

November 11, 2007

Stewardship Commitment Sunday

Dedication of Pledges

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

Luke 20:27-40

“The God of the Living”

When a child has a beloved pet that passes away, you are very likely to get a question in the days that follow like this: “Mommy, do dogs go to heaven?” It’s a good question, and it often causes some good conversations with children. Just what do we think about life after death, and what is heaven really like? Is heaven just for people, and if so, what kind of people are in heaven? Do they have wings? Do they fly? Are they like the people in those commercials on TV that show people dressed in white, wearing little wired halos and feathery wings, floating on clouds and eating cream cheese?

What do people in heaven do? A popular writer in the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, wrote a best selling book in 1868 titled The Gates Ajar. She describes heaven as filled with everything that is good or pleasing in this life, such as human relationships, pretty scenery, even pianos, but not work. It sounds a bit like a Florida retirement community without the illnesses, increasing medicines, and mortality.

What does happen after death? For a long time, people who believed in a bodily resurrection thought that cremation was a horrible burial practice, as there would not be much left of a person to resurrect. But that creates even more questions. What about someone who is eaten by a crocodile? What about people born with deformities or severe illnesses? Just what kind of bodies will we have in heaven, anyway? Will we recognize each other? Will we be resurrected right away, or do we go into a type of holding pattern until Jesus comes again with shouts and great tumult and raises us in one great dramatic mass resurrection?

So many, many questions about death and heaven and resurrection! These questions may seem trivial and speculative to some of us, but to someone struggling with grief or their own impending death, these are very important questions. Will I be alive after I die? What will it be like? Young European men, many of them teenagers, fighting in the Crusades in the land of Palestine thought about these things a lot. When archaeologists today uncover the graves of those Crusader soldiers who had fallen in this foreign land, they find that their heads are propped up and turned to face Jerusalem, so that the first thing they would see in the afterlife would be Jesus returning to the Earth in victory. The thought was that Jesus, the Messiah, would come in glory to the Earth by appearing first on the Mount of Olives, just across the valley from Jerusalem.

It is this belief that still motivates many ultra-conservative Jews to seek burial on the Mount of Olives today. If you travel to Jerusalem, and look East out of the Old City walls to the Mount of Olives, you will see thousands and thousands of graves and tombstones. Since there is a tradition among some groups of modern Jews that the Messiah will appear on the Mount of Olives and resurrect the dead at that time, many of

them want to be as close as possible to the actual event. Some fear that literally tunneling their way underground to the Mount of Olives from a European grave will be too perilous, and they go to great lengths to be buried outside of Jerusalem. A few years ago, a gravesite in the cemeteries of the Mount of Olives would sell for as much as 50,000 American dollars!

Definitely some people still put much thought and concern into the questions about life after death. What does the Bible say about all of this? What kind of answers does it give to these many and complicated questions? Quite honestly, it doesn't say a lot. We don't get a lot of descriptions about heaven, or about how best to be buried. Jesus was dead, buried, and then resurrected, but he didn't tell everybody what it was like "on the other side." He had more important things to discuss.

So when a group of Sadducees approach Jesus with a question about marriage in the resurrection, Jesus doesn't give them the type of answer that they seek. Of course, it's clear that they really don't want a serious answer anyway. You see, Sadducees were a party or denomination of Judaism living in the days of Jesus that was somewhat conservative theologically. They thought the whole idea of resurrection was outlandish. They thought their Pharisee neighbors, who did believe in resurrection, were way off the deep end. So when these Sadducees bring this question to Jesus, they are hoping to trip him up, make a mockery of the whole resurrection business, and undercut the credibility of Jesus. This is the third round of questions that Jesus is given as he teaches in the temple on this particular day. Chief priests, elders, scribes, Herodians, Pharisees, all these have brought their trickiest questions to Jesus.

Now it is the turn of the Sadducees. They want to find a way to embarrass Jesus. They concoct this scenario for Jesus that draws on the idea of what was called levirate marriage. Levirate marriage was created as a way for a male to have descendants and his name preserved, and it said that if a man died before he and his wife had children, then his brother needed to marry the widow and have children for the deceased brother. It seems very weird to our modern minds, but that was the thought behind this question. However, the question is perfectly absurd. One could almost expect Jesus to respond to these snickering Sadducees by saying, "That's the dumbest question I've ever heard!" or "I'm not even going to dignify that with a response," or "My goodness, seven dead brothers? This woman sounds like a dangerous person to marry!"

