

It is a good time of year to think about endings and what might lie beyond them. Both the liturgical year of the Church and the calendar year are drawing to a close, the liturgical year ending first with November 25th as the last Sunday of the year. We're passing through a series of special days on both calendars which are geared towards remembering those who've gone before us. Today, November 11, used to be known as Armistice Day, then as Veterans' Day before nearly all Federal holidays were moved to Mondays. Our more liturgical sisters and brothers in various traditions have recently celebrated the Feast of All Souls and All Saints Day or *Dia de los Muertos*. The secularized counterpart, Hallowe'en, is of course a prime time to think about what lies beyond the veil, although in a rather different way. Outside, we see the signs of natural decay, as leaves fall from trees and perennial plants go dormant. Here at Good Shepherd, we've just had a seminar on end of life legal issues and my own reading in recent days has included Dying Well by Ira Byock and Dead is a Four-Letter Word by Lynn Melby.

So when I saw a whole heap of passages about death, resurrection and the end of things piled up in today's various lectionaries, I decided I really couldn't ignore the subject. To be honest with you, I thought of bypassing these verses when I first read them. I am far more interested in grappling with how the Bible teaches us to live in this world than I am in indulging in speculation about what the next world is going to be like. But the fact of the matter is that belief in resurrection and in everlasting life is key not only to my own personal theology, not only to the great tradition of the Baptist movement, but also to the history of the Christian faith and to post-exilic Judaism. So, I thought it would be well worthwhile to spend some time this morning with this odd little story that is repeated in all three synoptic gospels and perhaps we'll find something at the end that relates to our mortal lives on Earth as well.

As Luke tells it, Jesus is in Jerusalem, nearing his own death, when he is confronted by a group of Sadducees in the Temple. We don't know a great deal for sure about the Sadducees, although many scholars believe that they were an elitist group, certainly in support of the high priestly families and perhaps all related to them. They are likely to have been in favor of peaceful coexistence with the Romans, perhaps because they were amongst the established wealthy class and had the most to lose from revolt. They were "strict constructionists" when it came to the Law of Israel, accepting the authority only of the Five Books of Moses and rejecting the Oral Law of the Pharisees. As part of this fundamentalist outlook, they denied the possibility of bodily resurrection, as it was not attested to in Torah. Brian McGowan, an Anglican priest in Australia, tells the story of trying to explain to a class of 9 year-olds that the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection. Said one young wit, "Fr. Brian, that's why they were Sadd-u-cee."

Their question for Jesus, odd though it may seem to us, is right out of their steadfast belief in Torah. It concerns a practice later called Levirate marriage. Deuteronomy 25:5-6 says, "When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband's brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel." This law can be seen in action in the fourth chapter of Ruth and perhaps also in a rather disturbing story in Genesis 38. But the underlying concept is actually closely tied to the Sadducees probable understanding of what constituted life after death, which makes their question to Jesus seem far less ridiculous. It is likely that the Sadducees held to an earlier

Hebrew understanding of life, that the only kind of immortality available to persons was in their offspring. Only a person's name and memory survived death and that only if the family line was continued. Remember God's great promise to Jacob in Genesis 28: "your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring." It is very similar to God's earlier promises to Abraham. With this view, the most important thing is the continuation of the family, the clan. That is how God's Chosen People of Israel will continue. If you believe that you will only continue to exist in your children, then you will have lots of them, because the priority is the continuance of the group. And, it's important to keep the inheritance, the land, within the same clan, lest it slowly devolve to outsiders, the *goyim*. That's why a man must have an heir, even if the heir came posthumously.

On the positive side, as commentator William Long points out, we fiercely individualistic moderns could learn something about communal values and loyalty from this point of view. And levirate marriage served as a safety net for young widows, making sure that they would continue to be included in the family structure. On the other hand, this all points to the extreme vulnerability of women and the utilitarian approach to relationship in that society. Marriage was for procreation and the transmission of property; relationship, love and nurture were secondary at best. Women lived by the will of the men in their lives: their fathers, who married them off; their husbands, whom they served; their brothers-in-law, who might take them in if they were of a mind to do so. A childless widow who was past childbearing had only the kindness of family or strangers to rely upon. All of this is tied to the concept that persons continue to exist after death only through their offspring.

At some point in the history of Israel, though, a new idea crept in, probably around the time of the Exile. God had promised greatness for God's people but they were suffering the most dreadful fate – war, starvation, exile. Yes, the nation had fallen short of God's measure, turned away from the will of God and transgressed, but surely there were righteous people who had suffered as well? How could they enjoy the fulfillment of God's promises after death? We begin to see the hope of something after death in passages like this morning's reading from Job or Psalm 16: "For you do not give me up to Sheol (that is, the grave), or let your faithful one see the Pit." Isaiah, whom Jesus often quoted, said, "Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead." The Book of Daniel also predicts resurrection: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." By the time of the Maccabee revolt against the Greeks in 164 BC, which brought the last independence for the Jewish state until 1948, the concept of the resurrection of the dead was well-entrenched. Today's Old Testament reading in the Catholic lectionary is from the book of Second Maccabees and relates the story of seven brothers and their mother who were captured in the rebellion. I won't read the whole text but as the Jewish martyrs are tortured to death, several of them express their confidence in their ultimate reward by God. The second of the brothers says to the king, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws."

