



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

God of the Living

Luke 20:27-40

Fr. William Klock

August 23, 2015 – Trinity 12

I began last Sunday by saying that context is everything and now I find myself needing to start with those same words today: context is everything. This morning we'll be looking at Luke 20:27-40. It's a difficult passage and it's made all the more difficult—in fact, I think it's safe to say, it's made *impossible*—if we read it out of context. Even otherwise decent commentaries are all over the place on this passage, either because they've failed to look at the immediate context of the passage within Luke's gospel or because they fail to recognise or to account for the historical and cultural setting—or both. So let's begin with the text itself. Again, Luke 20, beginning at verse 27:

There came to him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife." (Luke 20:27-33)

The first thing to notice is that this isn't an off-the-wall theological question that Jesus was asked. Again: context. The immediate setting is Jesus' teaching in the temple. Remember that the first thing Jesus did after arriving in Jerusalem and being hailed as King by the crowds was to go to the temple and upset everything. He upset the market and the bankers and he upset the people and the priests who were there to offer

sacrifices. The scribes and the elders and the chief priests were furious. And yet Jesus didn't upset everyone and put a temporary halt to the sacrifices and then run away to hide. No. Luke tells us that he stayed in the temple—in fact, that Jesus was teaching there daily. He acted out the coming judgement and then he stayed around to explain it to the people: to warn them and to call them to repentance. In doing that Jesus gave the religious leaders plenty of opportunity to confront him and that's just what they did, first asking him by what authority he had invaded and upset the temple. He responded by appealing to John, asking them if John was a true prophet or not. If John was a true prophet, then Jesus was the Messiah whom John preached would come to usher in the kingdom. If John was a true prophet, then Jesus was the Son of David people proclaimed him to be and just as David's son, Solomon, had built the temple, as David's Son, Jesus had every right to upset the temple and rebuke those who had corrupted it.

But the religious leaders don't give up. They keep trying to get Jesus into trouble. They keep coming and asking him questions. They try to expose him as a revolutionary, at which point they can hand him over to the Romans for execution, or failing that, they hope they can make him look like a charlatan or a fool in front of his admiring crowds. But in the process Jesus uses all of this to tell his own story. They ask him by what authority he acts and he reminds them of John and asserts his authority as the Messiah. He tells them a parable about a vineyard, stolen by wicked tenants who beat the owner's messenger and finally kill the owner's son when he tried to claim what was his. Jesus warns them: the wicked tenants won't get away with their rebellion forever; the owner *will* take the vineyard away and give it to others. They ask him a trick question about paying tribute to Caesar, but Jesus turns their question into an opportunity to declare a new kind of kingdom that will come not through compromise with the Romans or through violent revolt, but will come as God's people worship him by allowing themselves to be handed over to Caesar and killed. In fact, Jesus will lead the way in ushering in that upside-down

kingdom with his own death. And now they come to him with a question about resurrection and, getting a bit ahead of ourselves, after that a question about how David's son can also be David's Lord. And so Luke—and Mark and Matthew too—all give us this sequence of questions and answers in which we see Jesus' ministry: the Messiah who warns the people and their leaders, who is handed over to the Romans for suffering and death, who is resurrected, and who through this counter-intuitive act of humble sacrifice, defeats his enemies and is declared Lord.

But what about the Sadducees? Why would they ask him this specific question about marriage and remarriage and resurrection? Here's where we need some historical background—to know a bit about the Sadducees and their dispute with the Pharisees. The Sadducees and the Pharisees were Jewish religious parties. They weren't the only ones, but they were the two most prominent in Jesus' day. We've talked about the Pharisees before. They weren't the party in power, but they were respected by many people. The Pharisees were all about keeping the *tora*—the law. They read Israel's history and they believed that God had abandoned them to exile in their own land because of their failure to live up to their end of God's covenant. Israel had compromised too much and too long and God had had enough. But, they believed, if Israel would only repent and be faithful in keeping the law, the Lord would return to deliver and to live once again in the midst of his people. They looked forward to the day when what they called the "present age" would end with the coming of the Messiah, who would defeat Israel's enemies and then resurrect the faithful dead of Israel to life to live with them in the glorious "age to come".