But Jesus doesn't respond that way. He knows very well that Sadducees don't care about such things. They are not really looking for an answer. Even so, he uses this overture as an opportunity to teach, and to refute his opponents. What he says is essentially "God's future for you cannot be understood as an extension of your present existence." In other words, it is not the case that we can take what we like out of our current life, raise it to the nth power, and call it heaven. That's not what resurrection means. And resurrection is not just bodily resuscitation. Resurrection is transformation.

The questioning Sadducees are so preoccupied with details of levirate marriage, and they are so caught up with trying to trap Jesus, that they can't quite grasp something

radically new that is unfolding before them. Jesus points to the Scriptures that they draw their beliefs from, and says, “God is not the God of the dead. God is the God of the living!”

You see, way back when God created the world and everything in and around it, God called it “good.” But human beings seem to continually find ways to mar that goodness. The testimony of the Scriptures shows us how human beings, even those that should know God best, continue to twist the original goodness of the Creation. Yet those same Scriptures show us how God relentlessly redeems and renews and restores.

So when these Sadducees ask Jesus about marriage in the resurrection, Jesus essentially says, “In this world people get married. And they put a lot of effort into marriage. They yearn to find the right person for a spouse. They put all kinds of energy into that search, sometimes over a lifetime! Then they have the biggest celebration of their lives, with lots of expense, and families look to new chapters in their family history. Then they work hard to preserve that marriage, and to make it thrive. Marriage is a major preoccupation here on earth.

“But it isn’t a big deal in the world to come. You won’t be concerned about marriage or death in the resurrection. You will have better things to think about, believe it or not. In the resurrection, you will be with God, the God that has loved every second of your life on earth. You will be with the God of life. And to God, everybody is alive, just like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and then Moses.”

Do you know this is just about all Jesus has to say about what life is like after death? You would think that he would tell parables, or give descriptions, maybe even some kind of road map, about what happens to us when we die. But he doesn’t. He does tell one thief on a cross next to him at the crucifixion, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” But that isn’t much, either. Details would really help to answer our many questions.

Jesus doesn’t try to explain the resurrection. We still have so many questions about what it is like to enter life after earthly death, but they must go unanswered. These details just aren’t important to the ministry of Jesus. Resurrection is assumed, and the rest is left to our ability to trust our eternal well-being to the God who loves us, the God who constantly reaches out to us, the God who seeks to correct us and mend us and heal us and make us whole.

What we do know is that God acts in the here and now. God really is the God of the living, and transformation can begin right here and right now. When God raised Jesus from the dead, it was just the beginning. And Jesus didn’t say in those post-Easter days, “Let me tell you all what heaven is like.” No, Jesus has more important things to tell the people around him. You are to live like I live. You are to walk as I walk, following God as closely as possible, bringing good news to the poor. You are to follow the God of the living, not the dead.”

For you see, the same God who created this world and called it good will not leave this world to rot and languish in its own sin and destructiveness. God loves the creation far too much for that. The resurrection is God's way to create a new heaven and a new earth without doing away with the old heaven and the old earth. It is God's way to reclaim and redeem this world, to take what we have messed up and make it right again. The resurrection is God's way to hang on to us and never let us go, because God loves us far too much to do that.

Marriage, and so many other things that hold our questions about resurrection, are of this world. They are a way to order our lives in the here and now, but they are not eternal in their significance. Does this mean we will never see our loved ones again, those who are by the side of God? Of course not. We will join them someday. And that is because God is faithful, and God does not abandon his beloved children. Resurrection is a whole new world. In that new world, we will be with our God, the God who brings us back from death in so many ways each and every day here on earth. Even though resurrection is a mystery, it affirms that we serve a God who makes all things right in the end. The resurrection explains why, in the midst of suffering and evil and pain in this world, Christians still live as the people of hope.

One other thing about following the God of the living. Since we know our time on earth is limited, we know that we have only so many days to connect fully with those around us. Perhaps tonight, or tomorrow morning, or whenever you have your quiet time with God, you can calm yourself, and be aware of how you will live each precious moment given to you on this earth. Perhaps you can contemplate the richness of the day, and the people you are grateful for. Perhaps you can consider how to be true to your values of life as a follower of God. Perhaps you can evaluate how you are a faithful steward and custodian of the gifts God has given you. Perhaps you can find freedom in knowing that the time here is limited, since death is as common as life. But even more so, you can find strength in the promise of the resurrection ahead. Then, you will be fully living the life God has given you as a gift in the here and now, and you know you will live in the life yet to come. You are a child of the God of all those now living, and in the life to come. Amen.