

25th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 11.6.16

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

We might not be in the mood for this sort of thing this morning, but it seems the Sadducees were picking a fight with Jesus, and he was picking a fight right back—and maybe you're sick of fighting. Lord knows I am. This season running up to the election has felt like one side picking a fight with the other side, and the other side picking a different fight right back. Really, according to a *New York Times* poll, the only thing an “overwhelming majority of the electorate” agrees on these days is a general disgust at the state of American politics. So, we really might not be up for a fight this morning. But I'm a lectionary preacher, and this is the reading we get this morning—the Sadducees picking a fight with Jesus, though likely because Jesus by his mere presence in the Temple was picking a fight with the Sadducees.

This is to say the Sadducees weren't actually wondering about the resurrection. That's what I think, anyway. They weren't really wondering anything about the resurrection—except perhaps how anyone could believe in something so ridiculous, so unorthodox. In fact, when they Sadducees approached Jesus, saying, “Teacher...” even this might have been disingenuous. They likely didn't expect to learn anything from him. They likely didn't regard him as a teacher but as a joke.

But, as I say, Jesus also had it coming.

This is the first time the Sadducees make an appearance in Luke's gospel—the first and the last, which shouldn't surprise us. After all, these were Temple priests, and we've only just arrived in the Temple. Prior to now, Jesus had been wandering Galilee and its environs, far from the Temple and therefore far from the Temple priests. Prior to now, the only religious authorities to be found were Pharisees, interpreters of the Law and so needed wherever the Law was in application. But now, Jesus was in Jerusalem, was in the Temple, was indeed in his final week of life; and he was on the Sadducees' turf.

He wasn't making himself an easy presence. Just a few verses before these, Jesus is remembered to have “cleansed the Temple,” overturning tables, upsetting the money-lenders and sellers of animals for sacrifice, chastising that the Lord's house was to be a house of prayer but it had become a den of robbers. And just a few verses hence, Jesus will be remembered as foretelling the destruction of the Temple, now ornate and adorned, but soon to

be a pile of stones and rubble. All this would have hit the Sadducees quite literally where they lived.

A word about who they were: the Sadducees were descendants of the priest Zadok, who lived at the time when King David had the Ark of the Covenant recovered from the Philistines to be housed now in Jerusalem. In fact, Zadok was there, among the other Levite priests, carrying the Ark with his own two hands; and he was there when this priesthood established religious practices for the people now that they were in the Promised Land. Zadok was there when Solomon succeeded David on the throne, and when the Temple was built, and when the priesthood established the Temple cult. And now his descendants were among the most powerful in the social structure of Roman-occupied Judea—yes, masters of all the religious ceremonies, but also allies with the imperial power, handmaids of Rome and the local Herodians.

Now a word about what they believed or, more to the point, about what they didn't believe: the Sadducees didn't believe in the Resurrection. This might seem obvious; as Christians, we tend to assume no one believed in the Resurrection until Jesus was resurrected, and from this there sprung a radical new idea. But that isn't right. On the contrary, hope for life beyond death is something that had long been planted and growing.

In the 9th century before Christ, the prophets Elijah and Elisha performed miraculous resuscitations of individuals who had recently died. These are thought of as proto-resurrections: the people brought back to life would presumably die again. But the hope was there that wrongful or sudden death might be overturned. Yet this begs the question, how do you distinguish wrongful death from any death?

In the 6th century, the prophet Ezekiel gave voice and vision to the hope for a general resurrection of those long dead when he imagined a valley of dried bones coming back to life—bone to its bone, and then sinews and flesh filling out the skeletal promise until the once-dead now stood alive and together. These were the people Israel and Judah who'd been slaughtered during the previous century of war and exile; and now they were envisioned as restored to their life and land.

In the 4th century, the long-suffering Job, in his desperation, confessed, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see by my side, and my

eyes shall behold...!” This grafted on to the concept of resurrection the hope and need for redemption—that somehow, somehow the wasteful, gratuitous suffering of this age, as personified in Job, would be redeemed, made less wasteful, drained of its evil and filled with goodness and light.

Of course, this idea of redemption as a response to the evils of the world can be problematic. To claim that suffering and evil are redeemed comes dreadfully close to claiming these things have purpose, and to claim that evil has a purpose sounds dangerously like justifying it. “Redemptive suffering” is an idea that has undergirded such structural evils as American slavery and such secretive evils as the domestic abuse of women and children. In sum, we must be careful with the concept of redemption, that it not make us slack when we’re confronted with evil, that it not make us blasé that “everything will come out in the wash.”

