

BEFORE THE READING

Today's gospel from Luke, Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem, the last chapter of his life – a place where it seems he came to speak his message directly to the religious authorities of Jewish life in his time– and where they then challenged and tested him in response, hoping to get him to speak against Jewish law and thereby discredit his growing popularity with the people. Now it's the Sadducees' turn to take a go at him.

The Sadducees were a minority sect of Judaism in Jesus' time from priestly and aristocratic clans. They benefited by the Roman occupation and collaborated with Roman officials. For them, the Torah alone held authority, the first five books of the Hebrew bible, and they studied it closely. They did not believe in Resurrection, or the continuity of life after death. Like the Israelites at the time of Moses, the Sadducees believed one lived on through one's children, not in another plane of existence. In today's reading, the Sadducees are hoping to show the absurdity of resurrection and of Jesus at the same time.

Luke 20:27- 38:

“Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, “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 brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless. Then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally, the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

Jesus said to them, “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. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And 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.”

The God of the Living – Sermon for November 7

This time of year, images of death are all around us . . .

November 1st, long a church holy day called All Saints Day, or All Hallow's Day, the day of praying for the dead, and the night before it, all Hallow's eve, we now call Halloween – playing, capering, flirting with images of death, danger, evil. Here at our own South Church Halloween Phantasmagoria concert last weekend many of you showed up here sporting these images – ghosts, monsters, zombies, skeletons, vampires, Larry, I'm not really sure what you were but it was some harbinger of death – the grim reaper?

Halloween comes to us here from the Scots and Irish who brought the Celtic Festival of (Sowan) “Samhain”, that marked the end of the summer season of light and began the turn toward darkness and shorter days, a time when the Celts believed the veil between the living and dead was thinner. Today's holiday is a mix of pagan and Christian practice around these holy days about the dead, both to pray for those who have gone before and to protect us from them.

Darkness is certainly on my mind this morning, with the ending of daylight savings time, right? Rising in the dark in the morning, then coming out of school or work and it's dark again!

Here in the Northeast, as living things begin to lose outer layers and shut down to hibernate, we are reminded of the fallow times of life, times of grief or loss, times we need to take stock and

hunker down. When there is more darkness, we think more about things unseen, things we don't know, the uncertainties of life.

What happens when we die? Where do we go? Will we see our loved ones again? What is the meaning of our lives? Humankind has wrestled with these kinds of questions throughout history. We try to get answers to the things we don't understand as if knowing would help them be easier . . . Not knowing can draw us quickly to places of fear and despair, bitterness and shadow.

But the night has as much to teach us as the day. We can't only be in the place of blazing action – we must also have time for rest and recovery. Christine Paintner writes that the wisdom of the darkness, the unknown, is not about fact, it's about mystery. She invites us to sink into unknowing, the place where God can be so much more than our small minds can imagine. After all, she reminds us, we live in a world where being certain about God can lead to violent acts that extinguish life in the name of God.

Here it is so well expressed in a song by Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls – I'll just give you one verse – the song is "Closer to Fine."

“I want to tell you something ‘bout my life, maybe give me insight between black and white.
The best thing you’ve ever done for me, is help me take my life less seriously,
it’s only life after all!

Well darkness has a hunger that’s insatiable, and lightness has a call that’s hard to hear!
I wrap my fear around me like a blanket. I sailed my ship of safety ‘til I sank it.
I’m crawling on your shore.

I went to the doctor, I went to the mountains,
I looked to the children, and I drank from the fountains,
There’s more than one answer to these questions, pointing me in a crooked line.
And the less I seek my source for some definitive, the closer I am to fine! Closer I am to fine!”

The songwriter found that pursuing the answer to life’s questions drew her to the edge of despair – she says so poignantly, “I wrap my fear around me like a blanket. I sailed my ship of safety till I sank it” – she goes to doctors and nature to find answers and in the end decides, “there’s more than one answer to these questions pointing me in a crooked line. And the less I seek my source for a definitive, (the less I need to nail it down in certainty,) the closer I am to fine!” The closer I am to wholeness and contentment.

Please notice – this singer is not *sad* about lack of clarity, she is *jubilant*!

The wisdom of the darkness, the unknown, is not about fact, it's about mystery. This time of year invites us to explore life in the balance here, on the threshold between death and life, between dark and light, between what we know and what we *believe*.

The bible has much to say about these issues about human life and death, but in today's scripture in particular, Jesus takes on this topic with people who feel certain about how God works.

The Sadducees have taken the laws of Moses to a ridiculous extreme in this example – using the ancient practice of marrying a brother's widow to keep alive his legacy and trying to use it to disprove the after life. They ask Jesus, if this woman died after marrying seven brothers, whose wife would she be in the resurrection?

Jesus says first, “those who belong to this age marry” – in other words, “we do that here on earth” but “those who are considered worthy of a place in that age neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God.” I can almost see him shrugging with the silliness of the idea – it's like comparing apples to oranges, or better, apples to chairs! What will happen after we die can't be compared to life here now, Jesus is saying, it's just not like that!

Then Jesus does something surprising – he doesn't rise to the bait of the Sadducees, but rather meets them in the place they consider their authority – the Torah. He quotes from the book of Exodus, when God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush: “Tell the people that I am the God

of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” which Jesus sees as proof that God knows our forbears in the present, as alive with God now.

Jesus wasn't only speaking to the Sadducees, but to all who were listening when he said, “Now he is not the God of the dead, but of the living: for to him all of them are alive.”

How does it work? What will it be like? Jesus says, we really can't imagine now what it will be like then. He takes us back to the place of unknowing and mystery, but gives us this beacon of light: For our God is not a God of the dead, but of the living. Paul explains this more in first Corinthians, when he writes: “For now, we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known”

Our Christian faith calls us to believe what which we cannot know – that the God who knows us, every sinew and synapse of our beings, accompanies us now and will be with us then. In life, God is with us. In death, we are with God.

We have only to look around us at the rest of creation to see this mystery expressed over and over again! Looking at the changing leaves this fall season really brought home to me again the amazing wisdom of nature – surely the trees are never more lovely than at the *end* of summer life? If only I can be that feisty, a flame of color as I meet death someday, my most beautiful and piercing self just as I let go of life. But of course, the trees know what we humans doubt – that life does not end with winter. The trees do not die, they sleep – hibernating under the winter

snows – resting, renewing, rejuvenating for return – when the cycle of life comes back around: new green shoots in the Spring.

Our God is not a God of the dead, but of the living! What does it mean to be a follower of this God? I believe Jesus was inviting us to transform not only what we believe about death, but also what we believe about *life*.

We make choices every day that can extinguish life, or quicken it. When a challenge crosses us, we can walk the way of fear and doubt, react by pulling in tightly to protect ourselves, saying “we must do what is safe!” or we can breathe into the unknowing, relax and pause there, saying, “right – let us give space for God to speak.” If we cling and hold on too tight to what we know, life gets squeezed out. But if we expand and open our hearts with courage, new life has the space to grow.

Our coming year here at South Church will give us poignant opportunities at just such choices. Our pastor is leaving. Our building is aging and crumbling. As we work together to meet these challenges, let us consider how they may be impacted by the very way we live each moment – let us not be so sure we know how God operates, or what God wants for us – and instead, humbly stand together on the threshold of dark and light, day and night. For it is there, in the darkness before dawn, the balancing point between the known and the unknown, that we may hear God speak in a way we cannot imagine. Our God, the God who defeats death, the God of the Living.