The Sadducees, on the other hand, were the party in power. They controlled the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews. They controlled the temple and the chief priests. They were rich and powerful and they were in that position because they had compromised with the Romans. All of the resurrection talk of the Pharisees was revolutionary. If this were happening today, we might see

some similarity between the Pharisees' talk of resurrection and the promise of paradise that inspires suicide bombers. You couldn't talk about resurrection without also talking about the end of the age and to talk about the end of the age meant overthrowing the current order of things. And people like the Sadducees, who are rich and powerful and invested in the current order are upset by that kind of talk. As a result, the Sadducees took a much more conservative view of things. The Pharisees might look to some of the newer books of the Bible, like Daniel, and find talk of resurrection at the end of the age, but the Sadducees appealed to the older—and probably in their minds, more reliable—parts of the Bible, especially to the five books of Moses. They found no hint there of this new-fangled idea of resurrection. In the older parts of the Bible death is death; everyone dies and is consumed by *sheol*, by the “grave”. And to be fair, the Old Testament is pretty ambiguous about death. The idea of resurrection—of new life after death—came along pretty late in the Old Testament and in Jewish thinking. And so the Sadducees rejected this talk of resurrection and judging from the writings we have from that time, one of their favourite tactics for refuting the idea was to raise these absurd scenarios: Okay, if you believe we'll all be resurrected some day, tell me what happens to the woman who has been married seven times!

Again, we need some more context. What are they referring to when they talk about this woman who has been married to seven different brothers? They're referring to something called the law of levirate marriage that was given in Deuteronomy 25. “Levir” is the Latin word for “husband's brother”. Here's what the law said:

If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not

be blotted out of Israel. And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.' Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, 'I do not wish to take her,' then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, 'So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' (Deuteronomy 25:5-9)

This is how a woman might end up married to seven different brothers. Remember that the Sadducees aren't really asking Jesus a theological question. Again, this was the sort of absurd situation they thought undermined the Pharisees' doctrine of resurrection. Imagine this woman and her seven husbands being resurrected and the dilemma they'd find themselves in. Maybe Jesus will just back down and not answer the question lest he look silly, but if he does answer and in some way argues in favour of a future resurrection of the dead he'll just be doubling-down on his revolutionary talk. It'll be more they can use against him when they hand him over to the Romans.

But Jesus does it again. He turns their question against them and instead uses the situation to set them straight on the kingdom. Look at his response:

And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. (Luke 20:34-36)

Jesus backs up the Pharisees on this one, at least to a point. The Sadducees

believed that “this age” is all there is. After “this age” there was only *sheol*—the grave. But the Pharisees rightly believed that there is an “age to come”. In the present age, men and women marry and are given in marriage. They procreate to replenish the human race. In the present age we have laws for things like levirate marriage. In the present age, people die and laws like the one noted here were put in place to preserve a man's name and his family line in the face of death. This doesn't mean that love and companionship and family will have no place in the age to come. That's not what the Sadducees' question is aimed at. They're focused on the legal issue, but it's a legal issue that's irrelevant for people who are no longer subject to death. People who have been resurrected to life no longer need to have children to preserve the human race and they certainly don't need to worry about practises like levirate marriage to preserve a dead man's name and family. Those are things that matter to people who die, not have been resurrected. Jesus puts it this way: those who have been resurrected to live in the age to come are “equal to” or “like” angels.

Now, let me be clear, Jesus does *not* say that those who are resurrected in the age to come *are* angels. The Church has *never* taught that human beings become angels at death or in the resurrection. Never. The Bible teaches no such doctrine. But that hasn't stopped the idea from becoming common in folk theology and it hasn't stopped people and even some Christians from appealing to this verse to support the idea. Again, *human beings do not become angels*. Jesus says that those who participate in the resurrection become *equal to* or *like* angels, and the thing that makes them like angels is the fact that they can no longer die. That's all Jesus is saying. Birds fly in the sky and airplanes are like birds in that they fly in the sky too, but airplanes are *not* birds. So resurrected humans are like angels in the sense that they no longer die, but that doesn't make them angels.

