

## God of the Living

Luke 20:27-38

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

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There are some questions that preachers are supposed to know the answers to. Here's one of them. One Sunday after church a young mother and her five-year-old daughter hung around after worship obviously wanting to talk. "Dr. Williamson, my daughter has a question for you," the mother said. "Go ahead, honey." The little girl looked me straight in the eye and said, "Is Buster in heaven?" Her dog, Buster, had been hit by a car and killed. They had buried Buster in the back yard, said prayers and everything. But she wanted to know: what is it like for Buster? Is he in heaven? Her mother said that she had tried to answer, but that's the kind of thing preachers are supposed to know, so the little girl wanted to ask me. "Is Buster in heaven?"

Her question was genuine, from the heart. She asked it because she loved Buster and hoped that he mattered enough to God that he might be in heaven. Preachers get questions like that from time to time. We are supposed to know things like that.

This morning's scripture passage has just such a question. But it wasn't asked from the heart. It was asked out of cynicism and sarcasm. The Sadducees weren't really asking a question; they already knew the answer; they were just trying to make Jesus look the fool by asking him a trick question. "Pay attention now, Rabbi. Moses told us that if a man died leaving a wife, but no children, then his brother has the obligation to marry her and raise children in his brother's place. Isn't that right, Rabbi?" (They were referring to something called the Law of Levirate Marriage. It's spelled out in Deuteronomy 25:5-10.) "So what if there were seven brothers, and the first brother took a wife but died without giving her children. So she married the second brother, but he also died without any heir. She married the third brother and the very same thing happened. And so on, through all seven brothers. Finally this poor woman died. Now here's the question, Rabbi: after the resurrection, whose wife will she be?"

They probably sniggered when they asked it, because it was a ridiculous question. But then the Sadducees thought that the whole notion of resurrection was ridiculous. The Sadducees were the ultra-conservatives of the Hebrew faith; they built their beliefs on what is said in the first five books of the Old Testament, and those books don't really say anything about resurrection. The Sadducees believed that when someone died, that person went to the land of the dead. That's not hell, as in heaven and hell, but simply the land of the dead. People don't "live" in the land of the dead; they "dead" there. For the Sadducees it was this life and no more. The notion that God would raise to new life those who had died was absurd to them. So they enjoyed poking fun at those who held on to this pie-in-the-sky hope.

That's what was behind their question to Jesus. They were goading Jesus. Jesus' answer, however, ignores their goading and goes straight to a higher truth: "God is not God of the dead, but of the living, for to God all are alive." It's like what Jesus said on another occasion, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me shall live, even though they die. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26). The promise that Jesus brought was that all people, even those who have died a physical death, live to God.

But that raises questions: if the dead live in God, what sort of life is it? What sort of life do they have that can still be called life? Is there any continuity between this life as we know it and whatever sort of life follows? What about all those things that make life in this world pleasant and worthwhile—are they any part of the life to come?

We know that “we can’t take it with us.” We know that life in heaven has nothing to do with the accumulation of material possessions—homes, cars, iPads, stocks, bank accounts. But what about those things that are truly precious to us? What about marriage and family and friendship? I have on many occasions, when trying to offer a word of comfort and hope to a family who has lost a loved one, prayed to God that we look forward to that time when we shall be reunited with those we love. Is that a part of the life that is ahead for us all? Will we be reunited with those we love? What kind of life awaits us?

It’s hard for us to imagine life in any other sense than how we now know it. It’s difficult for us to picture life any other way, but that is because our knowledge is so limited. Think of it this way: an unborn child in the womb has no way to comprehend what kind of life is ahead. Floating around in the amniotic juices, a baby about to be born cannot imagine the life we now know. In the same way, we who are going to be born again to life in Christ, cannot fully comprehend the life that awaits us.

Although our knowledge is partial at best, in our faith, there are some things that we do believe about the life that awaits us. One thing is this: “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” We say that phrase every time we repeat the Apostles’ Creed. Now, to be honest, I’m not sure that I know all that phrase means, but I believe it is a way of saying that the unique qualities that make me me and you you will continue. Frederick Buechner puts it this way:

All the major Christian creeds affirm belief in the resurrection **of the body**. In other words, they affirm the belief that what God prizes enough to bring back to life is not some disembodied echo of a human being, but a new and revised version of all the things which made that person the particular human being he was—that she was—and which need something like a body to be expressed: his personality, the way she looked, the sound of his voice, her peculiar capacity for creating and loving. (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 42-43).

As a young man Benjamin Franklin composed his own epitaph. It read, “Here lies a volume badly worn and tattered which one day will come forth in a new edition much improved by its Author.” That’s what the resurrection of the body is all about—it’s that God is still at work perfecting us.

There is another thing that we believe about the life that is ahead. We know that the God who is engineering all this is the same God who sent the Son of God to live and die as proof of how much God loves us. The one constant in this life and the next is the eternal and limitless love of God. I don’t know what form God’s love for me will take after I die, but I believe without any doubt that death will not bring an end to God’s love for me. The Sadducees were wrong: it’s not just this life and no more. Paul said, “Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:38-39).

It is our faith in God that enables us to have hope even in the face of grief and loss and death. Earlier this year some 200,000 people died in the terrible earthquake that struck Haiti. There is no way we can comprehend or make sense of such destruction. In the face of such

loss the only thing we have to lean on is our faith that somehow God's love is greater and stronger than death.

This week as we will be honoring our veterans who served our country in military service. I'm sure that many veterans who experienced the heat of battle lost comrades in war. The fight in service to their country has cost many people their lives.

Last week our church calendar observed All Saints Day. It's a day for remembering all those faithful people who have lived their lives in faith and now live the perfect life of peace that God promises.

In all of these cases we grieve that they are no longer physically present with us, and yet we believe that the life they are living now is greater than anything we can imagine. With Paul, we too can affirm that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God. Jesus says it in today's scripture: God is God of the living, for to God all are alive.

God's perfect kingdom is not yet complete, We still experience the grief and sadness of death. Nevertheless, we believe that there is coming the day when God's kingdom will be fulfilled. Until that day we continue to give thanks for all God's saints and we keep on praying that God's will be done. ✠