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Proper 27C
Peace, Seattle
November 10, 2013
Luke 20:27-38

GOD OF THE LIVING

If the issue in today's gospel, at least on the surface, is marriage, the search for an "ideal mate" is delightfully captured in a Sufi story where we meet Nasrudin, the wise-fool:

Nasrudin is having tea when a friend comes to share the news that he's going to be married. In their conversation, the friend asks Nasrudin if he had ever thought of marriage.

Nasrudin tells him,

- When I was young I very much wanted to get married. So I waited to find the perfect wife.
- My travels to find her took me first to the North. There I met a beautiful woman who was gracious, kind, and deeply spiritual, but she had no worldly knowledge.
- Then I traveled to the East. And there I met a woman who was both spiritual and worldly, beautiful in many ways, but we did not communicate well.
- Finally I went to the South and after much searching I found her. She was spiritually deep, graceful, and beautiful in every respect, at home in the world & at home in the realms beyond it. I felt I had found the perfect wife.

WELL, WHY DIDN'T YOU MARRY HER? the friend asks.

ALAS! says Nasrudin, **UNFORTUNATELY, SHE WAS LOOKING FOR THE PERFECT HUSBAND.**

While the issue in today's gospel may seem, at first, to be marriage, the real question behind it is whether there is a life beyond this one. And though Jesus doesn't go into much detail—and within the vast testimony of scripture there are a variety of responses to that question—what he does say is essential. So I want to spend a little time unpacking the context here.

By the end of the 19th chapter of Luke, Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem, the destination toward which he's been aiming his entire public ministry. And over the next two chapters we find Jesus in scene after scene at the Temple, bumping up against the chief priests, Bible experts, Pharisees, and the like, each of whom challenge his authority and do their best to trap him theologically and expose him as a fraud.

The opposition group *du jour* is the Sadducees a group of modern intellectuals of that time, for whom the Torah—the first five books of the Bible, the book of Moses—was the essential authority.

By this time in the first century, the idea of a resurrected afterlife—which was not part of the worldview of God's people before the 2nd century BCE—had become accepted by many in the Jewish faith. The Pharisees are one example. But it was still disputed ground and open to debate.

The Sadducees, finding no support for the concept of life after death within the Torah, rejected it. [1] According to them, everything comes to an end with death. Since this varied with what they've heard coming from Jesus, they decide to set an intellectual trap for him, hoping his answer will show that his teaching about the resurrection of the dead is absurd.[2]

They create a hypothetical scenario about a woman who goes through seven husbands, each of whom dies. And then ask, IN THE RESURRECTION, WHOSE WIFE WILL THE WOMAN BE?

[1] I'm indebted to Eberhard Busch's commentary in *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) p. 284 ff.
[2] Ibid. pp. 285, 286.

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The teaching is designed to poke fun at Jesus. But Jesus takes them seriously.

The point he makes is that resurrection life is not simply the continuation of mortal life beyond death. The quality of the life to come is completely different. Heaven and earth are not the same—they don't have the same ground rules. For children of the resurrection, marriage won't be an issue, says Jesus.

And then, citing the Torah, Jesus drills home his main point:

GOD IS THE GOD NOT OF THE DEAD, BUT OF THE LIVING.
FOR TO GOD, ABRAHAM, ISAAC, & JACOB ARE ALIVE.

Looking through the lens that Jesus provides we see that…

"God does not say, 'Once upon a time long ago I used to be the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, but now they are dead and gone, though I remember them with great fondness.'

NO. God speaks in the present tense to announce that God was, is and continues to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, FOR, Jesus says, TO GOD, ARE OF THEM ARE ALIVE."[3]

"Death," writes Eberhard Busch, "is the end of many things but it is not the end of everything. Our death is not the end of God."[4]

To the question, what is heaven like, and what will our existence there look like? there are few detailed answers in Scripture. Mostly what we get are hints and glimpses.

But that hasn't kept people through the ages from projecting onto heaven's screen all sorts of ideas of what it will look like. Over the past 2000 years, a variety of elaborate schemes have been developed by church leaders, theologians, and artists to try to define the order of that other world. In nearly all of those systems, the heaven they've created is a place I wouldn't be caught dead in.

Most visions of what heaven is like, it turns out, reflect the anxieties, preoccupations, and social strata that are peculiar to each particular age.

In her book, HEAVEN: OUR ENDURING FASCINATION WITH THE AFTERLIFE, author Lisa Miller offers a fascinating overview of the history of the concept of heaven from the perspective of three of the world's religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Toward the end of her book, she talks about the resurgence in recent years of books, films, stories, and TV shows about heaven, concluding that, to many contemporary Americans, "heaven is whatever you want it to be." [5]

As a case in point, Miller quotes from a letter that Ernest Hemingway wrote in 1925:[6]

To me, heaven would be a big bullring with me holding two Barrera seats, and a trout stream outside that no one else was allowed to fish in and two lovely houses in the town;
one where I would have my wife and children and be monogamous and love them truly and well, and the other where I would have my nine beautiful mistresses on nine different floors.

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[3] Patrick Willson, in *Feasting on the Wor*d, op. cit., p. 287.
[4] Busch, op. cit., p 286.
[5] Lisa Miller, *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife.* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010) p. 215
[6] Ibid. The letter was addressed to F. Scott Fitzgerald.

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I'm all for using our imagination. But for me, ultimately, the contemplation of heaven is best grounded in what Jesus taught and how he lived.

We get one of those words from Jesus in today's gospel: God is not God of the dead, but of the living.

Whatever else dies when our lives come to an end, the love of God does not die.

When we understand this, then we can make a further step: God does not release us to oblivion. God, in compassion, takes us into his heart and we will never be excluded from it. Jesus showed us with his life how true this is.

We human beings are not eternal, but God's love for us is.

And this means that those who have died, who are no longer with us, are still alive to God. And because they are alive to God, they are brought close to us and still speak to us.

Jesus doesn't answer all our questions about the life beyond this life.
But what he does do, is point us to a God whose faithfulness to those whom he has called is immeasurable and inexhaustible.

When we trust God's faithfulness, we are gifted with what we need to endure all that life and death will ask of us,[7] and we find our voices rising with JOB, and singing:

I KNOW THAT MY REDEEMER LIVES!

Please rise for the blessing…

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.

[7] Patrick Willson, p. 289.