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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
5/1/2008, Ascension Thursday  
Acts 1:1-11, Matthew 6:25-33

Sermon preached at the joint liturgy with nearby Holy Trinity Church (Episcopal)

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>28</sup>And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: <sup>29</sup>And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (Matthew 6:28-29, KJV)

This evening's beautiful Gospel Reading about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field invites us toward peacefulness and trust in God. Such peace is even more wonderful when we pause to reckon with the times back then — times of near poverty and pervasive economic insecurity. There are thieves now and there were thieves back then, but the damage done by the thief back then could be devastating, even the difference between life and death. You and I might be able to weather a theft or a hold-up. We might say, "Go ahead, take my cash, take my watch, take my cell phone. Go in peace, only do not shoot me." But for people of the ancient world, the taking of their money could be the final blow driving them to hunger and perhaps despair.

Yet what does Jesus preach in his Sermon on the Mount? He preaches peace and goodness even in face of injustice. He would have us look heavenward and to not be undone by thieves here below:

<sup>19</sup>Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: <sup>20</sup>But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: (Matthew 6:19-20, KJV)

And though there should be no thief, but rather tough economic times, still Jesus preaches peace and trust in God even in those tough times:

Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on.

Why? Why is Jesus able to counsel contentment even in face of injustice and uncertainty? Why is it rational for him to preach and for us to believe that we should be as contented as the lilies quietly growing in their fields and the birds peacefully flying in the air? I believe that the answer is the Ascension, whose festival we are celebrating tonight. Jesus has ascended up yonder, but he has not ascended in such a way as to forget you — your hopes, your dreams, your fears. That is, Ascension does not celebrate the absence of our Lord, but rather the commencing of his great ministry of intercession on your behalf.

I am one of those Christians who for the longest time had trouble warming up to the Ascension. For much of my life, it never struck me as particularly good news that Jesus has ascended to heaven. I would have preferred him to have stayed here below. I have imagined that I would be willing to save up my pennies, fly over to Israel, and stand in a

long, long line, waiting my turn to talk with Jesus. Yes, I imagined that I would have liked that better. Let the risen Jesus remain here below.

But I try to follow the wisdom of the Church, and the Church celebrates the Ascension of Our Lord. It does not lament the Ascension, but celebrates it. And in my old age, I think that I might be beginning to understand why the Church should celebrate the Ascension. It has to do with the high priestly intercession of Jesus on our behalf.

Recall an old rule of Trinitarian doctrine: The works of God *ad extra* — that is, the works of God directed toward us and all creation — are the joint work of the three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These divine persons are equal in majesty and in eternity, yet they are different persons and they have individual contributions to make to that great *ad extra* work: the work of human salvation. The work of the Father is to bring things into existence, as when he says, Let there be light. The work of the Holy Spirit is to bring to perfection and sanctification those things which the Father brings into existence. And the work of the Son is to save, to redeem, and intercede for that which exists, so that we will have a chance to be sanctified and perfected.

Jesus, then, has ascended to the Father to carry on his proper and irreplaceable work of intercession on behalf of the world and of you and of me.

Long ago, we had a homebound member of our church named Theresa. She was a gentle, wonderful Hungarian woman. Once upon a time, when I brought the Holy Communion to her, she had invited a friend in her building to come and share the Blessed Sacrament with us. This friend was also an elderly woman — a beautiful black Baptist Christian. When I bring the Sacrament, it is my method, as it is with so many clergy, to bring along my Bible, to read aloud the Gospel Lesson for the week, and to preach a sermon for the homebound. So, I did those things. But this time, thanks to the presence of this dear Baptist woman, I found the preaching easier and better than usual, for she lifted me up. She would say such things as Amen! Preach it, Pastor!

So it is that I picture heaven. Jesus stands before God the Father and intercedes for you and me. He is our Great High Priest. He needed to be off to heaven, not to be done with the things of human life, but to turn to his divine ministry of intercession. I imagine him saying, “Father, remember Alfred. Think on him with love and compassion. Create something new on earth, create some health for his old creaking bones, create some more room in the commonwealth of America, grant him more grace for these days.” And I mean no impiety here, but I love to imagine the angles and the archangels, the cherubim and the seraphim adding in their encouragements.” Preach it, Jesus. Preach it for Alfred’s sake, for the sake of each person in the church.”

And the Father sits there with his heart swelling with love and good will. “This is my Son, my Beloved. I am so very proud of him! I love him with all my heart! And he joins me in loving Alfred. I mean to listen to this intercession. I mean to grant this prayer of my Son.”

We could imagine the divine litany of the great intercession:

O God, who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked turn from his way and live;  
Who did put away David’s transgression when he confessed and repented of his sin;  
Who spared the Ninevites when they repented in sackcloth and with fasting;  
Heavenly Father: I came into the world to save sinners;  
I received publicans and sinners and did eat with them;  
I forgave the sins of the adulterous one;

I looked in mercy on Peter, who denied me;  
On the cross I did promise Paradise to the penitent thief;

By my baptism, by my fasting, by my conquering of temptations;  
By my toils and griefs;  
By my cross and by my bloody death;  
Have mercy, Heavenly Father, have mercy on earth and on all its people.

This ministry of intercession I would be no means want to interrupt. And so, I am glad that Jesus has ascended to the heaven, to the right of the Father. It is the reason, in the end, for some peace in life. It is a good reason for the trust of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Jesus has ascended to be our Great Intercessor, and therefore, things are going to turn out well. Live for him. Live according to what he believes in. And wait with confidence for that world in which there is no more sorrow, nor tears, nor suffering, but a united Church sings its songs of praise to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.