

First Sunday of Advent
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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I can't tell you how many times I've gotten the question of what happens when we die. I've had it asked while at the bedside of dying patients during chaplaincy. I've had theological debates about it with my roommates in seminary. Even scarier...I've had it asked during a children's sermon. We can't help but be curious about it; we can't help but wonder when our loved one is slipping away what will happen to them. And though it's a question that provides comfort for many, it is a question that is, at the same time, terrifying. I say that because I like questions that are easy to answer and that I can collect evidence for. And this...we won't be able to know if we are right or wrong until the age to come. And that is hard.

Now the answers that I can provide are based on my understanding of Scripture, baptism, and the creeds. I know that I believe in the resurrection of the dead. I know that I believe that God has the last word and, because of that, death has lost its sting. I know that in Christ there is a new creation and that I am part of that new creation through my baptism. I know that the broken systems of this world will no longer have control in the next...But, this is about all I can give to you.

But, this is similar to what Jesus offers here. So the sadducees come up to Jesus asking about the resurrection. This is really a teasing and not an authentic question because, as it says, the sadducees don't believe in the resurrection. They are trying to prove how ridiculous the idea of resurrection is in light of what Torah teaches.

Now it's important to take a second to further understand who these resurrection deniers...the Sadducees really are. First and most important is that they only read Torah - what is often referred to as the Pentateuch as it is the first five books of the Hebrew Scripture. Other Jewish folks, like the well known Pharisees, also read the Psalms and the Prophets. It is from these sources...the testimony of the prophets... that the Pharisees gained trust in the resurrection. In part because they could not believe that there could be a God that would have this - this mess of life - to be the end. They understood that God would keep the promises God made to God's people and enact justice in the world. They too, would not be able to describe the resurrection, but they do know that whatever it is, God's justice will reign. The systems in this world that oppressed would be destroyed.

And this is why this question is rather ridiculous for Jesus. "Whose wife will she be, since all seven married her." Let's think about this woman for a second. This woman married her first husband. This marriage was probably arranged by her father. At the very best, there was love between them. At the worst, her marriage was a form of slavery. Regardless, she was, in that patriarchal society, considered property of men. Property of her father and then property of her first husband...then of the second and the third and the fourth and so on. In her life she was more or less owned by eight men. She had no say in the matter.

Friends, I would say this is an unjust system. A system where women have no autonomy over their bodies. A system in which a woman's worth is based solely upon her ability to procreate. A system in which she was continually sexually assaulted. And, even worse, it was a system upheld and endorsed by religious and political institutions of the time.

And so Jesus responds to the question of whom this woman would belong to by destroying the whole system. And then turns Torah back onto the sadducees to prove that this eternal life that upended unjust systems, is one that they unintentionally professed.

They tell Jesus that it is Moses wrote this law about marriage and so Jesus uses their own tool against them by bringing up the account of Moses and the burning bush. God says, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Do y'all hear how that in and of itself is admitting to life after this? It took me a while but God says..."I AM the God of Abraham..." not I WAS ...I AM. Present tense. To say this presently means that they are not dead to God. So, indeed, "God is God of the dead but of the living because to God, they...Abraham, Isaac, Jacob...are all alive."

And so from this text we have two insights into the afterlife. First, there is one because all are alive in Christ (we talked about this last week when celebrating All Saints). And, second, resurrected life is much different than this. It is where people are free.

But again, are these questions about what the resurrection is and what it'll look like even important?

It is important insofar as what our vision of resurrected life says about what we want and wish life to be in the present. So the question for us becomes, "Since you believe in the resurrection, how might you live differently now?"

In this season, where we can see death around us through the fallen leaves, this season where nights become longer and easily fear surrounds us, it can be so easy to have

difficulty trusting in God's promise of resurrection. To feel hopeless. And yet today we enter into this season of Advent. A season of hopeful anticipation.

The color for the season of Advent is blue. One of the reasons for this color is that it is the color of dawn. You see, Advent is this liminal space between night and day - where the fears from the night are still present but the sun begins to illumine all of creation. It is in this liminal space that we can see and bear witness to the in-breaking of God's kingdom. We have been named children of God, children of the resurrection, children that have the opportunity to bring hope to the hopeless. Hope to the living.

Because if our God is God of the living, should we not, as children of the resurrection, be people for the sake of the living? Commentator Cameron Howard said, "God is a God of the living, and the living are hungry. Thirsty. Exploited. Homeless. Abused. Overworked. Out of work. Lonely. Despairing. Addicted."

The living in this world deal with systems of oppression. They face the realities of this broken world. They are, like the wife of today's story, passed around like property. As children of God, children of the resurrection, we are invited to work towards that resurrection vision...a resurrection in which all are free, all are fed, all are sheltered, and all are treated with dignity.

This season of Advent may we bear witness - in word and in deed - to the hope we know is coming after dawn on that new day, when all will be gathered together in God's loving embrace, in which we cannot die but have life eternal. May it be so. Amen.