

Sermon: "Answering Impossible Questions"

Luke 20:27-38

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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THE EARTH AND THE MOON

An astronomy professor gave a final exam on which he asked the students to

"List three things that occur on the earth that do not occur on the moon."

Now I assume that the professor wanted the students to talk about three principles of astronomy or some physical law related to astronomy.

But, one student answered the question from a different perspective.

When asked to list three things that occur on the earth that do not occur on the moon she wrote,

"Roller Skating,
Bruce Springsteen,
and the Republican party."

Behind every question
is the assumed world of the questioner.

The astronomy professor was living in one world while the student was living in another.

THE DEBATE ABOUT RESURRECTION

The same is true in our Scripture lesson for today. The Jewish leaders were living in one world. Jesus was living in another.

The question that the Sadducees asked Jesus carries with it the assumption that Jesus bought into the worldview of the questioners.

You see, the big theological debate in Jesus' day was about the possibility of life beyond life, the resurrection.

The Pharisees believed in a resurrection.
The Sadducees did not.

Now, it's important to know that the Pharisees view of the resurrection was nothing like what we believe as Christians. The Pharisees were very detailed and fanciful in their description of the resurrection life.

They believed in a resurrection that was very literal and physical, and they even anticipated the begetting of children in this new era.

And very few of their thoughts on the life beyond this life were grounded in Scripture. It was just a hope for more of the same, only bigger.

On the other hand, the Sadducees thought this idea of a resurrection was pure nonsense.

In their eyes, nothing in Scripture indicated that there was any life beyond this one, and in their debates with the Pharisees, they had

concocted a far-fetched story to prove their point.

It was the same story that they used to test Jesus.

ONE BRIDE FOR SEVEN BROTHERS

In the story, seven brothers had been married to the same woman as a result of trying to fulfill the Mosaic law of levirate marriage.

According to this law, if a man died childless, his brother was to marry the widow and rear children by her. The first son born to them would be the son of the dead brother.

In this way the family line of the dead brother would be kept from dying out.

In the Sadducees' much exaggerated story built on that custom, seven brothers in succession married the same woman and each of them died without having a son by her.

Afterward the woman also died.

Their question was this,

"In the resurrection, to whom shall she be married?"

This almost comical story had no doubt confounded the Pharisees and called into question their belief in the resurrection.

They assumed, of course, that Jesus would also be put to shame by their clever story.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

But, they did not count on the fact that Jesus had a whole different way of looking at things.

Yes, Jesus believed in a resurrection, but it was not a resurrection based upon speculation or wishful thinking. It was a resurrection hope that was embedded in the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jesus said that marriage was a big preoccupation with our life now because that is how life is perpetuated.

In fact, the Jews considered marriage to be a sacred way of participating in divine creation itself.

And so, having children was considered to be a blessing, and not having children was considered to be a curse.

There are quite a few stories in the Bible that take up this theme of the barren woman.

The faithful barren woman prays to God, asking that He might remove the shame of being without a child. God smiles upon her faithfulness, and then blesses her with the gift of a child.

This child is then seen as a sign, a portent of a greater salvation.

But, Jesus reminded his listeners that in the resurrection, there is no need to worry about the perpetuation of life any more. In the resurrection, the greater salvation foreshadowed by the Scriptures will become a reality. Life will last forever, and the joys of that resurrection life will be beyond our imagination.

We will be in the presence of the God who created marriage and children and all the wonderful things that we enjoy in this life.

Resurrection won't be just more of the same.

It will be a whole new world.

MYSTERY AND HOPE

Exactly what that future life will be like we can't know right now. As the apostle Paul tells us, our picture of eternity is clouded.

But, one thing we do know. One day we will see God and all will be revealed. One day we will understand. (1 Corinthians 3:12)

When we talk about the resurrection, we necessarily talk about mystery. We talk about what "no eye has seen nor ear has heard." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Some people find that disturbing. They want to speculate and ask questions.

But, over the years I have come to believe that all our speculations and questions add nothing to our discussion of the resurrection. Indeed, sometimes our fanciful and unscriptural attempts to elaborate on the resurrection make the hope seem less real.

I like the way commentator William Barclay put it when he wrote, "We could save a mass of misdirected ingenuity, and not a little heartbreak, if we ceased to speculate on what heaven is like and left things to the love of God."

IN LIFE AND IN DEATH

I much prefer saying that I do not know what the resurrection life will be like. I don't know what it is to be like an angel or to be a child of God who has constant access to His presence.

But, one thing I do know. I can trust the compassionate and forgiving God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. I trust that God with my life and the life of those I love. I can "let go" when friends and family members die because I believe that we are always in the Lord's hands.

The foundation of what I believe is so well stated in the opening line of our latest confession, A Brief statement of Faith. It goes, "In life and in death we belong to God."

