

Dead or Alive

Scripture: Luke 20:27-38

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him 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. Now there were seven brothers; the first married and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally, the woman also died, in the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her. Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; 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. Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. 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. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD

Luke's passage opens with intrigue as the Sadducees, who have a clear understanding that there is no resurrection, are asking Jesus questions about the resurrection. Questions have many functions in conversations. Questions are posed to gain knowledge and comprehension, analyze and assess a situation, challenge authority, shame an opponent, or win an argument or debate. Questions often give an opponent the advantage, as the question sets or reframes the conversation. The one who ask the question has the power. The Sadducees are questioning Jesus about a mystery that they have already considered and rejected. Their questions are not for the purpose of genuine dialogue, but for the purpose of prompting debate, with the hopes of showing up Jesus and showing onlookers that Jesus is not trustworthy or knowledgeable. Jesus seizes the moment of questioning as a teachable moment about the nature of heaven. Rather than taking the questioning as a personal attack, Jesus uses this moment as a time to teach about the love and mercy of God.

Jesus answers the questions by describing how heaven and earth are not the same. The ways of God are not the ways of humanity. God's judgements are not our judgements. Things do not work in heaven the way they work on earth – Thank God!

"God is not a God of the dead." This does not mean that God is indifferent toward humans who are already dead. God has not forgotten them. On the contrary, in relation to God, death is an enemy, and overcoming death is for God as important as defeating sin. "Where, O death, is your sting?" (1Corinthians 15:55). With these words, Paul rejoices with gratitude for the victory of God in Jesus Christ over the powers of death. However, Paul's statement is not meant to support the idea that death does not really exist or that there is a continuation of our lives after our deaths. Rather, we have to take seriously what the living Lord says in Revelation 1:18; "I am the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades." These keys are only in the Lord's hands and never in our hands. If we are his followers, then we follow the one who has these keys in his hands.

It is this living Lord who is encountered in today's text by some Sadducees, a group of modern intellectuals of that time. The Sadducees refused the idea of a continuation of life after death. According to them, everything comes to an end with death; therefore, life is to be lived as fully as possible within the boundaries of earthly time. Because their belief is in stark contrast with what Jesus teaches about survival after death, the Sadducees' set an intellectual trap for him, thus hoping his answer will show that his teaching about the resurrection of the dead is absurd.

The Sadducees say, let us imagine the case of seven brothers who marry their brother's widow as prescribed by the law of the time. If there is eternal life, upon the death of all the brothers and the woman, to whom will the woman be married? This imaginary scenario is meant to make fun of Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus takes them seriously, and he makes this one basic point: After their death they will no longer marry or be given in marriage, for they are now angels, children of God, and will remain so forever. (v. 34-36)

What Jesus points out to the Sadducees is that eternal life is not simply the continuation of mortal life beyond death. Whatever the reality is on the other side of earthly life, we should not think of it as a continuation of this life that affords us an opportunity to complete a still imperfect works. Indeed, we humans must do now what we can do for the good, such as help the needy, work for improvement of the human situation, resist egoistic threats to fellow humans and other creatures. “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “Today”. (Hebrews 3:13)

Certainly, the decisive point that Jesus makes to the Sadducees is this: Death is the end of many things, but it is not the end of everything. Our death is not the end of God. We are living in a certain time, but God “alone is immortal”. (1Tim. 6:16)

When this is quite clear for us, then we are allowed to make a further step. This God is not a mere God. This God does not release his creatures. In his compassion God puts them in his heart, and they will not ever be excluded from it. We humans are not eternal, but God’s love for us humans is eternal. Our life does not continue constantly, but God’s mercy is upending toward those to whom he is merciful.

As they were, so they are now in God. Because they are in God, this means that they are now healed from their illnesses and cleansed from their evils.

In the hours of the last evening of his life, the theologian Karl Barth was working on a lecture. In that lecture, he wrote of God as the God of the living in these words: “All live to him, from the Apostles to the forebearers of yesterday and the day before yesterday. They do not have only the right, but also relevance in the present, to be heard also today.” These sentences call our attention back to the text, to the sentence about the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob (v. 37) and the assertion that to God all of these ancestors are alive. (v.38).

What does it mean to say, “to him all...are alive”? This means that all the humans who lived before us and who are now not among us are living “to God”. Because of that connection with God, they are also not dead to us. They have not only spoken in their former times; they still speak today. We do not live without them. The members of the first elected people of Israel, the members of the Christian church who were loved by God before our birth – none of them has passed away.

We are today, together with them, the complete people of God.

We cannot know fully all members of the people of God, but again and again several of them are revealed to us. They come close to us by the God of the living, if we understand that today they still have a say in what we have to say. Such communion with those who preceded us belongs to the praise of this God who is “God not of the dead, but of the living”

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY:

I remember Christine and I, grieving the loss of our stillborn son. Our 5–6-year-old younger son Kenneth was what we were worried about. Kenneth had looked forward as much as we did to the birth of his little brother Jonathan. Kenneth was so excited about his brother that he would talk to it all the time, lay against it, and love it. Talked about things they would do together when he was big enough.

When we told Kenneth and the other children about losing the baby, we told them that it had gone to live with God in heaven. Kenneth showed little emotion at the time, maybe it was shock.

To help the situation Christine and I planned a little family get together, a trip across the bay to talk and express all the children’s emotions. As we were traveling, “Heat Lightning” started flashing over the bay, the children watched for a while, then Kenneth stated: Jonathan better be careful because God would get mad at him for turning the lights on and off up there in heaven. To God and Kenneth and the rest of the family, Jonathan is definitely alive. “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” Luke 20:38

PRAYER:

O God, your love cares for us in life and watches over us in death.

We bless you for our Savior’s joy in little children and for the assurance that of such is the kingdom of heaven. In our sorrow, enable us to commit ourselves, to you unfailing care. Help us to trust, where we do

not understand. In our loneliness, may we remember our loved ones, trusting them to your keeping until the eternal morning breaks, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

BENEDICTION:

God was, is, and continues to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and Jesus concludes, “For to God all of them are alive”. Our name and identity are not limited by membership in a family but are described as “Children of God” and “Children of the resurrection”. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob participate in this new age and new life, as heirs of the promise of God – which is also the inheritance of those of us who hear this story so many years later.