There is something about bagpipes …

Just this last Wednesday, I was serving at Lillian Guthrie’s memorial service here at Trinity. At the very end of the service, Elizabeth and I processed down the center aisle toward the back of the church, like we always do. And there, right in front of the font, stood a bunch of bagpipers playing Amazing Grace as loudly as they could.

It’s hard to put to words what it sounded and felt like – the deeply chordal melancholy-yet-triumphant tones, the simultaneous dissonance and harmony, the deep breaths it took to sustain such long tones – tones that seemed to reach far back into the past and far into the future at the same time. It felt like they were ushering Lillian into glory right then and there. I’d say that the bagpipes could be called resurrection instruments. They sing a truth we can’t quite put to words, but we feel it in our bones.

Sometimes it takes these kinds of holy disruptions to shake us into the deeper reality we live in, but are often blind to. We say we believe in God, in the More, in Heaven, even, but sometimes we need to encounter it in the body, in the heart, and not only in the head. The mournful-yet-exuberant chords of the bagpipes, played by people who knew and loved Lillian, shook me into that knowing that is deeper than belief - for a few minutes. And then it was back to life as usual.

We all have these stories – moments when something pierces our routine and shakes us into the really real, when he have a glimpse of the More – Like a piece of art that feels like hope but we don’t know why. Or a gaze that is held a little longer than usual and something is exchanged. Or unexpected tenderness. Or the quality of light in the sky when it is both day and night at the same time, and we pause for a second, marveling at that mystery. These are gifts of awareness, when we sense something is breaking into the present from somewhere else, and we somehow intuit that we are part of a much bigger Story than we usually see.

The feast of All Saints, which we celebrated last Sunday, was a day when we invited in more of that awareness of the larger Story. We read the names of our loved ones who have died this past year, and we had a baptism – the sacrament of death and new life and initiation into the body of Christ. And these past few weeks have been particularly rough as we’ve had more funerals than normal. And so it seems particularly fitting that today’s Gospel asks a question about the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, which apparently was a huge debate among the different sects of Judaism in the first century.

The Pharisees believed in a general resurrection of the dead, and the Saduccees did not. And this was all before Jesus’ resurrection. Jews in the first century thought about life in terms of “ages;” This age and the age to come. This concept was inherited from a long line of prophets who believed that history was going somewhere, and that one day God’s plan would be fulfilled, in which we would enjoy full communion with God, and with each other, and within ourselves,
and with the whole cosmos: literally heaven on earth. It wasn’t the notion of escaping this world in order to go to a better heaven. It wasn’t the idea of shedding this body so that the soul could rise somewhere else. (That was a Greek notion, not a Jewish one.) The Jews believed that the resurrection and the new creation would be earthy and bodily – a renewal and transformation within this creation, not a different ethereal one. It also wasn’t a return to some kind of Eden perfection, but something entirely new – right here on Earth – the day when heaven and Earth would become the same place, like Jesus prays in the Lord’s prayer: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

So when Jesus gets this question from the Saduccees about the resurrection of the dead in the age to come, he probably isn’t surprised because this was the kind of thing people debated about in those days. But he takes their question about the future and drags it into the present. Because Jesus was all about collapsing the binary between now and later, earth and heaven, life and death.

But let’s look at the specific question they ask Jesus because it has huge implications:

Jesus has finally reached Jerusalem and he is teaching in the temple. The Saduccees are suspicious of Jesus’ teaching, especially the authority with which he is speaking. And so they try to mock him and prove publicly that he is wrong. In order to prove that his belief in the resurrection is absurd, they propose an equally absurd hypothetical situation:

"Teacher, “they ask, “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.”

They are referring to an ancient Jewish law, in which if a man’s brother dies childless, the surviving brother is required to marry his brother’s widow and have children with her, in order to perpetuate the family inheritance and the patriarchal name. This particular woman in this story has to go through seven brothers and marries each of them. And so the Saduccees ask Jesus, “In the after life, who gets the woman? Who does the woman belong to in heaven since she had seven husbands on Earth? They are thinking, “Gotcha Jesus.”

And Jesus responds in a perfectly Jesus-y way, “Well …,” he says, “the woman won’t belong to anyone in heaven, because in the resurrection, in the age to come, people won’t possess each other. They will belong to God. In fact, everyone will be children of God, children of the resurrection.” And then he ends with a real zinger: “God is a God not of the dead but of the living.” And with this, he turns their question back on them and points out that their question is the wrong question. “Who gets the woman in the afterlife?” is the wrong question. Instead of focusing on who the woman belongs to in the afterlife, perhaps they should be focusing on what that poor woman’s life was like while she was alive!

God is a God of the living, Jesus says. If, like the Sadduccees, our theology becomes disembodied and stops caring about actual bodies that are alive, we are in trouble. And Jesus knew
this. God is a God of the Living and the Dead, and, he says, even the dead are alive to God. His
nondual response to the Sadducees claims that yes, we will be children of the resurrection in the
age to come, but we are also children of the resurrection now! He proclaims that he kingdom of
God is at hand – it is here -- the resurrection of the dead has not yet happened, and it has already
begun, in Jesus.

What if the future reality is breaking into this one in holy disruptions of the status quo – every
time there is an act of forgiveness, every time we experience profound love and sometimes in our
suffering, wherever people work for justice despite the odds, wherever there is shocking newness
or unexpected abundance, or even deafening bagpipes? My favorite theology professor called
these anticipatory glimmers – moments that shimmer with what is to come, and what is breaking
in already. And what if every time we grow in love and honesty and courage and generosity, we
are actively participating more and more in the life of the age to come?

And so perhaps Jesus is inviting us to think of resurrection less as something far in the future,
and more of something that is happening right now. He challenges us to consider how we can
live into our identity as children of the resurrection, children of the new creation, right now.

We often ask (and obsess over) the wrong questions. I know I do. We climb ladders, then realize
they are leaning against the wrong tree. And Jesus points to the questions we might be trying to
ask, but often don’t know how:

Like: How can we be more alive now? How do we help create the new world that Jesus is
announcing and that God is making?

Part of the reason that Jesus’ teachings were so threatening to the religious authorities of the time
is because if God is a God of the living, and if the living are hurting, anxious, scared, oppressed,
homeless, and lonely, then it matters how we treat each other. It matters that we work to topple
systems of the status quo – systems that believe more in death and finality and logic than in
resurrection. Believing in resurrection is dangerous because it loosens us from fear’s grip and it
liberates.

So it is easy for us postmodern post-enlightenment people to protect ourselves from this pre-
modern enchanted view of reality. But I feel a dare in today’s Gospel story: Dare to believe in
resurrection, it might be saying – both the resurrection of the dead and the resurrection of the
living; Dare to let those moments of interruption open our imaginations into what might be
possible, despite what the world tells us is nonsense and impossible.

Wendell Berry explores this in one of his most well-loved poems. I’ll end with a small excerpt. He writes,

Friends, every day do something that won’t compute. Work for nothing. Love someone who does
not deserve it. Denounce the government and embrace the flag. Ask the questions that have no
answers. Plant sequoias. Listen to carrion – put your ear close, and hear the faint chattering of
the songs that are to come. Laugh. Be joyful though you have considered all the facts. Go with
your love to the fields and lie down in the shade. Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction. Practice resurrection.

* Some ideas in this sermon were inspired by *Love Wins* by Rob Bell, and the article “Bodily communions: An eschatological proposal for addressing the Christian body problem” by Dr. Scott MacDougall, professor of theology at Church Divinity School of the Pacific. The poem citation is from *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front* by Wendell Berry.