

“God of the Living”
Luke 20: 27-40
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In our reading from the Gospel today, Jesus is put to the test with a question from the Sadducees. Within Luke’s narrative, the question comes at the beginning of the week that would end with Jesus’s arrest and crucifixion. Tensions were growing after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and the religious leaders were looking for a way to minimize if not eliminate his influence. The chief priests, the scribes, and their spies had already tried and failed to trip Jesus up with trick questions and now the Sadducees took a turn.

One thing to note is that the Sadducees and the Pharisees did have their differences. The Sadducees acknowledged only the authority of the Torah and they rejected the Pharisees’ oral teachings. They also didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead. Despite these differences, the two groups were united in their opposition to Jesus. Let’s listen now to the Scripture.

²⁷ Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸ and asked him a question: “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. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married a woman 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, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

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. 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 Sadducees were asking, but they weren’t really searching for truth. They came up with a far-fetched scenario about a woman whose husbands kept dying to try to prove their point that there is no resurrection. Since they were already convinced that there is nothing after death, they weren’t sincerely curious about resurrection life, but even if the Sadducees weren’t, plenty of people are. Recent polls conducted by the Pew Research center show that 70% of Americans and 64% of adults in 36 countries believe there is “definitely or probably life after death.”

What all these people believe about life after death varies, but I think the *reasons* that people want to believe are probably quite similar. These are just my own theories, but I think people believe that life goes on somehow because we only know what it feels like to exist and we can’t imagine what it would be like to stop existing. I think

people look forward to a next stage of life that will include reunion with loved ones because we are inherently relational, and we can't imagine that the relationships in which we give and receive love won't continue to exist somehow. I think also that the created world nudges us to believe that death is not the end. There are signs of resurrection everywhere. Leaves fall from the trees and die at this time of year. The tree stands bare through the winter, but with spring come new buds announcing the arrival of new life after death.

We can have our hunches, and people can come up with ideas about what we think might happen after death, but when Jesus answered the Sadducees, he spoke with authority about resurrection life and about God. His words don't explain every mystery or give us an answer to all the kinds of things we like to speculate about like will pets be in heaven or what age will people be in heaven. But Jesus does reveal core realities about resurrection life, and we can trust what he says when we wonder about life, and death, and the possibility of resurrection.

On the central question of whether there even is a resurrection, Jesus's answer aligns with the Pharisees. He affirms that yes, there is an age beyond the one we live in now, but it isn't just a continuation of this life with more of the things we love and none of the things we don't. Some things that are part of life in this world won't carry over into the next. Because the Sadducees brought it up, marriage is the example in this passage. Marriage is a gift that offers protection, stability, and the possibility of children who can carry on the family line. It helps sustain life in this world where people are vulnerable and death is always near, but Jesus says that people will no longer marry or be given in marriage in the resurrection because marriage won't be

needed for those purposes anymore. It won't be needed for the purpose of sustaining and protecting life because Jesus says that those who inherit life will become "like the angels." That doesn't mean that everyone will get a halo and wings. It means that mortality will be exchanged for immortality. Paul says later in I Corinthians 15:42, **"So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable."**

The good news about inheriting immortality is that it means no longer living under the shadow and fear of death. It's hard to even imagine how that would feel and what it would be like because death is everywhere in this world. In the new world, though, there will never be any fear about losing a loved one and there will never again be any grief to bear over those losses. On Thursday last week, I received a message letting me know that someone who was one of my very good friends in seminary died suddenly at the beginning of the week. He was 55 years old and leaves behind his wife and three children. Though we haven't kept in close contact since seminary, the news was sad to me, but mostly I have felt sad to think about the shock and sorrow that his family are experiencing. Stories like this are unavoidable in this world, you have your own, but someday there won't be any more stories like this for those who are clothed with immortality.

And neither will there be any burden or anxiety to carry about trying to avoid death on a day-to-day basis. You may not wake up each day and consciously think about all the things you have to do to avoid dying, but truly, this is what many of our human fears and anxieties are tied to. For example, we spend our lives worrying about what we eat, or whether we will eat, and we have to do to ensure that

we will be able to eat. This is why people will sometimes spend years feeling trapped and miserable doing work that brings no joy. It is the same reason why wars are fought, and why mothers sometimes do unthinkable things to be able to feed their children – because people are ultimately trying to avoid death. Resurrection life will be different, though. Without the fear and threat of death, we won't be always striving to survive. Instead, we will be free to simply live and enjoy being alive. So, death and the parts of life in this world that help us avoid death will not carry over from this age into the next, and that is good news, but there is more good news in what Jesus says about what will and what does continue in the age to come.

In his response to the Sadducees, Jesus says that God is the *God of the Living*. Because the Sadducees defended their own position by appealing to the Torah, Jesus also turned to the Torah and recalled the story of the burning bush where God says I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Though the patriarchs died long before Moses, God speaks of them in the present tense and by doing so God is indicating that they are still with God in the present. The point that Jesus is making about God is that the *living* God can only be the God of those who are also alive with God. It means that God remains in relationship with *living* people, and that relationship is not broken by death. Some things will pass away, but if we are children of God in this age, our identity as God's children and the relationship that begins with God in this life will never pass away. It will last – we will be with God and will be loved by God for all of eternity. Again, Paul helps us understand this concept when he says later in Romans 8:38-39, ***“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

The good news that is proclaimed to us today is this: resurrection life is real; it is eternal; and all who receive it will go on being with God and being loved by God forever. This is not good news that is reserved for only a few people. It is good news for all people and Jesus has made it available for everyone everywhere who wants to inherit it. The thought of our own death and dying can be frightening if we have fears about either ceasing to exist or about continuing to exist somewhere outside of the presence of God, but Jesus's word of grace is "do not be afraid." Jesus offers assurance about life after death and that assurance rests on what *he* has done for us. He experienced death on a cross, and he rose again, taking away the power and the finality of death and opening the way to eternal life. It is a free gift and all anyone has to do is receive it through faith that says "God, I trust your love for me and I trust that through your Son Jesus I am yours and I will be with you forever."

It is good to have assurance about resurrection life, but I can't end without saying that the hope of putting on immortality and being with God and loved by God forever isn't only good news for the future. God is the God of the *living* which means God will be God to God's people in eternity, but God is our God while we live out our days now in this life. To live this life in relationship with God is the way to live the best and most abundant life. Without the knowledge of God and God's ways, people naturally tend to stumble along in the darkness, making choices that lead to death, but God came to us in Jesus to be our light, to show us how to live the good life God intends for us, and to make it possible to live with peace, and courage, and joy, and hope even as we live for now in the shadow of death. Jesus truly is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He has come that we might have life and have it to the full, and that is a gift that can be ours now and forever. Amen.

