

Sermon on Luke 20:27-38
22nd Sunday after Pentecost, November 10, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace....

Life can be an ongoing series of questions, asked in order to gain knowledge and understanding, from how to build a fire or tie a shoe, how to follow a recipe to the meaning of life. There are good questions and there are bad questions, fitting questions and inappropriate questions – we’ve heard them all! Today we will do some theology, which, after all, is simply humans asking questions about God.

So it is only fitting that on this Sunday AFTER the feast of All Saints, when we remember our loved ones who have died in the Lord, that we ask the question raised in the gospel today: *Is there life after death? Is there a resurrection of the dead?* It’s the issue that Sadducees and Pharisees argued about in the time of Jesus – whether there was a resurrection of the dead, or not. Now, the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, so as the old saying goes, “They were sad, you see!” But the Pharisees did believe in the resurrection of the dead, and so they said, “I see!” This will now help you to remember the difference between Sadducees and Pharisees, the next time you are in a Bible study or at a wake for a deceased friend.

So we have heard words of hope in the redemption of God in this world of woe, of life everlasting when we know that one day we shall all die. Perhaps not the texts I would have chosen for a day we focus on stewardship in the Church! When an organization usually kicks off a fund drive or annual stewardship campaign, prevailing wisdom leads us to proclaim what great things this institution offers to those who would support it, like the great ministry a church gives on behalf of its members, friends, and community. We could do that, we should do that! Perhaps we will get there. But no, today we focus on the essential human question: *knowing that we, and all humans die, so is this the end of our existence? Is there life after death? What does God say about this? What does Jesus say?* If these are your questions, well, you have come to the right place, at the most opportune time, of all the Sundays that you could come to church! For in the Old Testament we hear Job cry out: *“I know that my Redeemer lives, and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God!”* And we shall hear Jesus say to those Sadducees, *“In fact, the dead are raised. The God of Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is God not of the dead, but of the living!”* This is the good news we proclaim today! We are alive in Christ, who gives us the promise of life forever! Knowing this makes us thankful, and generous in our giving to God, the Church, and our neighbor! So, that’s where I’m going today!

But I want to start with what Job said in the Old Testament reading. It's a short passage that we read, which we usually hear only at funerals, or in concerts of Handel's Messiah with that exquisite soprano aria! If you know the story of Job, it's a story of a faithful person holding on to faith in the midst of suffering. It starts with describing a man named Job, a person who was blameless and upright, but was targeted by Satan to make a test case out of his faith. Satan made a "bet" with God, that Job's faith wouldn't last once misfortune came his way. So Job suffered all kinds of calamities, which tested his faith and drove him to despair. In a world where everyone "gets what they deserve", Job didn't deserve this! God is supposed to punish the wicked and reward the righteous with blessings, right? It wasn't fair, so Job complained to God in this great lament. Job's "friends" questioned Job, asking if he were really as righteous as he claimed (yes, he was!)? God had failed Job, he said, because his calamities were far beyond the bounds of any possible minor sins. Another asked how Job could say such things – was God a perverter of justice? Could it be that Job suffered for the sins of his *children*? Just admit your sinfulness and let it go! Job wondered how a human being can stand and be justified before God? A third friend rejected Job's claim of unfair treatment by God and advises Job to place himself at the mercy of the court (I mean, God). But Job continues to plead his case to the ultimate judge. All his friends and family had failed to understand or comfort him, so he replied to them in the great lament of chapter 19, where he asked for their pity, and cried out: "*O that my words were written down in a book forever!...For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand...and after my skin has been destroyed, in my flesh I shall see God!*"

So Job's friends had hard questions for him, and Job had hard questions for God. Job challenged the very core reasons to have faith in God, for if God allowed awful things to happen to Job, a righteous and faithful human being, what was the point of faith, or obedience? There would be more questions to come – for this chapter is only halfway through the book! Still, we shall see how Job held on to his faith and professed hope in God's promises, in God's goodness, in the future.

Job's questions asked whether life is fair, whether God's judgment is fair, and whether there is hope for justice and healing in human suffering. Had God abandoned him? Why do bad things happen to good people? So, there are some questions we ask that are essential about God and our relationship with God or neighbor, and some that are not. There are some questions that do not matter, that are not essential, which we call *adiaphora*. Like asking: *how many angels can dance on the end of a pin?* Then we get lost in the forest because we only see the trees. Asking the right questions is critical, such as: "What is God calling me to do in my life? What is God calling the Church to do today?"

