

The Ascension of Our Lord
May 25, 2017
Luke 24:44-53

I'm dating myself here, but I stand before you holding a vinyl record album from 1981. Remember them? This is from the soundtrack of the movie, "Chariots of Fire," with the music by Vangelis. Remember that famous music? The movie "tells the fact-based story of two athletes in the [1924 Olympics](#): [Eric Liddell](#), a devout Scottish Christian who runs for the glory of God, and [Harold Abrahams](#), an English Jew who runs to overcome prejudice. The film's title was inspired by the line, 'Bring me my chariot of fire,' from the [William Blake](#) poem adapted into the popular British hymn "[Jerusalem](#)"; the hymn is heard at the end of the film... The original phrase 'chariot(s) of fire' is from [2 Kings 2:11](#) and [6:17](#) in the Bible" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chariots_of_Fire). That reference takes us back to Israel of old and the Biblical account of the prophet Elijah being taken up into heaven. As Elijah walked along with Elisha, who would succeed him in his prophetic role, we read: **"And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it and he cried, 'My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' And he saw him no more"** (2 Kings 2:11-12). It is that image of a chariot of fire that we find here in this Sanctuary on the wall of the choir loft behind us. I encourage you to turn around and take a look at it now. All of these plaques here symbolize the seasons of the church year: the four candles of the Advent season; the manger of the Christ Child from Christmas; the star of Epiphany which guided the wise men to worship the Infant Jesus; the crown of thorns of the Lenten season; the empty cross and open tomb (or rising sun) of the risen Savior at Easter; and the chariot of fire for Ascension; the descending Holy Spirit in the form of a dove at Pentecost; and the three intertwining circles of the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – for Trinity. Of all these images, perhaps the one that is least familiar is that chariot of fire, but it does help us to understand what today, the Ascension of Our Lord, is about. May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

Sadly, Ascension Day is an often overlooked and little celebrated day in the life of the Church. And yet, here we are gathered here in the Lord's house this evening to do this very thing. It is an important day because if Jesus had not ascended into heaven the Holy Spirit could not have descended to earth and be poured out upon those first disciples, and indeed, upon believers even to this very day. Before his ascension, Jesus reminded those first disciples to **"stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high"** (Luke 24:49). In ten days' time, that power would be evident on that first Pentecost with tongues of fire and speaking in new languages. While the Holy Spirit continues to work among people through the preaching and teaching of God's Word and through the holy Sacraments, we rejoice our risen Savior Jesus **"is seated [him] at [God's] right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fill all in all"** (Ephesians 1:20-21).

Elijah of old was taken up into heaven by that chariot of fire, the only person recorded in Scripture to be bodily assumed into heaven without dying (with the possible exception of Enoch – see Genesis 5:24). This points us ahead to something greater than Elijah. That is Jesus' ascension, except there was no need for a chariot and horses of fire to convey Jesus to heaven. As the divine Son of God, Jesus was taken up into heaven with no need of anything or anyone to assist him. And now we wait for his promised return, mindful of what the angels told the first disciples: **"This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven"** (Acts 1:11b).

Until Jesus comes again, He has given us work to do, even as He tells us: **"... that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things"** (Luke 24:47-48). My friends, that is what we are engaged in as we join Jesus on his mission. Through our words and deeds, with our lips and our lives, our calling is to point all people to Jesus in whom we have life and salvation. May our risen, reigning, and returning Savior help us to do this with joy and thanksgiving by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.