

In the heavenly places

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The preacher faces several challenges in these Ascension texts. How can we present Jesus' departure from the earth as an occasion for not sorrow but celebration? How to translate the kingship and hierarchical language into imagery that speaks to a world no longer governed by kings and monarchs?

Feminist biblical scholars note a third challenge: How can we counter Luke-Acts' use of the Ascension to exert a degree of social control?

The Ascension story marks an end to Jesus' resurrection appearances on earth, thereby muting any future enthusiasts who might claim to have seen Christ. Even the apostle Paul, who asserts in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8 that he is also an eyewitness, underscores that he is the last person who can make the claim to have seen Jesus alive after his resurrection. Henceforth, no one can legitimately claim to be an eyewitness to the risen Christ.

The Ephesians 1 text is assigned for today because it portrays Jesus Christ as seated in the heavenly places at the right hand of God, as Lord of the church, presiding over its cosmic unity. Ephesians is the source of the church's creedal statements that Christ is "seated at the right hand of the Father."

Unlike the authentic Pauline letters, Ephesians was probably not written to one specific church (since the opening reference to the saints of God "in Ephesus" is not found in the best manuscripts). In this letter we begin to see the concept of "the church" as encompassing multiple congregations united in Christ's oneness. The author prays with unceasing thanks for the whole church, for its faith and love. This

prayer is grounded in cosmic praise of God, drawing on imagery of heavenly unity from Colossians.

Psalm 110 shapes Ephesians' description of Christ's journey to enthronement at God's "right hand" (v. 20) and the proclamation that God has "put all things under his feet" (v. 22). A royal coronation psalm, Psalm 110 projects extravagant hopes for the future messiah. Ephesians and other New Testament texts pick up these same hopes and ascribe them to Christ.

No other New Testament letter speaks with such detail about the "heavenly places" (*epouraniois*, Eph. 1:20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12). Especially striking is the declaration of Eph. 2:6 that *we*, too, have been raised already to "sit" with Christ in the heavenly places. The hierarchical imagery of Ephesians' high christology has often been used as a way of inscribing churchly hierarchy. The preacher would do well to focus rather on the hymnic quality of this passage, and on the mystical presence of Christ in the community, inhabiting every time and place.