

**Sermon, Proper 27, November 10, 2019, Jane A. Beebe**

“Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”  
(Luke 20:38)

The Sadducees were a learned sect who focused on the teachings of the Torah, and were centered on the Temple as the focus of worship. This led them to reject the possibility of resurrection—a concept supported by the Pharisees—perhaps because it seemed to messily transcend the inherent order of the law. I find myself identifying with the Sadducees a bit in their desire to live a covenantal life. Yes, they appear to be testing Jesus by imagining an unlikely scenario designed to twist anyone’s brain into a theological pretzel. Yet I wonder if there is some anxiety underlying their question. God has provided the underpinnings for a just and loving society through his covenant with his chosen people. What they are describing, however, is the levirate marriage taken to an absurd level.

A levirate marriage is one in which the brother of a deceased man marries his sister-in-law if his brother has died childless. According to Jewish law, the first-born son receives a double share of his deceased father’s inheritance. It is expected that this son will have additional family responsibilities such as care for his mother. However, if the first-born son dies childless, the inheritance goes to the next son, who, in effect becomes the first-born. This son will not only care for his widowed mother, but his widowed sister-in-law. This reflects a strong ethic within Judaism that provides for the care of the vulnerable.

I love how Jesus reframes the Sadducees' scenario. He distinguishes between the present day when we need the teachings of Moses to guide us, and the next age. In the resurrection from the dead we live wholly for God, and *to* God. As created beings our aliveness comes from God. This aliveness does not leave us, but is transformed. As Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians, "...All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18) What Jesus says may seem even more confounding than what the Sadducees ask in the first place. He uses scripture from the Torah (specifically Exodus) with which the Sadducees were intimately familiar in order to show that resurrection is real.

In Exodus 3:6 God says to Moses, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." This is a statement made in the present tense. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived their lives to God. In God, they are alive: eternally alive. In Jesus' astonishing interpretation, this means that the resurrected life is what God intends: in the here and now, and in the hereafter. There is that other conversation Jesus has with his disciple, Mary of Bethany, just before he raises her brother Lazarus from the dead. Jesus tells her that Lazarus will rise again. Martha responds, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on

the last day. Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live...” (John 11:24-25)

The resurrection “...expresses the holistic and inclusive character of the live-giving power of God...”<sup>1</sup> This power is not confined to the future but is available now. It includes not just the soul but also the body. The power of the resurrection rests not in immortality per se, but in God’s ongoing will to create and additionally God’s willingness to show mercy.<sup>2</sup> It is through the resurrection that the “new heaven and the new earth”—the whole cosmos—are brought into being.

The theologian Jürgen Moltmann sees this cosmic renewal as stemming from God as Alpha and Omega. He refers to Aquinas’ statement that “...the emergence of things from their beginning corresponds to the restoration of things at the end.”<sup>3</sup> In his mind there is a connection between the first creation and the renewed creation. He equates God’s presence in creation with the presence of eternity in time. “The eschatological indwelling of God in “the new heaven and the new earth” is *the presence of God* in the *space* of his created beings.”<sup>4</sup> This presence brings to all creation the fulfillment of justice, eternal life, and righteousness: God’s Shekinah.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 362.

<sup>3</sup> Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 263.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

It is then apparent that Jesus's judgment of humanity must arise out of the same love that fueled Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Migliore urges us not to shrink from the "purifying fire" of that love. We must not assume that the sins of others are more shameful than our own.<sup>6</sup> Trusting in God's mercy we must be merciful ourselves; we must forgive as we have been forgiven. What we experience as judgment has a profound effect on our ability to be in communion with God and each other.

Therefore, our understanding of eternal life must partake of that same vision of fulfilled communion. This allows us to accept the reality of physical death. Because we do not live apart from God's presence, surely that is our reality in death as well. Heim affirmed for us that eschatology is about relation. "When heaven is interpreted as the joy of fulfilled reconciliation and life in communion with the triune God through the work of the incarnate Lord, it is seen to be at once the consummation of both personal life and life in community."<sup>7</sup> At the same time eternity can be apprehended in the present moment. Again in Moltmann's words, "Eternity is *absolute presentness*."<sup>8</sup> Eternal life is fulfilled life.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 363.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>8</sup> Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 291.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Enough of theology. There was something about the Sadducees' story, its fanciful quality perhaps, that put me in mind of fairytales and children's rhymes. I thought of the lullaby "Hush Little Baby." The parent promises bigger and bigger gifts if the child will fall asleep. And yet, in the end, it is the baby's sweetness, its belovedness that is important. My mother used to sing this to me. Being rocked and sung to is one of my earliest memories. Sometimes now when I am singing or humming around the house or in the car, I hear her voice for a second. Her voice is somehow alive in me. This is how I understand resurrection.

"Hush, little Baby, don't say a word,  
Mama's gonna buy you a Mockingbird.

And if that mockingbird don't sing,  
Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring.

And if that diamond ring turns brass,  
Mama's gonna buy you a looking glass.

And if that looking glass gets broke,  
Mama's gonna buy you a billy goat,

And if that billy goat won't pull,  
Mama's gonna buy you a cart and bull.

And if that cart and bull turns over,  
Mama's gonna buy you a dog named Rover.

And if that dog named Rover won't bark,  
Mama's gonna buy you a horse and a cart.

And if that horse and cart fall down,  
You'll still be the sweetest little baby in town."—Trad.

