

“God of the Living” Luke 20:27-38
Delivered to Church for the Highlands
Sunday, November 7, 2010

Several holidays combined together last week, all of which had a common theme: death and the afterlife. They were: Halloween, with its fascination with zombies, monsters and graves; then All Saint’s Day, a way for the church to counter all of the paganism with a remembrance of Christians who have died; and, then Dia’ de los Muertos, a latin-American celebration of color and skeletons, giving reverence to their dead ancestors. These days point to our interest in death and what happens to us when we die.

A recent movie, Hereafter, Directed by Clint Eastwood, and with star Matt Damon, also takes on the mystery of life after death with several actors, one of whom who has had a near-death experience. Again, such a movie and its popularity show our interest if not fascination with the afterlife.

This was the case in Jesus’ time. Some in his religion believed in an afterlife and others didn’t. Jesus happened to hold the same view as one of the groups, the Pharisees, who did believe in it and took lots of heat and from the Sadducees, who didn’t. As we hear what Jesus said to them that day, we can draw encouragement and challenge for how we live today. It is good for us to hear from Jesus that God is God of the living.

It is good for us to hear this from him when we remember those we know who have died and are with us no more. Death constantly takes away and never seems to add anything. It also just doesn’t seem to make sense. I mean, one minute we are walking and talking with someone, enjoying their smile, laugh, and the way they bless us and the next thing we know they are gone—gone from our contact and our sight.

This kind of reality check was present in the Sadducees’ question and mind that day as they lobbed this question up for Jesus to swing at. They already had things wrapped up and settled in their minds. It was just easier to not believe in the afterlife. It was much easier to conclude that there is no real life after death, certainly no marrying and continuing on as we do here on earth. I am sure that there were others in the crowd that day who just couldn’t buy into the hopeless reasoning of the Sadducees and were leaning inward with their best ear forward wanting to know what this Jesus had to say in answer to the question.

So, Jesus answered it with a challenge and reminded them about the reality of the resurrection for those who have died. He spoke with authority about a place where there is life after death, of where the dead become like angels and exist as children of God. It is an existence determined by resurrected life. What was on the other side of death was life; that those who were dead were dead no longer.

As I worked on this Scripture this week, I thought of what a great funeral text this makes. I don't think I've ever preached from this for a funeral, but what Jesus states here about life after death is a powerful word of comfort for us as we remember our loved ones who have died and are with us no more. God wants us to have comfort in knowing that they cannot die anymore, that they are like (note that Jesus didn't say they were angels, but like them) angels, and that they exist as children of God. He doesn't go into any other detail here and he really doesn't have to. There is enough comfort for our grieving souls in this phrase about heaven to last a lifetime, at least until we get there ourselves.

It is also good for us to hear from Jesus that God is God of the living when we wonder about life after death for our own lives. What Jesus made clear to the Sadducees and to the undecided in the crowd that day was that he knew a thing or two about heaven. He had mentioned it before but now he really seemed to shine as one who could speak intelligently and authoritatively about it. I'm sure they had never heard a Pharisee put things in this way before. Jesus was an expert, it seemed, and they listened up. And I can't help but think that many in the crowd went home with comfort and peace in their hearts to know that death would not be the end.

The same Jesus speaks into our crowd today. We share their need to know and their doubts and their tricky questions. We haven't been there, but we know it is a pending reality. The closer we get to death, the more we want to know and the more comfort we need. Jesus provides you and me today with this wisdom and comfort, with his expertise. What God says to us through the words of Jesus here in Luke ring true for us, especially in light of the fact that this same Jesus would go on to make heaven an immediate reality for everyone, removing death as an obstacle to heaven for humankind.

We, like those in the crowd, get a choice to make. We can either rest in the words of Jesus or go with the sad and misinformed plan for the future held by the Sadducees. Why would we not want to go home with a realization that we are eternal and that God has a plan for us that goes way beyond our bodies and our existence in this world? After all, according to Jesus, God is not a God of the dead, but of the living. He is just getting started with His recreation of that which he has made. Jesus' teaching sounds a whole lot better to me than the rational explanations of philosophers and atheists who still make loud noises today. Doesn't it to you?

Finally, it is good for us to hear from Jesus that God is God of the living when we catch ourselves missing the point in life, when we find ourselves going through life dead to a living God. The Sadducees missed the point. And Jesus knew it. He entertains their question and it entertains him as he fully understands why they asked it. Jesus knew they were missing the point. They were also missing life, life the way God had always intended it to be for them. They were missing the hope and joy of heaven. They were missing the rest of their Scripture, conveniently cutting out the parts they didn't like or those Scriptures that threatened their wealth and power. They were missing the point of life, who was standing right in front of them.

I love how Jesus handles their pointed question by talking about Moses, reminding them of how he got the point. It came to him on a hot day while walking through the desert, looking over to see a bush completely on fire. He found the point as he approached it, learning that it and he were on holy ground and that God was speaking from it. God was not dead, for God was speaking-and through a bush in the desert! Moses learned a lot about living that day. He got the point and it changed his life forever.

And we are to get the point as well. Have you gotten it yet? Do you feel like your life has a point these days? Sadly, most of us just skate through life without ever realizing the burning bushes around us. We get so caught up in producing and protecting what we have that we forget to look into the burning bushes. We can so easily function as though there is no resurrection, not in the hereafter and certainly not in the here and now. Just as Jesus turned their question around to focus their attention on how God was living then, so his words do the same for us, getting us to see what the living God is doing right now, in front our eyes.

I love that oft-quoted phrase from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Earth crammed with heaven, each common bush aflame with God. Yet only he who sees takes off his shoes.*ⁱ What Jesus is asking us to do here is to take off our shoes and look into the blazing reality of a God who lives and who gives life to the dead and to the living.

Life here is short. It is a gift given to us and one for which we will be held accountable. What God invites us to do is really live; to join in with God in the real, resurrected life He has provided right here in the deserts and bushes of life. What a tragedy to get to heaven and realize that all that living you did on earth was not living but missing the point.

This point meets us at our point of need in this world, especially in the difficulties of our lives on this earth. It puts things in perspective when we get upset over the loss of our's and God's favorite sport's team, when your candidate or party loses an election. It also comes to us when we aren't feeling useful and reminds us that we really can make a difference in this world. The point Jesus is making here comes right into our sorrow, pain, anxieties and loneliness and won't let us walk away without knowing what real living is all about.

And this point comes up to us this morning as we gather around the Lord's Table for Communion. It is a point made for us by Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection. Jesus provided us with access to life, to real and abundant life through his work of reconciliation. He is present with us now as we come to this table and as we go out into our new week.

One of my favorite quotes comes from St. Irenaeus, who wrote, "*The glory of God is one human being fully alive.*" It is God's glory because God is God of the living. Is He your God? Are you living?

ⁱ Quote is from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as found on Lindy Black's Sermon Nuggets page, <http://home.roadrunner.com/~lyndale/Pentecost%2024C.htm>