

Ascension Meditation

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 May 2019

Preacher: Ellen Vest

[0 : 00] For so many reasons, we're really incredibly fortunate to be able to worship here at Canaan Baptist, and one of the reasons that I frequently give thanks for this space is this great big cross in the front of the sanctuary.

And while I've worshiped in many Protestant denominations over the years, I have never had the opportunity to worship in an American church blessed with an image as rich and as deep as the one that we have here.

On any given Sunday, almost everything that is said and done up front is relevant to what our eyes are seeing. Not only can we hear the word, but we are blessed to be able to see the word also. We can see what is being talked about by our pastors and priests set in its broader context. At one point in a sermon series past, Tommy spoke eloquently about the heavily trafficked intersection between heaven and earth.

And that's exactly what we have here. If you have the keys, this whole thing can be read like a book. As this has become an increasingly personal aid to focus my own worship, I have increasingly longed for you also to have these keys.

[1 : 05] Being in the middle of a series on Revelation, it's a particularly nice time to share this with you, as you'll see plenty of the imagery that's up here comes from that book. It's also especially appropriate to talk about this in the Easter season, as we have been able to witness and participate in both of the sacraments that this talks about, baptism and the Eucharist.

The first thing to say is that this is a mosaic. It's not painted on the wall. It's made up of a lot of little tiles called tessera, and it's set into the plaster, so it's part of the integral structure of this physical church building.

In this aspect, it mimics us. As members of the family of God, we have become fully incorporated into the physical and spiritual structure of the church as the bride of Christ.

Second, I'm not going to be at all offended if you do not look at me once from now on. I'm here to be your audio guide to this piece, because there is a special power to hearing and seeing also.

Occasionally, there will be some slides over on the screen that will let you have a close-up view of some parts of this that's hard to see. If you don't have a super comfortable view of this entire thing, I would say get one, or you're going to be really, really bored.

[2 : 22] When I look at this cross, I often think of two things. The first is the vision of Jacob at Haran. On his way to take away from his own people, Jacob rested on the journey.

His head on a rock, he fell into a deep sleep, where he dreamed of a stairway to heaven. I remember the thing that I first thought when I heard this story as a child. If I saw a stairway to heaven, I would run right up it.

Why didn't Jacob get up and do that? After all, the story does not say there was anything to prevent it. It does not say there was a gate. What would stop me from being there among the angels?

And from doing what they do. Only a little child would perhaps be without guile enough to think such a thing were possible. Well, we adults must get over whatever stops us from thinking this way.

The second thing I think of when I see this cross is the life of a woman named St. Therese of Lisieux. Born in 1873, she joined a Descalse Carmelite order at the age of 15 in the village of Lisieux in Normandy, France.

[3 : 29] She died of TB at the age of 24. However, her journey of faith was of such depth and maturity that she was instructed to write her autobiography.

And eventually, she was recognized as a doctor of the Catholic Church. But this is not how she experienced or saw her own life of faith. She was a very young woman who yearned to be a great saint.

But at the same time, she knew that she wasn't good enough. She knew that she was weak and unable. She had an enormous degree of agony over her weakness and her smallness.

But in her spiritual life, she came to see a parallel between the gospel and one of the new technologies of her time. She wrote, We are in an age of inventions.

Now, one does not have to make the effort to climb the stairways in rich people's houses because an elevator does the work much better. In her seeking of him, Christ made it known to Therese that the way to him is not to be great and mighty and capable, but is indeed to remain small.

[4 : 36] She wrote, Ah, never has such tender and melodious words come to rejoice my soul. The elevator that would lift me up to heaven is your arms, O Jesus. This cross is like the stairway of Jacob and like the elevator of St. Therese.

Moving up and down it, in it and upon it, we can begin to absorb great mysteries, meditating on some of the beautiful means by which Christ not only lifts us up to himself, but comes down to us, so that he might live forevermore in us and we in him.

Let's take a look. In order to dive deeply, we must begin to learn a language, a language of symbol that has long been used in the depiction of Christian subject matter.

The language provides a vocabulary with which big concepts and complex theologies can be really richly expounded upon in compact spaces. It can also allow us to see, all at once, some of the polarities which are held together in the person of Christ.

