

## High and Lifted Up Acts 1:1-11, Luke 1:46-55

He was 22 years old when he left Ireland below deck on a freighter bound for America. He had no money, but he yearned for a better life. So he gave away seven years of his life as an indentured servant in exchange for passage to America. As the ship neared the harbor he strained eagerly at the small porthole for a glimpse of his new home. He couldn't see much, but what he saw caused his heart to skip a beat. There in the distance was the Statue of Liberty, arm stretched upward, torch held high. He could hardly believe his eyes. It was as if he were seeing the world for the first time, through new eyes. It was not the statue, not the copper, not the grand architecture that lifted his heart, but the dream it represented. The dream of liberty, of freedom, of opportunity. Freedom not just for the mighty, but for the lowly—poor huddled masses yearning to be free. And it was because America did not hide this hope in a corner, but lifted it up high, for all the world to see. Bigger than anything else on the horizon.

What is it that we lift up, for all the world to see? Well, you can't turn on your television set without seeing a goofy young boy swaying with all the braggadocio born of American ingenuity and saying, "Dude, I got a dell!" That's OK. I've got a Dell in my office. You can't believe how much easier it is to write a paper on the computer as compared to the old fashioned typewriter. And it is good, this technology that we exalt. Heart lung machines, little cameras that allow doctors to do precision surgery without ever cutting their patients open. A friend of mine used to work for IBM. In the sixties they were busy selling million dollar computers to companies to do their payrolls. They took up a room the size of our church's kitchen. Today I have in my office a computer that is thousands of times more powerful. It cost less in real terms than dad paid for our first television and makes my life easier. What does our culture exalt—technology.

Switch the channel and watch as the bad guys blow off the top of a building, but Bruce Willis gets the last word. He laughs as the mastermind culprit falls to his death 50 stories below. We like violence, when bad guys are on the receiving end. Even when scoundrels do violence, it becomes acceptable, as long as it brings success. Bonnie and Clyde have become American folk heroes. Today people point with pride to the fact that their parents once knew Al Capone. Others pay money to see his image in a wax museum. They stare, as if in awe of this bigger than life person. Just don't ask the son of the businessman who was crippled for life when Al's thugs butchered him for not paying protection money how he feels. Violence is exalted as a way to solve our problems.

Change the channel again, and listen as Robin Leach invites us to take a tour of the Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. Wealth and success way up there on our list of the top ten things that we lift up high. A few days ago the lunch bunch visited the mansion once owned by Ohio Governor Thomas Worthington. In the visitor's museum we get a glimpse of how he accumulated his wealth. A display showed how he bought a tract of land for \$600.00 and sold it for 12,800. We applaud him for it even if it means that many people came out on the short end of the stick. It would be like being charged \$2,000 for a loaf of bread. Do you remember when Michael Milken made millions using insider information. Well, he went to jail for a year or two and was fined in excess of one million dollars. When he got out he was still ahead by more than a million.

Lucky for him he didn't steal a lawnmower worth \$50.00, like the man in Cabrini Green in Chicago. He was thrown in jail with nothing to show for it. Leona Helmsly gained a reputation for her patronizing and harsh demeanor to her employees. Many rejoiced to see her behind bars, and yet how many today would brag if they had the chance to touch the hem of her dress. Someone has even gone on television proclaiming that greed is good. Technology, violence, success. We lift them as high in our culture in their own way as the statue of liberty.

Surely God must have a different and better idea of what should be high and lifted up. We want God to lift up something that is more filled with compassion, justice and beauty--not violence, wealth and success. At first glance though, it doesn't seem like God runs by rules that are much different than our own. Carolyn and I watched the video a few weeks ago entitled, "Catch Me If you Can." It is based very closely on the story of a sixteen year old boy in the sixties who impersonated a doctor, a lawyer and an airline pilot. By the time they caught him, he had cashed more than four million dollars of bogus checks. He served ten or eleven years in prison. Now, released he has made more money consulting government agencies about check fraud than he stole in the first place. It almost makes me wonder what in the world I saw in the ministry. In the Bible we encounter someone like this check kiting con artist. His name is Jacob. He was the youngest, and so had no right to the sixty percent inheritance. That was for his older brother Esau. No problem, he just waited until his brother was just about starving to death. Then he brought him wonderful red bean stew. What a kind thing to do. But first he had to hand over his portion of the inheritance. Then when his father was dying Jacob impersonated Esau before his blind father and stole his brother's blessing as well. Jacob was lucky to make it out of town alive. And yet the Bible tells us that God loved Jacob, the con man and hated Esau. When Clinton was in office there was a huge scandal about his extramarital life. He was almost thrown out of office. But here, right in our own Bible is King David, paragon of Biblical kings. Not only does he commit adultery, but he has his lover's husband killed to cover up his crime. And the Bible calls him a man after God's own heart.

But then you read a little further on. David wants to build a temple for God, but God says, "No!" "David, there is too much blood on your hands." I think we begin to understand that God uses the murderers, cheats, prostitutes, and income tax cheaters for the Glory of God's purposes. But when it comes to what God exalts there is only one place to look – the Lord Jesus Christ.

Mary, the mother of our Lord, once sang a song of praise. They call it the Magnificat. She was pregnant and visiting her sister Elizabeth. When Elizabeth called her blessed because she would give birth to Jesus, Mary burst out in song.

