*To God, everything is always only just beginning.*

Well, we’re movin’ on up, to the East Side

To a deluxe apartment in the sky,

Movin’ on up to the East Side,

We’ve finally got a piece of the pie.

 “The Jeffersons” was one of the most successful and longest-running TV situational comedies in history. In 235 episodes from 1975 through 1985, the show followed the exploits of George and Louise Jefferson, a prosperous African-American family who, because of George’s successful dry-cleaning chain, moved from Queens—where they were next door neighbors to “All in the Family’s” Archie and Edith Bunker—to “a deluxe apartment” in Manhattan. The first TV show starring black actors as main characters was the ill-fated 1951 “Amos and Andy Show,” which was cancelled after two seasons because the NAACP objected to its vaudeville-era caricatures and racist stereotypes. It took twenty years for Black sitcoms to return with successes in the 1970s like “Good Times,” “Sanford and Son,” and “What’s Happening!! While “The Jeffersons” was part of this wave, it was unique. Unlike the shows that depicted lower- and middle-class Black families living in projects or lower middle-class neighborhoods, “The Jeffersons” featured a Black family that had earned their way into the economic upper-class: the phrases “moving on up” and “in the sky” are understood not only as a physical rise in altitude but a figurative rise in social status. The tension behind the comedy is that, in spite of being successfully upwardly mobile, George and Louise still face unresolved internal and external race- and class-based challenges that American society was just beginning to address. Therefore, “The Jeffersons,” both as the title family and as a show, was about vindication—proof that after a struggle, someone or something is right, reasonable, or justified. Just as the Jefferson family’s rise in wealth and status vindicated their hard work and victory over racism to attain their goal, the show itself vindicated those who wanted to depict American black families and contemporary social issues in a way that appealed to and influenced American society at large. Nevertheless, even though the Jefferson family and the show were vindicated, in many ways their work had only just begun. Whether in a Manhattan apartment, a successful TV show, or the pursuit of social harmony, everything is always only just beginning.

Last Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension of Christ, which we commemorate today. Forty days after Jesus rose from the dead, He led His followers to a nearby hill and, as they watched, He ascended into Heaven. It is important to understand what the Ascension isn’t and what it is. Contrary to modern literalism, the Ascension is neither a product nor proof of a Three-decker universe, with Heaven being a literal place above us in the sky and, presumably, Hell being a literal place beneath the earth. The ancient Jewish religious attitude did not think this way, and neither do we. On that day, Jesus did not launch into outer space like Elton John’s “Rocket Man” to land somewhere beyond Pluto. In the Acts of the Apostles, when we read that Jesus “was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight,” we are partially meant to think of that ascent as a triumphal vindication: a “movin’ on up.” George and Louise Jefferson’s ascension to their Manhattan apartment was a vindication of their claims of racial equality and their triumph over social barriers through hard work; Jesus’ ascension into Heaven was a vindication of His claim to be the Son of God and His triumph over sin, death, and the devil through His death on the Cross and His resurrection from the dead. When Christ ascended into Heaven, God declared His Kingdom to be the true authority in the universe, that Jesus is that Kingdom’s Messiah, and that the worldly rulers and dominions of Rome and Jerusalem are not.

But even then, Christ’s Ascension is only the beginning of another chapter in God’s story for us. To God, everything is always only just beginning. At His Ascension, in His Resurrected Body, Christ re-entered the direct Presence of God the Father that He left at His Incarnation, when He was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of Mary. In that Heavenly Presence, Christ sits at the right hand of God—which again, is not a literal location in our space and time but rather is a relationship of trust and authority. Christ is the Father’s “right hand man” to rule over and intervene in the Creation for which He died. With that authority, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to cleave our lives to Himself, to inspire and grant us guidance, and to constantly renew within us the spiritual energy and insight to proclaim Him, His Gospel, His death and resurrection, and His mercy and forgiveness to the whole world. The Ascension of Christ is not the end of His work; it is the beginning of a new chapter of that work. To God, everything is always only just beginning.

Just because Heaven is not spatially someone above us does not mean that Heaven does not actually exist. Heaven is real as much as Earth is real. The words “heaven” and “earth” each describe a different dimension that intersect, interlock, and are interwoven. In the Acts of the Apostles, which was written by St. Luke, when we read that Jesus “was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight,” we are meant to remember the cloud that St. Luke also mentioned in His Gospel at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36), when Peter, James, and John saw Jesus talk with Moses and Elijah while His body and even His clothes burst with glistering light and while, from a cloud, the voice of God the Father says, “This is my well-beloved Son.” The cloud from which the Father spoke is the cloud into which Jesus ascended. Metaphorically speaking, Jesus ascended through a mystical cloud to re-enter the palpable Presence of God the Father; literally speaking, His Resurrected Body rose into the air and disappeared into a cloud—a real cloud, a cloud like the one that the Apostles saw and which passed over them, obscured their physical sight, and terrified them. That cloud, like Christ Himself, like the Presence of Christ in His Body and Blood at the Eucharist, is an eruption of Heaven into Earth; it is eternity transfixed in time. Heaven and Earth are very different from one another, but they are not distant from one another. If Heaven is to be with God, and if God is always everywhere, then Heaven is always everywhere, though we see it now only in brief glimpses. One day, on the Last Day, Jesus will return from His current place in Heaven to our current place on Earth. This is what the angels meant when, just after Jesus’ Ascension, they told the Apostles, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand look 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 (Acts 1:11).” On that day, the Last Day, Jesus will raise everyone from the dead as He is risen, He will judge the living and the dead, and He will bring us into the Heavenly dimension that has always surrounded us and He will show us to the Father and the Father to us. And then the difference between Heaven and Earth will be bridged, sealed, and merged so that there is only one dimension through which we, the saints, angels, and God Himself, will delight and interact. This is what St. John the Beloved meant when He wrote in His revelation, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a Bride adorned for her husband (Rev. 21:1-2). Like a bridegroom and a bride, like Jesus and His Church, Heaven and earth will be married together and made one. Even then that is only the beginning, because to God everything is always only just beginning.

If we feel stuck in a chapter of sadness, if we feel helpless to grief or pain, if we feel trapped in a place fear, regret, or loneliness, it is not the end. You will not always stay there, and even now you are not alone. Christ’s death was not the end. His resurrection was not the end. His ascension into Heaven was not the end. His Second Coming and the Marriage of the Lamb will not be the end. After our resurrection, after our entrance into Heaven, after Heaven and Earth are made one, we will always, only, and continually see God more and more deeply and love Him more and more purely. He is risen and has ascended into Heaven; He is movin’ on up. In Him, we rise and are renewed and restored; with Him, we’re movin’ on up. Starting now and moving forward forevermore, we are and always will be, as the Wesley hymn describes, “Changed from glory into glory, till in heav’n we take our place, till we cast our crowns before Thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.” Or, as St. Augustine wrote about Heaven, “There we shall rest and we shall see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise. [We shall] Behold what shall be in the end and shall never end (*City of God*, Bk. XXII, Chap. 30).” Our journey with the love of God into the love of God never ends, because to God, everything is always only just beginning.