

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

Psalm 145:1-5, 18-22

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

If you've ever spent any time with children, you know they can sometimes ask the most impossible questions. Along about the age of three, it seems every question begins with "Why?" Why is the sky blue? Why does it rain? Why do people speak different languages? Why do people have different colored eyes and different colored hair? You get the gist. And you've probably been asked these kinds of questions yourself and wondered how to answer without going into enormous scientific detail. We realize as we hear stories about Jesus from the four gospels that Jesus ran into the same problem. He was frequently asked impossible questions and this morning's gospel reading is just such an example.

In order to unravel the meaning in this gospel reading, let's put it into context. For the last few weeks we have been skipping around in the gospel of Luke and when we do that, we lose the sense of the chronological order of things. Last week, we heard about Jesus delivering his very first sermon at the beginning of his ministry. He talked about those who are blessed and those who will face woe. The gospel lesson this morning comes toward the end of his ministry. He has just entered Jerusalem and has wept because Jerusalem doesn't recognize him and he knows what's coming for it. He longs to cuddle it up under his wings to protect it, but Jerusalem will have no part of him. He goes to the Temple and overturns the tables of the money changers in a fit of anger about the desecration of his Father's house. And then he sets up shop in the Temple preaching and teaching daily about God and the kingdom of Heaven. He attracts hundreds of people and also the Temple authorities who see him as a troublemaker and begin to plot how to get rid of him. They need some justification for arresting him and better yet, for executing him, so they pose a series of impossible questions for him in the hopes of trapping him into saying or teaching something blasphemous. Then they'll have him just where they want him.

First they ask him by whose authority he is preaching and teaching and doing what he does when he heals people. Jesus' answer is another question. Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin? The chief priests and the scribes and the elders confessed that they didn't know, so Jesus tells them he won't say by whose authority he does what he does. And then he tells the parable about the landowner who sends his messenger to collect the rent and the really vicious tenants beat the messenger up and send him away. The landowner does this again with a slave and gets the same result. And then he sends his son, believing that the son will have more credibility and will carry more weight, but the wicked tenants murder him. The Temple leaders got the point and wanted to arrest Jesus right then, but they were afraid of his popularity with the people.

And then they ask him the tricky question about whether or not the Jews should have to pay taxes to the Emperor of Rome. He deftly gets out of that trap by saying "Render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar and unto God which belongs to God. And then the Sadducees step up to ask Jesus the question that we heard this morning. It's an interesting question since the Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection. They are the Temple leaders in charge of the daily operations in the Temple, so they are particularly angered with Jesus for the episode with the overturned tables. They are also rivals of the Pharisees and the scribes, so there is some tension between these two groups. We don't have a monopoly on tension-filled politics. But they are in agreement on one thing, however: get rid of Jesus. The Sadducees also adhere to a strict set of scriptures...not the complete Torah that contains the Prophets and the Psalms. They believe the only true scriptures are the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They believe that since there is no mention of resurrection in the Pentateuch, resurrection doesn't exist. Their trick question to Jesus is posed in such a way as to illustrate how ridiculous and impossible the whole notion of resurrection is. In this way, they think they can trap Jesus and at the same time they can take a jab at the Pharisees who do believe in resurrection.

So here's the question: A man who has six brothers and a wife, dies without leaving an heir. According to the law in Leviticus, the second brother then marries the wife in order to produce an heir, but he dies childless as well. All seven brothers eventually marry this woman and none of them produce an heir. So in the resurrection, whose wife will she be? It's a good question!

Jesus' answer opens up a whole line of thinking that the Sadducees had never considered. And perhaps a line of thinking that we hadn't considered either. Jesus tells them that there is no marriage in heaven. They neither marry nor are given in marriage. Well, for anyone in this life who is happily married, does that mean that after we die...in the resurrection...we don't have our wife or our husband? That's a disappointing prospect! That's the most intimate and loving relationship many people have. How could it be heaven without that all-important loving relationship? I'm certainly looking forward to a reunion. It's not the relationship itself that fails to exist in heaven; it is the social structure of marriage that doesn't exist. The relationship is still there. All our relationships are still there. In this life, we need the societal confines of marriage for the procreation of children so that the lineage will go on from one generation to the next as the older generation dies. But in heaven, they cannot die any more. They are children of God and like angels. We need the relationships, but we don't need the marriage.

And then Jesus does an interesting thing. He refers back to Moses in the Book of Exodus, which is part of the Pentateuch that the Sadducees hold dear and he reminds them of the conversation between Moses and God in the burning bush. In that conversation, Moses wants to know God's name. And "God said to Moses 'I AM WHO I AM.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you.' God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you'" [Exodus 3:14-15]. This is the living God. The God of the living. He doesn't say 'I *was* the God of Abraham;' God says, 'I *am* the God of Abraham.' God still *is*. And to God Abraham and Isaac and Jacob still *are*. The relationships continue after earthly death. Our relationships with each other and our relationships through God continue when we leave this life.

In answering so profoundly this seemingly impossible question, Jesus gave his followers and his enemies and us a glimpse of what life after death truly means. The quality of that life is beyond the temporal and physical constraints of the life that we have on earth. We can let our imaginations soar when thinking about the next life. No matter what we can fathom about it in this life, it is beyond our imaginations to conceive of it and yet we know that it is real. We do know from Jesus himself in the gospel of John that there is a kingdom of God, there is a heaven, there is life after earthly death and there is resurrection and reunion. For Jesus said this to his disciples, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." [John 14:2-5]. That's resurrection. That's reunion with those we love in this life, whether they are on this side of the veil or have gone on to the eternal life. This is Jesus' gift to us. This is Jesus' promise to us. And we know that Jesus always keeps his promises.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.