This cross can be thought of as consisting of two sections, heaven and earth. We will move up and down upon it as the angels moved on Jacob's ladder, but let's begin in heaven at the topmost part, which could easily be separated into a Greek cross, that is, a cross having four equal arms.

[5 : 56] On the island of Patmos, God met St. John with a series of powerful visions, providing imagery intended for comfort and worship, for warning, praise, and hope.

These things were written down in the book of Revelation, and the image here at the top is rooted in Revelation 5. Perhaps this depiction strikes you as odd.

If you are thinking, this lamb looks quite well, you are correct. This lamb is very much alive, standing in the traditional posture, representing the triumphant and resurrected Christ.

Surrounding its head is a special kind of halo. If you look closely, you can see the form of a cross interrupted by the head of the lamb. This is called a cruciform nimbus, and it is a kind of halo which is worn only by Christ.

And it proclaims that he has passed through the passion and experienced the resurrection. It implies that if his head were transparent, the fullness of the cross would be revealed.

[7 : 08] Well, the cruciform nimbus amplifies an aspect of Christ that readily makes sense to us here in the context of heaven. Again, the use of this symbol in Christian art is not limited to this context. Consider, for example, the implications of the cruciform nimbus when worn by the infant Christ.

Now, this is not an art history lecture, so I didn't bring a lot of supplemental examples of what I'm talking about in other works. But this whole gospel Jesus, this inside of time, outside of time God, is so powerfully expressed in this symbol that I did bring an example of this.

This is Fra Angelico. And here, Christ as an infant is held in the arms of the Virgin as they flee into Egypt. At every point in his life, Jesus held together the realities of life, birth, death, crucifixion, and resurrection.

What is the mystery of our faith? Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. Let's explore other aspects of the Lamb.

In the crook of his foreleg, he studies a banner. This is common in images of the resurrection. Christ emerges and stands victorious over the tomb, unfurling a flag of battle and of victory, and blasphemed with the sign of the conquering cross.

[8 : 25] While we're on the subject of victory banners, let's look further down. All the way near the bottom of the cross, in a space carved out like an almond, there is an inscription. It looks like an I-H-E.

These are the first three letters of Jesus in Greek. Iota, Eta, Sigma. If you've hung around Christendom for very long, you've probably seen this inscription before. It can be thought of as one of the many monograms of Christ.

This is a dual symbol. Not only is this the first three letters of Jesus in Greek, I-H-S, the Latin transliteration of the same, is associated with the vision of Constantine at the start of his conversion

to Christianity.

Interestingly enough, out in the lobby of this church, in a glass case, there's a gold cross that I suspect very much was made for this altar. And it's on the wall, and it bears that very inscription. On the eve of battle, in A.D. 312, depending on which account you read, Constantine experienced a waking vision, had a dream, or both.

However it happened, it was a vision or a dream with a message. In hoc signo. The whole message, in hoc signo vinces, which translates out of the Latin, as in this sign, you will conquer.

[9 : 40] He was also instructed to mark the shields of his armies with the sign of Christ. Now, whether or not things unfolded for Constantine exactly in this way is not important.

What matters to us is that the Iota etta sigma, the I-H-S, has come to represent not only Christ, but the sign of Christ through which victory is obtained.

Propped up in the H here is the sign of Christ's victory, the cross. There is more to consider here, but let's return to the top and finish the heaven section. At the center of the throne of God, there is a burning sun.

God himself is the light in the new Jerusalem of Revelation 22. And the Lamb stands before a star of David. All the prophecies of the lineage of Christ are alluded to here.

This is not only the Lamb, this is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Of the house and line of David, Christ was a descendant of Abraham. Salvation is from the Jews.

[10 : 43] From the little rise near the base of the star, four rivers flow out from the throne of God and from the Lamb, clear as crystal. These are the four rivers of Paradise, or Eden, the Pisan, the Gihon, the Tigris, and the Euphrates.

Here, they become the river of the water of life, from Revelation 22. The first and last books of Scripture are tied together in Christ. Down near the bottom center of the section of the cross, we can find a similar set of bookends.

There's an Alpha and an Omega. The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, these refer to Christ as the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Back up at the top, moving out from the center of heaven, we come to a symbol of the Passion, that is the death of Jesus.

The crown of thorns is woven around the ring, which connects the four arms of the cross. Each of these arms bears a symbol of one of the four evangelists. These men, who wrote the gospel accounts of Christ, each focused on a different aspect of him.