So now, about the gospel. Luke tells the story of the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. They came to Jesus with a question. It reminds me of a Senate confirmation hearing for a Supreme Court justice or important Cabinet official, asked by a hostile party. They were trying to trip Jesus up. Because they did not believe in the resurrection, they made up a trap for Jesus, by creating a hypothetical case of a woman, whose husband died. When each of his seven brothers took her into his home and married her in turn, as was according to the Law of Moses, each one of them died, without children. “In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will this woman be, when seven brothers married her?” Ridiculous question? Perhaps. But it was a question illustrating in the extreme their challenge to the very idea of life after death. They didn’t ask Jesus “why” he believed in the resurrection of the dead, or where Jesus found “proof” of this in the scriptures or the Law of Moses. They asked this ridiculous, hypothetical question asking whose wife would a woman be after she died if she had seven husbands?!

So how did Jesus answer them? Jesus did not challenge or question the law of Moses, nor the tradition – he drew from it for his answer! He simply presented his argument as a teacher, in the rabbinic tradition. But he did challenge the idea that in the life to come, in God’s kingdom, that those who have died can be considered married. There is no need for marriage in the resurrection, because those who have died are like angels, they are children of God, and cannot die anymore. It’s a whole new existence. He pointed out that Moses affirmed that there is a resurrection, because when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, he spoke as the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob. Jesus said to the Sadducees, “But you are missing the whole point with this question!” *“So now he is God not of the dead, but of the living, for to God all of them are alive.”*

What does this mean to us faithful who are living now? You, who are women, are not only identified by your relationship to your husband or his surviving brothers, but you, yourself are a child of God! (Oh, you knew that?) It is the same for each of us. The relationship that matters is with God – you and God, you and your neighbor, with its basis in love. This should not be such a revolutionary concept, but in many human societies this is still an issue. However, it is also true that we are defined by our relationships within our families, communities and culture, not only as individuals with our God. You and I are children of God, one with the whole Body of Christ, with all the saints.

But Jesus said the fact is, the dead are raised – and you are all raised! The essential point is that you, child of God, are alive! God’s promise to you is that even when you die, you shall live! Thank God, you are alive now! So, what’s the point of all this? You have been made alive, truly alive, in your baptism into Christ, when you were joined into the death and resurrection of our Lord! You are now “livin’ the life! The resurrection life! Life’s purpose is not only for the

resurrected life after you die and go to heaven – this is not the only goal for Christians – but your resurrected life is for your life today! Living the life of generosity, mercy, forgiveness and love for neighbor, within the body of Christ.

This means something today for your life as a steward of God’s creation, and your stewardship in the Church, in this community. For when we live the life of children of God, who have hope today and hope for the future, it affects our outlook, and our generosity! I hope this means that we are joyful, cheerful, generous givers out of thanks to God for all we have received – our very lives, our families, home, shelter, daily work and all we need from day to day. Not to mention, for loving forgiveness and mercy from God our Creator, our baptism into Christ and being part of his body, the Church, with a purpose and mission to live out in this world as witnesses to the good news, and our ultimate hope in the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting with God, as Jesus has promised!

How does this all connect to our stewardship today? It means that some of our questions about the details are not as crucial as we think they are, even when they are important! Knowing that the Church has a budget to provide a guide and accountability for the spending of our offerings to God as part of our mission as a congregation is very important, but knowing every last detail about it – not so much! It is good for us to be able to put the financial numbers of our budget on a spreadsheet, but when we love the Church and support our ministry together, we don’t have to wait to “see the spreadsheet” before we participate and give! It is important that our revenues match our expenses if we are to survive financially into the future, but it is not crucial as to whether we worship God together as the whole Church! We have leaders whom we entrust with this task – our Vestry.

For the fact is, as Jesus said today, *you are alive. You are a child of God, you have been called by name, and you have been baptized into the whole Body of Christ in the world. You and I have been called by God to be his witnesses in this world, and Jesus has promised to always be with us, to the end of the age. The fact is that the dead are raised, and this promise of everlasting life with God is good! God is God not of the dead but of the living; to him all of them – and us – are alive!*” So thanks be to God for this promise and this ministry. We pray for the continued faith, hope, and love to share this with others, with joy in this life!