Mark and Matthew both add “like the angels *in heaven*”. Luke leaves that out,

but I think it's worth addressing because many people will often refer to this passage to support another common error: the idea that "resurrection" means going to heaven. It does *not*. When he says that the resurrected become like the angels in heaven it's like me telling my daughter that she's like her grandmother in Vancouver. My point in saying that isn't that my daughter is in Vancouver, where her grandmother is, but that she shares something in common in her personality or her looks or her mannerisms with her grandmother, who happens to live in Vancouver. Like the angels in heaven, resurrected men and women are not subject to death. That's Jesus' point. Again, if we remembered the context, we wouldn't make this mistake. Back in the Middle Ages we Christians in the West made a mess of our theology. We confused "resurrection" with the idea of "heaven" and ended up short-changing ourselves and our message of good news and we've never quite recovered.

Understand that in biblical theology, "heaven" is simply the realm of God. It isn't literally "up there". It's not "the afterlife". Heaven and earth are separate, but overlapping realms. In Eden the two met and human beings lived in the presence of God, but sin sundered that geography. For the Jews the temple became the place where, once again, human beings could enter the presence of God—the place where earth and heaven overlapped. And what we see in the New Testament is God working to restore heaven and earth through Jesus. The image at the end of the book of Revelation is one of the New Jerusalem, of heaven, of the realm of God, being *rejoined* to earth so that human beings, restored and made right in Jesus, can live in the presence of God in a creation finally restored and set to rights. That's what resurrection is about and has *always* been about: about the dead being raised to life—not some disembodied spiritual existence playing harps on clouds—but raised to real, bodily, physical eternal life, *just as Jesus was*. Raised so that we can partake of life in the presence of God in his restored creation. That was, more or less, the expectation of the Pharisees.

The part they got wrong was that they never foresaw Jesus, the Messiah, leading the way. They expected *everyone* to be resurrected all at once at the end of the age by the Messiah. They never expected Jesus to be resurrected first, leading the way where the rest of his people will eventually follow. (Incidentally, this is one of the great proofs of Jesus' resurrection. The disciples didn't see it coming either. Like everyone else, they expected one mass resurrection at the end of the age. The idea that Jesus and Jesus alone might be resurrected first would never have occurred to them—they wouldn't have made it up and when it first happened it left them utterly confused.)

At this point, however, Jesus is just concerned with defending the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. In case they missed his point, Jesus states it another way when he says that those worthy to participate in the age to come are "sons of God". God is not subject to death and neither are his children. Jesus goes on in verses 37 and 38:

But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him."

Jesus takes the Sadducees straight to the books they accepted unquestioningly. He takes them back to Exodus 3 and to Moses' encounter with the Lord at the burning bush and he tells them that the Lord would not have referred to himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob if Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob weren't still in some way alive. Yes, they are in the grave, but that isn't the end as the Sadducees taught. They're dead, but they still have hope because God is the God of the living, not the dead. What does that mean? Jesus is using a form of rabbinical argumentation. It works like this. The Pharisees made two points: first that the faithful dead exist in some kind of intermediate state and, second, that someday they will be resurrected to life. Jesus cites Exodus 3:6 to prove the first point and the second point then

necessarily follows. Does that make sense? If God is the God of the living and *also* calls himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then even though dead, they must still exist in some sort of intermediate state or holding pattern. And if that's the case, then their resurrection and the resurrection of all faithful Israel has to be a sure thing. Q. E. D.

If Jesus is right, this was a terrifying thing for the Sadducees. He's already turned the temple upside-down and told them, through his parable about the stone rejected by the builders, that a new temple is coming to replace it. He's asserted his authority over them and their temple as the Son of David. And now he sides with the Pharisees on the resurrection—this revolutionary doctrine that scares the pants off the Sadducees. If it was true, it meant that they were doomed: doomed to lose their position of wealth and privilege and, worse, doomed to fall under the Lord's judgement because of their compromises. Jesus is essentially pointing back at them and telling them: "You're going down!"