This might be one reason the theological hope for redemption is one more aspect of the Christian life that has diminished in the past few decades. We feel we shouldn’t believe it, or we simply can’t believe it: redemption in the face of all we now know to be wrong in life, on a personal scale and on an historic scale: it’s just too easy to wish for and too hard to *really* believe.

Another reason might be that we simply don’t need it. Life here is, for the most part, good for us. Today’s disgusting partisan politics aside, life here in this world for us postmodern, globalized, technologized Americans is cushy—so much so that we might care little about what comes next. A realm in which justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; a realm in which the wolf shall live with the lamb, and the calf and the lion and the fatling shall live all together, and none shall hurt or destroy for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God; a realm in which death is no more, and mourning and crying and pain are no more; a realm in which the poor in spirit are blessed to see the kingdom of heaven and those who once mourned are now comforted, in which those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are fulfilled and those who make peace their chief aim now find it their home: we in the so-called 1st world have little need of such a vision because, look, I have a new pair of boots and all my favorite songs downloaded onto my iPhone.

Such was the state of the Sadducees. The likely reasons they didn’t believe in the resurrection were of religious orthodoxy and everyday pragmatism. As for the former reason,

none of the writings I cited earlier were authoritative to the Sadducees. Strict constructionists when it came to sacred scripture, they attended only to the first five books of the Bible—these books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. If it wasn't in these, then it wasn't authoritative, which means Elijah and Elisha, Ezekiel and Job were all well and good, but hardly the sort of voices you'd organize your life around, hardly the sort of visionaries in whom you'd plant your hope. *Sola Torah*, they might well have said: only Torah, only the Law.

And as for the second reason, everyday pragmatism, the Sadducees had it good in this life; they were living the high life. So why bother with some abstract notion of the "life to come," especially when perhaps the only place they had to go was down?

"Teacher," they approached Jesus. And I wonder if it's wrong of me to hear this in the voice of some student in the back row. You remember the ones from when you were a student, right? You were perhaps one when you were a student. I certainly remember them from when I was a teacher—the ones who used their smarts to undermine the whole class proceedings, those students who think feigned stupidity is clever. (They were my greatest challenge and, quite often, by greatest victory.) "Teacher, 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 bother."

Certainly the scenario these Sadducees sketched out for Jesus was cleverly stupid—for, though unlikely, I suppose it was possible. After all, it's true that the Law of Moses did instruct that a man should marry his brother's wife if it were to happen that she was left a childless widow and the brother died a childless man. If their coupling didn't produce children, then the surviving brother had an obligation to marry the left-behind widow, to produce children—children that she might be provided for in years to come, and children that the deceased brother might not have died childless and thus forgotten.

This was the way to eternal life, by the way. Children were the means of eternal life: to be remembered in this world, to live on: children were the means for real resurrection. The afterlife could only come in this world, through one's progeny. So, for the man who died and the widow he left, this barren situation was one of damnation—until the deceased man's brother arrived on the scene. Now was new hope for children to come.

But then he died—the brother, I mean.

So, the third brother came to save the day.

But then he died.

So, a fourth brother came along.

“In the ‘Resurrection,’” the Sadducees wondered, really wondered (No, really! They wanted to know!), “whose wife will she be?”

See? The Sadducees’ idea of eternal life is way more practical, way more realistic. Have kids, have eternal life; don’t have kids, sorry! Meanwhile, this supernatural, outside-time idea of resurrection introduces a world full of absurdities and red tape. I mean, really Jesus, have you thought this all through? If all these brothers are “resurrected” to some “afterlife,” who gets to take this woman to bed (—this poor, put-upon woman)? Will the brothers arm-wrestle for the privilege? Or will they throw down their harps and duke it out? Will there be some smack down on a cloud? If so, will it hurt? I mean, aren’t clouds soft?

Really, Jesus, until you can fill in all the technical details, keep your resurrection talk to yourself.

The thing is, Jesus did keep resurrection talk to himself. Whatever he might have had to say about it all (or *not* had, as the case may be), he kept it mostly to himself. Three times he’s remembered to have said that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, must be killed, and on the third day be raised. And then there’s this, Jesus saying that “...those who are considered worthy of a place...in the Resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage...” and for the reason that they cannot die anymore. And that’s it. Other than those two things, Jesus spoke not at all of resurrection.

