

"Using the Ridiculous to Get at the Real"

Exodus 3:1-6,7, 10-15; Ps. 145; Luke 20:27-38

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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There was a wife of a minister who was a teacher of young children. One day, a first-grader brought a drawing of a skeleton into the class where she teaches English as a second language. The title across the top of the drawing read "Inside of Me." It was designed to teach children that everyone has a skeleton inside of them. He unfolded it proudly and showed it to the class. One little girl from India was astounded at the thought that she and others had this scary looking skeleton inside them, and so she pressed the issue a bit farther. "Even you got one of these inside you, Mrs. K?" The teacher replied, "Yes, I have one too." The next question was a theological one. "Even God got one inside him?"

Now in a class made up of children from many different countries, cultures, and religious backgrounds (most of them not Christians), you can imagine that this question had the potential for major theological debate. I doubt if I'd have had the presence of mind to give the answer the teacher did; but, her expertise in six-year-old theology saved the day. "If God needs a skeleton, I'm sure he has one," she replied. "God has everything he needs." This apparently satisfied the theological curiosity of the class, and they got on with the lesson. (from a sermon by Larry Kalajainen)

There are all kinds of questions we encounter in our daily lives and there are all kinds of questions posed in Scripture. Some of them are questions that give rise to the "rest of the story". In

in the Garden of Eden God asks: "Adam, where are you?" "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

Sometimes they are questions that are asked in all innocence: "Where is he that is born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him?" Sometimes the questions are asked with anything but innocence and in an attempt to trip someone up. Jesus had to deal with many questions of this sort.

The Sadducees' question is one of those. It comes just after Jesus has fielded the question about whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. Now, some from the Jewish group called the Sadducees who Luke tells us do not believe in the resurrection, come asking a question about the resurrection. It is a ridiculous question, a set-up question. They are not really interested in the answer. Their minds are already made up.

Others might have serious questions about the resurrection. Others may be like Martha and Mary, grieving over the death of their brother Lazarus, hungry for any word from Jesus that can rekindle their hope and their faith. And Jesus gives them that word: "I am the resurrection and the life."

By contrast, the Sadducees aren't asking a serious question. It isn't asked from a place of neediness or desperation. It's asked from a position of superiority and self-assurance. Luke doesn't tell us much about the Sadducees. They were, generally speaking, the upper crust of Jewish society. They were very conservative, religiously, and only viewed the first five books of the Bible commonly attributed to Moses as authoritative. This is important to our story because they cite the Law of Moses as the basis for their set-up question.

The question itself has to do with levirate marriage. Since they didn't believe in the resurrection, their view of eternal life was a here-and-now approach. That is: eternal life, the continuation of our life, happens through our children, grand children, and so on. We live on in them.

Their ridiculous question affords Jesus the opportunity to speak about the reality of the resurrection just a few days before his own resurrection. And he will use their own Scriptures to provide the proof text he needs to drive his point home.

His main point is that God is the God of the living, not of the dead. All are alive in God. Heaven is not a continuation of the way things are set up on earth. The emphasis is not on maintaining our earthly relationships in heaven, but on becoming as children, children of God, children of the resurrection.

And the entry point for this new reality is found in our baptism. In baptism we die to an old way of life and we come alive to a new way, a God-directed and God-centered way.

When Jesus answers their question and then, later, when he becomes the answer to their question as he walks out of his tomb, he gives us such incredible hope and good news and the opportunity to choose what age we wish to live in. Do we want to be children of this age or children of the age that Jesus inaugurates in his life, death and resurrection?

God is God only of those who are alive, not of the dead. But God will only be God for those who are willing to die, to die to their concepts of the truth, reality and meaning.

If God is only God of the living, the eternally alive, then that moves the goal line. It is no longer "this" life and then the life "to come". The two move closer together and in fact are merged. Because of Jesus we are given the opportunity to live the resurrection today. He is the one who announces: "The kingdom of God is among you." He says: "I have come that you may have abundant life."

If the goal line is moved, then what? How do we live into this life that the God of the living gives us? We do so, in part, by living with the values of the kingdom to which we belong. We give our allegiance to God. We surrender our wills to God's will. We joyfully receive abundant life and we let go of our need to surround ourselves with such abundance, especially when we have the ability and the where-with-all to alleviate the suffering and the despair of so many of our brothers and sisters.

If we are children of the resurrection and if our home is with God, then it does make sense to follow Jesus' advice not to lay up treasures on earth but to be more focused on the kingdom of God and let our treasure go where our hearts long to be. We are invited to live abundantly, but that is not necessarily the same thing as living with abundance.

Richard Fairchild recounts an Italian legend about a master and a servant.

It seems the servant was not very smart and the master used to get very exasperated with him. Finally, one day, in a fit of temper, the master said: "You really are the stupidest man I know. Here, I want you to carry this staff wherever you go. And if you ever meet a person stupider than yourself, give them this staff."

So time went by, and often in the marketplace the servant would encounter some pretty stupid people, but he never found someone appropriate for the staff.

Years later, he returned to his master's home. He was shown into his master's bedroom, for the man was quite sick and in bed. In the course of their conversation the master said: "I'm going on a journey soon."

"When will you return?" asked the servant.

"This is a journey from which I will not return," the master replied. The servant asked: "Have you made all the necessary arrangements?"

"No, I guess I have not."

"Well, could you have made all the arrangements?" "Oh yes, I guess I've had time. I've had all my life. But I've been busy with other things."

The servant said: "Let me be sure about this. You're going on a journey, from which you will never return, and you've had all your life to make the arrangements, but you haven't."

The master said: "Yes, I guess that's right."

The servant replied: "Master, you take this staff. For at last I have truly found a man stupider than myself."

We are in the midst of making preparations for the rest of our journey. It is a journey home to where our hearts are. It is a journey toward God. May we find the grace and the trust, the

hope and the calm assurance that can give us the courage and make it possible for us to start really living this day and continue in faith, living as children of the resurrection, children of God, children of our Heavenly Father who, through Jesus Christ, has brought salvation to this house - to your house and to my house - today!

Thanks be to God and let us pray:

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