday after Ascension Day – Year B

priests did not have the Urim or Thummim in their midst, they were told to abstain from some of the priestly benefits until their claims could be verified.<sup>29</sup>

**Psalm 68:1-20.**<sup>30</sup> David began his psalm with a triumphal declaration, “God shall arise”. When He does, two things will happen. First, the enemies of God will be defeated—it will be as natural a thing as smoke dispersing in the wind or wax melting when on fire. There is no fight, no competition, God will be victorious.<sup>31</sup> Second, the people of God should be glad. This should be just as natural a response as the victory God has over those who hate Him.

Our response should be the same as David's, who in verse 4 extols us to “Sing to God and praise His name.” Verse 5 notes that part of the redemption includes God protecting the widows and the orphans, which James 1:27 reminds us is true religion. In all the excitement of the Lord's victory over death we should never neglect the poor and disenfranchised, these ones are at the heart of God.<sup>32</sup>

David used the imagery of jealous mountains fuming in envy at God dwelling with his people in Zion. The psalmist contrasts the mighty mountains of the Bashan, present day Golan Heights and Hermon against the lesser stature of Mount Zion.<sup>33</sup> Mount Zion is not a large imposing mountain at all. In actuality, Zion is the smallest of mountains in Jerusalem, let alone compared to the mountains of the north.

This reflects the character of the Lord, He does not place His temple on the highest but on the least of the mountains. God so often chooses the weak to confound the strong—the orphans, the widows, and the lonely, while kings of armies flee. God is actively involved in the life and victory of his people, even more so now following the resurrection and ascension of the Lord with the sending of the Holy Spirit amongst his people. We are now to be sent forth in the name of the

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<sup>29</sup> Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 7:65

<sup>30</sup> Psalm 68 is traditionally part of the Jewish prayers for Shavuot (Pentecost). Some commentators suggest the psalm was written on the occasion of the entry of the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem in which David danced and enthusiastically celebrated before God and the people.

<sup>31</sup> As we conclude the Easter season, it is important to remember that death and sin did not conquer Jesus when He went to the cross. He defeated them. Jesus knew that He would go to the cross but He also knew that three days later He would rise from the dead—death has been defeated.

<sup>32</sup> The Talmud, tractate *Shabbat 133b.6* states, “Be similar, as it were, to Him, the Almighty: Just as He is compassionate and merciful, so too should you be compassionate and merciful.” If the fatherless and widow, the lonely and imprisoned are precious to God, there is a reminder that we too should insure they are precious to us.

<sup>33</sup> The mountains of the Bashan-Golan are strong basalt rock—tall and imposing but with good soil and grazing land. Rain falls on Mount Hermon in abundance, upwards of 50-60 inches of rain annually. The limestone formation of Mount Hermon creates the largest karstic spring in the Middle East at Tel Dan (which forms the headwaters of the Jordan) and provides the surrounding land with its bounty.

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Sunday after Ascension Day – Year B

Lord, empowered and emboldened to extend His redemption with life and hope to a broken world.

Psalm 68:20 ends with “Our God is a God of salvation, and to GOD, the Lord, belongs deliverances from death.” Deliverances, תוצאות (totza'ot) the ‘end, going out, or exit’ is generally a geological and geographical term in the Scriptures.<sup>34</sup> Here it is in the plural. God is the same God throughout history, constantly delivering His people from death.<sup>35</sup> And we can view His salvation in the many places God’s salvation was made manifest as shown throughout Psalm 68.

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<sup>34</sup> Numbers 34:12 states, “And the border shall go down to the Jordan, and its limit [end] shall be at the Salt Sea”. Joshua uses the term 14 times when dividing the land for the tribes.

<sup>35</sup> Psalm 68:18 is quoted by Paul in Ephesians 4:8 with commentary that has interested, astounded, confounded, and brought a beautiful mystery to Biblical scholars ever since.

Many early Jewish commentators related Psalm 68:18 with Moses going up the Mount Sinai (Psalm 68:17) and returning with the tablets God had given him, such as *Midrash Tanchuma 3.1*, *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 46.5*, and *Avot d'Rabbi Natan 2.3*. Moses alone went up the mountain of God, which caused envy and gossip. There he received the Law of God that would bring life to man, a great gift “among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.” Before he could give them, he saw the rebelliousness of Israel and broke the tablets as they would bring death rather than life.

Moses started at the bottom of the mountain, ascended and then descended with God’s gift to even those who were rebellious and held captive. The phrase, “Κατωτερα μερη της γης” (the lower regions, the earth) in Ephesians 4:9 has had many commentaries written on it. In Greek writings in the time of Paul, it would signify a geological and geographical delineation (such as Strabo, *Geography*, 1.3.22, 4.2.3, 13.1.35, and 17.1.2). However, Paul spoke in a very rabbinical way in Ephesians 4 (not disagreeing with that which came before concerning Moses, but adding to it) in stating that Jesus started above, descended and then ascended once again.

We will not add to the vast wealth of commentary that has come before us but to say that the gifts Jesus brought was to bring the life of God to those who were in ignorance and rebellion against God. This mystery in Ephesians 4 should not bring argument but awe at the mystery of what Jesus has done, bringing the weak—even the captives who once were rebellious—to a place they can receive life as God will dwell in our midst. And surely, God has chosen to dwell in our midst as we remember the Ascension and the upcoming day of Pentecost.