It's important for us to remember that this Jewish belief over which the Sadducees and the Pharisees wrangled was resurrection of the body. In the Hebraic understanding, the body is the person. For a person to survive death, the body must be raised and restored. The Greeks, on the other hand, believed in a duality of body and soul. The soul is immortal and inhabits the body, which dies. As Church detached from synagogue in the development of Christianity, both of these concepts began to be incorporated. In both the gospels and in the letters of Paul, we find references to the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body. And although popular study and imagination deals more today with the continuation of the disembodied soul, one of the Church's earliest statements of belief, the Apostles' Creed, developed sometime in the first or second century, includes an affirmation of "the resurrection of the body."

But now I've gotten ahead of myself. Let's get back to the Sadducees and Jesus. Now that we understand better the Sadducees' question, what of Jesus' response? Jesus says, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage." One ancient manuscript of Luke says that "those who belong to this age are begotten and begat." Commentator E.E. Ellis suggests, "the sons of this age find the ground and continuity of their existence in procreation," which certainly fits the worldview of the Sadducees and the pre-modern attitude towards marriage being primarily for the production of children. But Jesus dismisses both this understanding of life and of marriage. Since, in the new age, "they cannot die anymore," as Jesus says, there is no need for perpetuation of the human race through childbirth. In particular, a woman's identity no longer depends on marriage or on bearing children. To the Sadducees, the woman in their story was property. In his response, Jesus upholds the value and dignity of the woman and of all persons. One of my former pastors, Paul Duke, had this to say in a sermon on this passage: "Jesus tells them what he tells other circles of men making analytical use of a woman to justify themselves: "Leave her alone" (Mark 14:6; John 12:7). Like so many theological and political speeches that muse about "the poor" or "the children," the Sadducees are making ideological use of someone with whom they wouldn't deign to be in actual relationship. Jesus puts a quick end to this, He sends their hypothetical woman, along with all of her actual sisters, away from the men's calculating gaze."

In the new age, all humankind are simply God's children. No human being is subservient or secondary to or dependent upon another. As Paul later said, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Again, from my friend, Paul Duke: "In this age of death, the focus is on having children. But for "those who are considered worthy of a place in that age," the focus is on being children, "children of God . . . children of the resurrection." In that age where all are children of God, there is no need for having children or having a partner. The having of people, one by the other, will be finished. All relationships will be equalized, all relationships transfigured."

From his authoritative rebuttal of the Sadducees worldview, Jesus turns to beating them at their own game through exegesis of the Torah. "The fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." Indeed, although my own slender knowledge of Hebrew means I must rely on others for this, all the commentators I read are adamant that Yahweh's words to Moses

are “I am the God of Abraham,” not “I was the God of Abraham.” Jesus teaches that there is a “now” component to the next life, an immortality of the soul, perhaps, in that all are alive to God. Immortality is not confined to human memory of a name. Remember the importance of a name in ancient thought, that the name of a person or thing held the essence of being. If persons are remembered by God, the Ground of Being, then the essence of a person continues to exist, for, as Paul said to the Athenians, “in God we live, and move, and have our being.” The relationship of God to God’s children does not end with physical death. We are alive to God for eternity. “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Despite these assurances from Jesus and from Paul, there still exists a great deal of uncertainty, fear and outright disbelief regarding the fate of humans after physical death. The confusion is scarcely surprising considering the language proposing both “now” and “future” resolutions of the human future. Some passages seem to indicate an immortality of the soul and some the resurrection of the body. The handful of passages on this topic are hardly detailed, scientific analysis, either. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul said “someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” He then went on to give an explanation which is beautiful but scarcely helpful: “So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body... Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”” It is indeed a mystery! Little wonder that we are still trying to make sense of it. But as the writer of Second Thessalonians says in today’s epistle passage in the lectionary, “As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed...” The love of God, from which we cannot be separated, is our assurance that all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. We are called to share the faith of Job, who said, “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 on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” We can’t know, can’t begin to understand what awaits us in the age to come. One last quote from Paul Duke: “This, after all, is Jesus’ point: whatever the resurrection is, it is utterly other than what we have known, and its center will be the One we have always known, however dimly. All that is contingent, cultural, political and religious will fall away in the great discontinuity of resurrection. But what is Real, what is Love, will be lifted into light, all relationships and all faces transfigured for the children of the One whom Jesus called “God not of the dead, but of the living.” In that transfiguration, we will at last become the living.”

But if our ultimate destiny lies in that new age, if we are, in fact, as one of my favorite old folk hymns puts it, pilgrims and strangers, “traveling through this wearisome land,” with our true home lying “in that yonder city,” then what does that mean for life here and now? Are we then

at liberty to ignore the injustice and lack of peace that is so pervasive in this age? Are we to treat our earth as a resource to be used at our pleasure and discarded? I suspect you all know me well enough to know how I would answer those questions. Of course not! Instead, I would point to the example of the family in Second Maccabees whose story I mentioned earlier. Knowing as we do that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even death, we should be bold to stand up for what we can perceive of God's will. We are saved to eternal life by grace through faith, a wonderful gift of God, regardless of what we are able to accomplish on this plane. Nevertheless, we will all stand, as Jesus taught, before the judgment seat of God, where we will be judged on what we have done and what we have left undone. My fervent hope, for myself and for all of us, is that we will all hear those amazing words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

And so, my sisters and my brothers, since indeed we know that our Redeemer liveth and on the earth again shall stand, let us prepare to use our lives in Christ's service and in the service of all those who are weak, or in need, or crushed by the blind cruelty of this world. Let us resolve never to cheat the poor, who long for bread, with empty words, saying "go in peace; be warm and filled," but let us stand ready to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to comfort those who mourn. Hear these words from this morning's epistle, II Thessalonians 2:13-17: "Always give thanks to God, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose God called you through the proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word." Amen.