

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 29, 2025

God's Yes

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

To fully grasp what it meant for the earliest followers of the Way to worship Jesus Christ as the ascended Son of God, it helps to understand the Roman imperial context in which they lived. After Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BCE, funeral games¹ were held in his honor in July of that year. During these games, a bright comet appeared in the sky and was visible for several days. This celestial event was interpreted by many Romans as a sign of Caesar's deification—that he had ascended to the heavens and become a god.

Octavian, Caesar's adopted son and heir, seized upon this moment. He proclaimed that the comet was the soul of Caesar rising to the heavens and used it as political propaganda to bolster his own legitimacy. He declared that Caesar was now a divine figure (*Divus Julius*), and by extension, he himself was the "son of a god" (*Divi Filius*). During his reign he even had coins minted that were inscribed with "DIVI FILIUS."² Octavian assumed rule of the Roman Empire and adopted the moniker Augustus. Some of the other titles Augustus Caesar was known by included Savior of the world, Redeemer, and Lord.

Jesus is born during the reign of this very same Caesar Augustus (it's his census decree that requires Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem). Most

¹ *Ludi Victoriae Caesaris*

² Jonathan L. Reed, "Archeological Contributions to the Study of Jesus and the Gospels", in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison, and John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus in Context* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 42.

coins Jesus handled growing up in Nazareth would have had that inscription. Every one of Jesus' followers would have been very well aware of what it meant to call Jesus Son of God, not to mention Redeemer and Lord! To say that Jesus is Lord is to say that Caesar is **not** Lord. The very first confession of faith, Jesus is Lord, is a counter-Imperial one.

The ascension and deification of Caesar was intended to prove his divine right to rule. The ascension and deification of Jesus gives follower of the Way the right to resist the rule of Caesar, the rule of Empire and power. Jesus blesses his followers as he ascends, restoring their agency as the body of Christ to continue the work of Christ in the world.

We find God operating, as God typically does, in an upside-down manner, at least according to the values of the world. Power so often seeks to deify itself, granting itself holy sanction to continue oppressive systems of exploitation and injustice. But the work of God, the mission of the true Son of God, was to sanctify humanity, not divinize a single human's rule. In a very powerful way, rather than ascending to glory, Jesus ascends to the depths...the depths of brokenness in the world.

The ascension is not just a one-and-done event either, it's really a continuation of the incarnation. To this point Justo Gonzalez writes: "God did not take on humanity for thirty-three years in order simply to discard it as a used garment. The incarnation did not end with the crucifixion and resurrection. On the contrary, what the doctrine of ascension meant was that God is still human, that even now one of us, a carpenter, an outlaw, a convicted and executed criminal, sits "at the right hand" of the Father. Because of the incarnation, when we now look at God we are not looking at an entirely alien being but at one of us."³

³ Justo Gonzalez, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 109-110.

And not only do we see “one of us” when we look at the throne of God, as Dr. Gonzalez rightly suggests, we see “one of the least of these.” When we cast our gaze towards heaven. When we dare to raise our eyes to the glory of God’s eternal throne, we will see Jesus at God’s right hand...and in Christ we will see all those with whom Jesus identified too: the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, the naked, the stranger, the sick, the child, the despised tax collector, the broken, the lost, the oppressed.

Ascension, then, is a counter-cultural event. The mission Jesus sets his followers on is one of resistance to power. The kingdom of heaven is a topsy-turvy kingdom where power is wielded collectively by the body of Christ, and it is wielded on behalf of those who have no power, no voice. Ascension for Christ is more about moving down towards the broken than up towards the powerful.

Karl Barth famously described Jesus, his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, as God’s ‘Yes’ to creation. To all of creation. Even those parts of it that don’t benefit us directly. Even those parts of it that we deem too dirty or broken. Even those parts of it without power or wealth or influence. God says ‘Yes’ to all of it. And God’s ‘Yes’ invites our “Yes” too.

And echoing God’s ‘Yes’ to all of creation means taking care of the earth, not exploiting it for profit. Echoing God’s ‘Yes’ to creation means acknowledging the worth of every human being...it means dismantling the racist Prison Industrial Complex, it means ending genocide and addressing people’s material needs. Echoing God’s ‘Yes’ means opening our eyes to how our comfortable lives and cheap goods come at the expense of the exploited global South. Echoing God’s ‘Yes’ would mean creating new institutions and systems dedicated to serving all of humanity, not just the 1%.

The messengers say the same to us as they said to the followers in Acts, “why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” After all, the throne Jesus has

ascended to is at God's right hand, filling all of creation. But the humanity that Christ carries to that throne, that Christ identified with most especially in his Incarnation, those "least of these" are the ones we are called to serve. If the ascension is a continuation of the incarnation, then God never moves away from us, rather God is constantly moving **in us** and **through us** towards the world around us.

Jesus ascended to God's right hand. Jesus ascended to the rubble of Gaza...to the mine fields of Ukraine...to the refugee camps in South Sudan...to lithium mines of the Congo...to all the places of the world where there is pain, suffering, and injustice. Jesus ascended to the underground gay bar...to homeless encampment...to the abortion clinic. Jesus has gone to all the places of the world he wishes us to follow. Jesus goes to creation sharing God's 'Yes', God's expansive love and grace. And Jesus invites us into that incarnation of God's love. Jesus invites us to ascend to the "depths" where we will find the heights of God's glory and love. Amen.