An aside, as to what he meant by marriage being “of this age” and not of the resurrected age: marriage is an institution for this world—something that stabilizes and safeguards, something that produces children and other long-range projects, something that cultivates a long-view of life and thus can benefit a whole society.

Marriage is also an institution with one eye on death.

Consider that the traditional marital vows make prominent the reality of death (“...‘til death do us part,” each of the couple will solemnly promise). And, as an aside to this aside, I think this is one reason people want to write their own vows these days—to leave death out of the ceremony altogether. It’s just such a downer, right? I mean, we’ve gotten all dressed up, we’ve spent all this money, so why tank the party with talk of death? It’s astonishing: as a

culture, we have made quite a project of denying the reality, the inevitability, of death—and this forecloses on the possibility of regarding death's persistence as something of a blessing. To have a limited amount of time is to force prioritizing, to force a decision onto each of us as to what's important. To have a limited amount of time gives time value; it gives life shape.

This isn't to make light of our actual experience of when a loved one dies, or when we ourselves are nearing death. These are often deeply upsetting experiences. But death as a notion can be a boundary that is a blessing.

More to the point, though, as regards marriage being something that belongs in time, on this side of the boundary of death, a friend once described a situation in which a pair of newlyweds learned of a fatal diagnosis for one of them. "So sad," I said to her, thinking this was clearly the right response. "But it's what marriage is for," she said, "so you have someone to be with you when the going gets rough." I'd never thought of it in such stark terms. It struck me as true, the more so the older I get. That Jess and I are together even as time takes its toll on us: this is deeply important to me, a value that derives itself from the reality of death.

So this is why marriage has no place in the resurrected life—because there is no need for it, no need for its stabilizing and safeguarding, no need for its resilience in staring down death.

And other than this, of the resurrection, Jesus said nothing. Notice, in fact, that it was the Sadducees who brought it up. These who say there is no resurrection: they're the ones who brought it up.

Methinks they protest too much. But they go for the kidney punch in their fight against the resurrection. They pick it apart technically, using language that's legalistic and literalistic; and in a realm where mystery reigns, legalism and literalism just aren't up to the task.

This is the problem that "Paul" had in addressing the Thessalonians. The members of the congregations in Thessalonica had become altogether too certain that Christ would come again any moment now, tomorrow if not today, and they were fomenting a communal freak out. No one was paying attention to the daily tasks of living, to the mundane work of maintenance when it comes to much of life. Instead, everyone was in a nihilistic frenzy that was pretending at faithful anticipation. Why bother with tinkering with public policy when

what's about to happen — what *should* happen — is just the end of all that is in service of some clean new beginning.

This is a perennial problem, it seems. That people mistake the radical hope we're called to for reckless nihilism and gleeful destruction: this is something the modern world knows as well as the ancient one, and now this perhaps post-modern one.

Paul would have none of it — Paul, or whoever it was that actually wrote this letter. There are reasons to suspect this was written later than Paul's writings. No matter: in face of this ecstatic cynicism, our writer offered a calming reminder. "Brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you've been taught; and may our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father, who loves us and through grace gives us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort our hearts and strengthen them for every good work in this world."

This is the trick set before us. This we remember as true every three years when we hear this text, which always comes as we close in on the end of the church year and so as talk of the end of time becomes commonplace on Sunday morning. This is the trick set before us on this 3rd to last Sunday before the end — the trick of living in hope for the glorious aim that is promised us. To redeem the time, to fulfill history's purpose, all the while living joyful and resilient, through the days that are set before us: this is our task.

This year this familiar message is perhaps even more pressing. On Tuesday, we will all together decide upon the leadership of our country and society moving forward. Someone will win, and someone else will lose. People who've supported the winning candidate could well feel victorious, vindicated; people who've backed the losing candidate could well feel unnerved, aggrieved. What we do as a society following all that is something on which I can barely speculate. The stakes at play in this election seem wildly unmoored from those of elections past, the whole electorate having been fomented into a state of near hysteria.

As for me, I hope to find hope in the calming words: "Stand firm; hold fast." And I pray to keep faith with the unflappable Christ, someone with whom you can pick a fight and come out a winner along with everyone else. That's my aim — and because I think it's God's aim as well.

Thanks be to God.