That is such a beautiful and simple way of putting it. We belong to God. We are God's children, in life and in death. That's all we know, and that's all we need to know.

"I AM"

And that was the point Jesus was trying to make to the Sadducees. The God of creation cannot be counted out even when life ends because the God of creation sees and experiences things from an eternal perspective.

Jesus reminded his questioners of a very familiar piece of Scripture. He said,

"When Moses was confronted with the presence of God through the mystery of the burning bush do you remember how God identified Himself to Moses? God said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.'"

Notice how God put it. God did not say, "I was the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." God said, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."

According to Jesus, in this case verb tense makes all the difference. God is always in the present tense.

God is the great "I am." All are alive to God because God is not limited by time or space. God presides over a great cosmic "now", a wonderful plan of salvation and glory from beginning to end.

When it comes to the eternal plan of God, many of us have too small a view. We place limitations on God because we do not make room for mystery.

We lose hope because we create a god out of own imagination instead of focusing upon the Almighty and all loving God who created heaven and earth. We focus upon a god made in our image instead of the God revealed in the compassion and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

IS THAT ALL THERE IS?

Quite often when I have a funeral I do talk about the things that made the deceased special. I remember all the things in them that were good and kind and faithful.

There is a measure of comfort to think that a person's life was well lived. But, honestly, even with the best person, that kind of analysis leaves us feeling empty. It leaves us asking, "Is that all there is?"

For the Christian, the answer to that question is a resounding "no."
There is more to life than just one thing after another.

Life, all life, has an eternal purpose and an eternal plan.

BEYOND MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

These days the family is almost deified, even and (dare I say it) especially in the church.

There's a popular sign used to promote a certain image of the church, a silhouette of a mom, dad and children going to church. That is symbolic of how many people define the church. In the minds of many people, church is defined by the typical nuclear family and familiar middle class values.

"Successful" churches boast about the fact that they attract "younger" members and churches with predominantly older members are referred to despairingly as "dying" congregations.

But, is our hope really tied to age and marriage?

Don't we proclaim a hope that reaches beyond this world and its limitations?

I think Jesus would say to us,

"Excuse me, but your hope is not found in attracting younger members with large families. Heaven is not about families or marriages or success or perpetuating a certain standard of living.

Those are the values of the old world.

There's a new world coming in which the old ways just won't make sense.

And you have been called to live according to this promise, the promise of life eternal."

The hope of the resurrection reminds us that the goal of life, this life and the life to come is all about bringing glory to God instead of to ourselves. God, the great "I am" is with us forever, and that brings a sense of purpose and hope in even the worst circumstances.

FUNERAL FOR AN UNBELIEVER

From time to time I am called upon to do a funeral for someone who has not been an active member of the church or even a particularly

good person. (Sometimes in this situation enthusiastic ministers attempt to comfort the family with an overly rosy picture of the deceased person's life. But, when that happens people often find it more irritating or even amusing than comforting.)

I think it is more helpful and honest not to focus so much upon the character of the deceased but upon the God to whom we all go. It is in focusing upon God's character instead of ours that we find hope.

So what do we know about the character of this eternal God?

In the Bible and especially through the life of Christ we learn that God is both loving and just.

God reaches out to us even when we reject and run away from His truth.

According to Jesus, God's goal is not to condemn the world. God's goal is to save the world. (John 3:16-17)

What a relief it is to know that we're in that God's hands.
Always have been and always will be. That's all we know.

But, then, that's all we need to know.

AT PEACE

A preacher told of a tragedy that occurred in his first church. It seems that one of his families had an adult son in his early twenties.

The boy was nothing but trouble. He had a long criminal record. He found himself in and out of jail all the time.

Mom and dad had great regrets about their son. They wondered if they could have done something different, if only they had been better parents then perhaps he wouldn't have gotten into so much trouble.

Then one June day they got the word.

He had died in a fight in jail. At the funeral there was much sadness.

"What a waste," many a person said.

The father and mother seemed inconsolable.

But, that was not quite true.

After the service at the cemetery, the mother said to the pastor,

"At last he is at peace. Now God can begin again with him. Now God can make up for any of our parental mistakes. Now the God who gave him to us has him for his own."

The lives of many people are wasted. They are wasted because they are marked by an almost total lack of peace.

They search for peace in many places, in marriage or friendship or their job ... or you name it. But, they never find it.

I believe that, in the final analysis, true peace is not found in even the best that this world has to offer. True peace is found in giving ourselves to a greater hope, an eternal hope.

And strangely enough, when we do that, all those relationships that were so messed up before become straightened up.

The eternal hope has a present benefit.

May the God of peace put eternity in our hearts that we might live this day and every day with hope.

Amen.

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