Matthew, whose gospel focuses on Christ's humanity, is represented by a man. Mark, whose book reflects Christ's divinity and kingship, takes the form of a winged lion.

[12 : 04] Luke, represented by an ox, wrote much about the sacrificial aspects of Jesus. John, whose writing is more philosophical, and who concentrates on the immortality of Christ, is the eagle.

If you forget who is who sometime, letters provide a clue. These are men who walked with Christ. They are the ones to whom it was said, If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.

Elevating the gospel writers to positions surrounding Christ in heaven alludes to the perfection of the word of God and the picture of him that it supplies to us. The symbols of the four evangelists, in this context, became conflated with the four living creatures, which encircled the throne in Revelation 5.

It's hard to talk about this image without bouncing back and forth between the heaven and the earth parts of it. In this cross, heaven and earth are so very connected.

While I talked about the heaven section as a Greek cross, this is not a Greek cross. This is a Latin cross. Taken as a whole, the bottom arm stretches down toward earth. Here, inside this form, is illustrated the abiding connection made in the person of Christ between things above and things below.

[13 : 22] At the end of the Eucharist, we proclaim this connection every Sunday. We celebrate this covenant with joy and await the glorious appearing of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who will unite all things in heaven and on earth, raising us from death and making all things new.

In him, and with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and forever. In keeping with the meaning of the special halo worn by the Lamb, the cruciform Nimbus, this connection is not only for later, after death.

It is for the present. The one who is outside of time meets us who are inside of time as we participate in holy mysteries now. Let's turn our focus to the section of the cross which appears first to deal primarily with earthbound things.

And down here, where things can be seen more easily, there won't be as many slides on the screen. Here, the gracious form of a grapevine makes it easy for the eye to travel up the cross, as easy as it is for the eye to travel down.

This is fitting, for just as Christ came down to us, he means to lift us up, drawing us all to himself. He does so, in part, through the means illustrated here.

[14:42] One of the main themes of the iconography we're looking at is the sacraments of the Church. Will Catholics accept seven sacraments, Anglicans accept baptism, and the Eucharist?

And it is these two that are expounded upon here in some detail. But let's look first at the water. We saw it down at the bottom, but water plays a strong role in tying this whole cross together both compositionally and symbolically.

The theme of water from the four rivers flowing out at the top continues through the main body of the cross, providing a rich and a varied blue background. At the bottom, it pours out in an allusion to baptism over a mandorla, that almond shape within which sits that monogram of Christ.

We are baptized because Christ was baptized. That is where his identity was declared. The Holy Spirit came to rest on him like a dove. The heavens opened and a voice announced, This is my Son in whom I am well pleased.

Through baptism, we also enter formally into life with him. This is the bottom of the stairway. It's the gateway sacrament to all the rest, where our identity in him and life as part of his family begins.

[15:57] As the priest says in the rite, as he marks the candidate's forehead with the sign of the cross, You are sealed with the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

If the militaristic in hoc signo vincis bit that I made such a big deal about earlier seems less than relevant to modern times, it becomes relevant now, for the priest goes on to say, Let us welcome the newly baptized.

We receive you into the congregation of Christ's flock, having been signed with the sign of the cross, and that hereafter you will not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified and boldly fight under his banner against the world, the flesh, and the devil, and to continue as Christ's faithful soldier and servant until your life's end.

We emerge from baptism, newly minted conquerors. But before long, one way or the other, we become aware of the condition St. Therese of Lisieux wrote so eloquently about and struggled with in her own life.

We are small and weak. How will we obtain heaven? As the water of baptism flows down, a robust vine springs up. The vine has been pruned, and you can see where it's been snipped off, and now it's bearing fruit.

[17:18] Who is the vine? Its fruit, willfully crushed, will be consumed by the faithful in the blood of the Eucharist. Grapes, in Christian iconography, represent the blood of Christ.

Among the rich green leaves, little tendrils curl delicately away from the thick stalk of the vine as it bends and climbs toward heaven. At the bottom here, the root is curiously divided.

We may be at the earthly end of the cross, but we're also back in Revelation 22. This particular vine is also the tree which is for the healing of the nations and which grows on both sides of the river of the water of life.