And his reference to Moses and to the Exodus only makes his point stronger. When God met Moses in the burning bush and spoke to him, it was to tell him that he heard the cry of his people in their bondage to the Egyptians; it was to tell Moses that he had come to deliver his people; it was to tell Moses that he was going to lead his people into a "new age", so to speak. The burning bush was an announcement of hope for God's people, but it was also an announcement of Pharaoh's doom. That story was the national narrative of the Jewish people. They told it over and over and year after year at Passover, not only to recall what the Lord had done for them in Egypt, but to inspire hope that he would come and do it again. And now here's Jesus citing that same story at the Sadducees. Mark, Matthew, and Luke all tell us about this series of confrontations with the Sadducees in a way that points to Jesus as the Messiah—a new Moses—coming to rebuke and to warn Pharaoh one last time. Jesus has come to lead the people in a new Exodus and he puts

the scribes, the elders, and the chief priests in the place of Pharaoh. They're going down as Jesus delivers his people from their bondage. And so there's no reason to wonder at their response. Luke writes:

Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." For they no longer dared to ask him any question. (Luke 20:39-40)

If I were them I wouldn't ask anything more either. Like an atheist who finally realises that he's been living his life on the wrong assumptions, these scribes are coming to the frightening reality that they've invested in the wrong narrative, the wrong priorities, and have made themselves enemies of the Lord they thought they served. Jesus' point is that if God was faithful in Moses' day, he will be faithful in his own day and that puts the Sadducees in a very scary position. If Jesus is right, if there is going to be a resurrection of the dead, that means the world is about to be overturned and them with it. This was good news to the poor and to everyone else who had been excluded from the kingdom when they should have been welcomed, but it was terrible news for the false and corrupt shepherds of Israel.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus points to his own death and resurrection here. For the people in the temple that day these things were hard to understand, but for us those events are history and we can find hope in them just as St. Paul did. In Romans he writes about Jesus Christ our Lord, who "was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness *by his resurrection from the dead*. In the resurrection Jesus overturned the corrupt shepherds of Israel. In the resurrection Jesus overturned the false lordship of Caesar. In the resurrection of Jesus, God became King and has subjected all things, including the Sadducees and the Romans to himself. Jesus' resurrection gave Paul hope. He knew that if Jesus had risen from the dead it was inevitable that faithful Israel—that the saints of the old covenant and of the new—will one day follow him. He exhorted the Christians in Corinth, writing to them:

In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (1 Corinthians 15:20-26)

This is the new exodus. It has already begun. In our baptism Jesus has led us through our own Red Sea and rescued us from our bondage to sin. He's washed us clean and given us a foretaste of the life that is to come. A land full of giants and walled cities lies before us as it did for the Israelites, but we can charge into that battle and into the darkness with the light because we know that where Jesus has gone, we will follow. Jesus has begun the conquest of sin and death and he will reign until both are vanquished forever. This was St. Paul's hope. This was the hope of men like Polycarp, whom I mentioned last week. Tied to the stake with a fire ready to kindled at his feet, the Romans demanded he renounce Jesus and declare Caesar to be lord. He refused as have so many saints down through the centuries. Through their witness the world has been changed. Through their witness the lordship of Jesus has been made known. Through their witness the good news has gone out to the ends of the earth. And their witness was sure because it was founded on the knowledge that Jesus has overturned the old order of things, that with his death and resurrection this present age is passing away, and that just as he has been raised from death to life, so shall all of us who, in faith, find ourselves in him.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, in the death and resurrection of Jesus you have conquered sin and death for us. In his resurrection you have made Jesus the

firstfruits of all your sons and daughters and have given us hope for our own future resurrection. As we think on these things, remind us that in Jesus you are King. Remind us that the rulers and systems of this sinful age are being overturned, and keep before us the kingdom of your Son that we might rightly invest in the things of his kingdom and in the things of the age to come. And, Father, as we recall your mighty saving deeds and as we live in hope of all things being made new, make us bold to proclaim this good news in the world without fear and without compromise. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.