"My soul magnifies the Lord . . . . He has brought down the powerful from their thrones. and lifted up the lowly." "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones." Who can forget when the Berlin Wall came tumbling down without a shot being fired. Priests and lay people prayed and held candlelight vigils. The number swelled. The wall came down.

"And lifted up the lowly." Like the woman taken in adultery to whom he said, "Neither do I condemn thee." Like the woman who put half a penny in the temple treasury. Look, Jesus said, she has put in more than all of these with all their riches. Like the lepers healed and the blind given sight and lame made to walk. There is today

a lawsuit that has been raging for ten years. Exxon/Texaco has taken millions of dollars in profits in oil from Ecuador. Here in the United States, oil companies must pump biohazardous brine and wastes back into the same cavities the oil came from. But this is expensive. Ecuador didn't have laws requiring it, so Exxon/Texaco left all that stuff in ponds on the surface. People downstream began having all kinds of health difficulties. The waste been leaking into the rivers. They have no indoor plumbing but get their drinking water and bathing water from streams into which the materials has leaked. And so they have brought suit to recover damages. The case has been transferred from the United States to Ecuador, but in a surprise move the Supreme Court has ruled that any damages awarded by the courts in Ecuador will be assigned and carried out here in the United States. Is it possible that even today the lowly might be lifted up? The ones who pay with their health and their children's health for the fuel that takes us to the mall?

Mark has no account of any appearances of Jesus after his crucifixion. Only the empty tomb. Matthew has resurrection appearances, but no account of Jesus ascending into heaven. John speaks of Christ being glorified and lifted up. And what is it that is lifted up? And where is it that Christ's glory is found. On the cross. Jesus said, "when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show by what death he was to die. When Jesus was working out his mission in the desert he was tempted. Look, said the devil, you can have Trump Towers, you can have the Pentagon. You can control every nation on earth and have all the glory and the power. What a way to rule. But Jesus said, "Only God must be lifted up." Draw men to you, said the devil. Use power, and force, prestige, and the glory of all the kingdoms of the world. They'll flock. Jesus said no, but when I am lifted up, on a cross, I will draw all people to myself. A cross, like the crosses on thousands of sanctuary walls. Like the crosses that paint the skylines of thousands of cities. What is it that God lift's up? John has no account of the ascension of Jesus into heaven, only these words of Christ that he is glorified when he is lifted up on the cross.

It is Luke's account of the ascension that we remember. He tells us both in Luke and in Acts that the disciples saw Jesus taken into heaven. "As they [the disciples] were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

A number of years ago a Russian cosmonaut looked out of the window of his space craft. He saw the moon. He saw stars. He saw planets. He saw the black expanse of space and the brilliant sun. He is reported to have said, "God does not exist. I looked out and God was not there." Maybe he forgot to read history and learn how people because they loved and believed in Christ worked to make it a crime for anyone in England to engage in the trafficking in human slaves. Maybe he wasn't watching when the first Black girl brought into a white school never lifted her voice but prayed for those who hurled insults and threats. Why, because Christ had taught her to love her enemies and pray for them. Maybe he didn't hear how Corrie Ten Boom did not let life in Nazi prison camps tear down her spirit, but lived and forgave the jailer by whom her sister had died. If he had looked here he would have see Jesus high and

lifted up, shining in the light of his glory. He looked out and saw nothing in the heavens. I hope he was watching when the Berlin Wall fell, for he might have understood, as Mary did, that God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.”

We know what our world exalts. But what is it that God exalts? God exalts the cross. But what does that mean to “lift high the cross”? How easy it is to misunderstand. When we do, we turn the emblem of suffering love into a sword of incredible cruelty. One knight who came back from the crusades wrote in July 15, 1099, “With drawn swords our people ran through the city; nor did they spare anyone, not even those pleading for mercy. The horses waded in blood up to their knees, . . . It was a just and wonderful judgment of God.” They went out everywhere and killed not only Muslims but also Christians. When Christ ascended into heaven, God put him on the seat of highest glory and judgment. God lifts up in highest glory the suffering love which prayed, “Father, forgive.” It is this suffering love that draws all people, not ruthless power. Not wealth. Not success. Why does God lift Jesus up? Because “he was obedient unto death, even death on the cross.” For this reason, because of this suffering love, he is high and lifted up and given a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow. When Rambo blows away the bad guys audiences cheer. When Christ was crucified people mocked and laughed. God’s cheer was to raise Christ from death and lift him up on high. Ruthless power does not reign on high. Love demonstrated in supreme sacrifice reigns on high. Our Lord ascended into heaven. Before that demonstration of pure grace every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God. And the angels sing glory.

“As they [the disciples] were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” We know what God lifts up on high. What do we lift up in our hearts? What do we cheer for in our hearts, reflect in our attitudes, push for in public policy and law? What do we invest our time and money on? Where do we go for strength and joy? What is it before whom our hearts bow, to whom hearts and hands and voices are lifted in praise and thanks?

To your name, Lord Jesus, help us to bow our knees and all their worshiping, bow the heads and all their thinking, bow our wills and all their choosing, bow the hearts and all their loving. Amen.