Christ is the vine, we are the branches. He abides in us and we in him. How? Well, let's see. From among the grapes, this particular vine produces additional fruit, illustrated in three emblems.

Let's look from the top down. First, we come to the dove of the Holy Spirit. I mentioned earlier this is associated with baptism and with the confirmation of Christian identity.

[18:27] Moving down, we have the cup and the wafer which represent the sacrament of the Eucharist. Fittingly, it sits halfway between heaven and earth. And maybe over your time of looking at this, you've noticed that is a mighty fancy wafer.

Like the mandorla on the bottom, it contains that iota, etta, sigma. This also contains a Christogram. While the IHE is a straight-up abbreviation, this symbol is a picture made with letters, specifically the Greek letter tau, which looks like a T, and the Greek letter rho, which looks like a P.

This typographic picture of Jesus on the cross is called a starogram. It functioned in early manuscripts as an abbreviation for the Greek word cross. But it also represented the crucified Christ.

And here, it marks the wafer as his body. Lastly, we come to the most curious of these three symbols. It's a cute little boat. Why a boat?

The association began with the Ark of Noah in that warm, heaving wooden hull, creaking and groaning and full to neerboasting with all of creation. A family abided in the only solid thing in the world.

[19 : 39] while all the rains poured down outside. We still live in that family and we still abide in that place. The family of the church is hidden with God and Christ.

Just as Jacob went on a journey to take a bride from his own people, Christ came for the same. He took a bride from a people he made his own. That's us. It's the church.

Indwelt by the Holy Spirit, abiding in him, and acting as his bride through the taking of the sacraments, we exist as part of the fruit of the tree that is meant for the healing of all the nations.

This cross not only offers us an image of God in heaven, but of the church fully alive. Let's tie this up by considering for a moment the place of this cross in the actual physical church building.

It's not illustrating theoretical mysteries, it's illustrating holy mysteries that we participate in weekly.

At the base of the cross, this ladder between heaven and earth is the altar. On that altar, the priests prepare the Eucharist, which we believe to be the very real presence of Christ.

[20 : 51] Thus, the imagery of the cross comes alive every week as we both proclaim and participate in this mystery of heaven. Now, if you have ever watched the priest prepare the sacrament, the bread of heaven is exposed and laid bare.

At the right time, it is broken in an allusion to the broken body of Christ on the cross. In further preparation, perhaps you have noticed an interesting thing, how the priest pours water in the chalice to mix with the wine.

What's happening here is not a watering down of the booze, but a bringing together of the two sacraments illustrated here in Christ, and a proclamation of the healing that only Christ himself can bring about.

Before Christ was removed from the cross, a Roman soldier pierced his side, and from the wound, blood and water flowed. That was blood separated into its component parts, the heavy water, the heavy red material separated from the water.

That's what happens when we die, separation. In the case of Jesus, the separation of these earthly elements was the verification that the soldier needed to declare Christ dead and to authorize his removal for burial.

[22 : 03] But in the Eucharist, just as in the resurrection, Christ brings back together what death has separated, not only with the water and the blood, but him and us. He died for sinners, and thus, at our own deaths, we can look forward not to separation, but to reunion.

Looking back at the cross on the wall, in and up and up, the vine of Christ, we climb and are lifted. We do not make our way to heaven apart from him, but in him and by his aid.

But as we reach the top, the vine bends over, stops short at the boundary between heaven and earth. A thick band separates things above from things below, and the topmost tendril hits a golden ceiling.

How will we leap the gap? As Matthew emphasizes in his gospel, the chasm was crossed by God who became man. It is he who will reach across to lift us up into the heavenly places, just as he has been doing all of our earthly lives in him by the means of the cross and through the graces poured out in these sacraments.

Though death looks like the last great barrier, we need not fear. We who have died in Christ are also raised with him in Huxigno, in this sign, we too will conquer.

[23 : 23] The arms of Jesus are the elevator which will lift us to heaven as well. Any Sunday, let your eye wander up and down this staircase freely.

It and the things that it illustrates are for you. And so we say each week, all of our problems we send to the cross of Christ. All of our difficulties we send to the cross of Christ.

All the works of the devil we send to the cross of Christ and all of our hopes we set on the risen Christ. to the cross to that and that from the rock and the river you are even going to pray as And so we