

“Alive in the Afterlife”

Luke 20: 27-40, by Marshall Ziemann, preached 11-10-2019 at PCOC

Ever since last summer we have been going through the gospel of Luke together here in worship. Now we are nearing the end. Last week, we revisited the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19. We witnessed his encounter with Jesus that gave him a change of heart and new direction in life. It was a transformation!

After that encounter, Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and the plot thickens, as they say. Jesus knows his days are numbered, so during this last week in Jerusalem, he focuses his time in teaching in the Temple every day.

There were two general responses to Jesus’ teaching (which Luke summarizes at the end of chapter 19): “The chief priests, the scribes, and the religious leaders keep looking for a way to kill him” (19:47), while “all the people were spellbound by what they heard” (19:48).

Our text for today is part of the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. They are looking for a way to trap him, so they can hand him over to the Governor, Pontius Pilate. The question for this particular day is about the resurrection, something that is about to become very real for Jesus.

This is no academic debate for Jesus. He knows that he’s living out his last days in Jerusalem, about to “trust his own life and death into the hands of God.” (Daniel B. Clendenin) This week we are in Luke 20, and today we begin with verse 27.

And as I read, I’m going to do something I usually never do. I’m going to add a few comments.

²⁷ Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him

²⁸ and asked him a question [*about the resurrection*].

“Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.

[This was an ancient custom. It was a way of ensuring an inheritance for your family and support for the widow. The Old Testament mentions this custom, in Deuteronomy and later in the story of Ruth.]

²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰ then the second ³¹ and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³² Finally the woman also died. ³³ In the resurrection, therefore, [*that they don’t believe in*] whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

[And they probably all felt quite smug at this point.]

³⁴ Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵ but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age

and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.

[You're not married in heaven, but you're still alive.]

³⁶ Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷ And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. ³⁸ Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." ³⁹ Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." ⁴⁰ For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

There's a disease that some future pastors catch in seminary. I call it seminary breath. Seminary breath usually starts out as a good thing, a love for theology, let's say. Future pastors go to school to study about God, and there they find there are many classes related to God's activity in the church and in the world. These classes are usually known by their fancy names, names like:

Ecclesiology (the study of the church),
Soteriology (the doctrine of salvation),
Eschatology (the study of the End Times),
Pneumatology (the study of the Holy Spirit) and on and on.

All these are excellent topics, by the way, but for some students it's too tempting to get caught up in the fascinating subject matter and along the way forget about the subject (God). They also forget about the object of all of God's activity in the world (people). So, while a study of theology is absolutely essential in our lives as followers of Christ, we can never get so caught up in it that we forget either about Christ, or people.

That's what these Sadducees have forgotten here. They are trying to trip Jesus up over a doctrine they didn't believe in themselves.

There's an old story I remember about these two guys who are travelling in a hot air balloon, and they are lost.

Suddenly, a gust of wind takes them down, and they land in a farmer's field. One of them calls out to the farmer, "Where are we?" and the farmer yells back, "You're in my field!" Then another gust of wind swoops them back up into the sky. One of the guys in the balloon turns to the other and says, "That farmer must have been a theologian. What he said was true, but it really didn't help us, did it?"

I'm not sure if the Sadducees helped many people, either.

The Sadducees were much different than the Pharisees (who we normally hear arguing with Jesus). They were fewer in number than the Pharisees, they were usually wealthy. Many of the priests and aristocrats were Sadducees. They were

the governing class; they collaborated with Rome. They were very much interested in the here and now, because that's all they thought there was. They didn't believe in "the immortality of the soul."

They are not that interested in the afterlife, or in preparing for the afterlife, because they said they couldn't find any proof of it in the only part of the Bible they accepted, the first five books of the Old Testament, the books of Moses. They didn't believe in angels or demons, nor see any of the books of the Prophets as being from God, so they weren't that worried about a coming judgment one day, either.

All of us know people like this - spiritual, to a degree, with a belief in a God, but not much to base it on.

The way Jesus chooses to answer them is very good; it's something we should all take note of. When they concoct this bizarre story of "One Bride for Seven Brothers," Jesus doesn't come back at them with highfaluting theological verbiage, and he doesn't discount their beliefs, either. He gives them a really clear answer, based on the part of Scripture they did believe in.

He uses the story of the burning bush in Exodus - a story they believed - (that's when God identifies himself to Moses, as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). Jesus argues that God wouldn't speak like that if they were still dead. God speaks as if they are still alive to him (even though they are dead to us). They are very much alive in the Afterlife, thus there is a resurrection of the dead. The actual voice of God has declared it in the Sadducees' own scripture! Jesus has made a good point. That's why in the last verse some of the other folks gathered there exclaim, "Teacher, you have spoken well. And they no longer dared to ask him another question."

This, to me, is a major application of this passage, something that all pastors (and anyone who ever tries to defend their faith) should keep in mind: "Jesus used arguments that the people he was arguing with could understand. He talked to people in their own language; he met them on their own grounds; and that is [one reason] why the common people heard him gladly." (Barclay)

This is Good News for Real People, news you can understand, news you can use.

It should be noted that while this text does give us the reassurance of life in the Afterlife, it doesn't answer all our questions about heaven. Movies are often fascinated by what heaven will be like, but the fact is, we just don't have all the information we'd like to have.

So, when Jesus says there won't be marriage in heaven, those of us who are happily married aren't sure what to make of it. We can't really conceive of life apart from our spouse. But there's a message here, too, for those who are single, either by choice or not, and for those who've been married more than once, or not always happily married: here in this life people put a lot of emphasis on being married, but apparently not so much in heaven.

Who you are in God's eyes is not defined by if you are married or single or divorced or widowed. To God, your life is not on hold if you're not married. Your life, your real life, your full life is meant to be about your life with Christ, which begins here and now, and then carries over into the Afterlife.

This is how Eugene Peterson translates these verses in his version of the Bible called The Message:

Jesus said, "Marriage is a major preoccupation here, but not there. Those who are included in the resurrection of the dead will no longer be concerned with marriage nor, of course, [even] with death. They will have better things to think about, if you can believe it. All ecstasies and intimacies then will be with God."

It's this wonderful kind of life that waits for us in The Afterlife, and we can hardly fathom it. It's the life of the resurrection and it's available to all.

These Sadducees asked Jesus, through this convoluted hypothetical scenario, to speak about the resurrection, which they rejected, but we hold most dear. Jesus found a way to address them that corrected them, while valuing them, and giving us a strange glimpse into the world to come.

I don't know if Jesus won any converts that day, but he certainly won their respect. This little story appears in three of the gospels. In Luke, this is the only time the Sadducees are ever mentioned, although in his sequel, the Book of Acts, Luke will refer to them five more times. They will argue later with Peter or John or Paul when they preach about Jesus' resurrection from the dead as The Early Church is formed.

Whatever the Afterlife is exactly like, we will be very much alive there, with many details awaiting us, for he is the God of the Living, not the dead. Amen.