

The Wide Embrace of Resurrection

“Hey Jesus! Question...”

Have you ever heard someone ask a question in a public forum and it was immediately clear the asker of the question had no real interest in gaining knowledge from the person they were asking the question of?

More of a “comment” than a “question?”

That is what is happening in this text.

Within scripture we find many who seek healing and Truth at the feet of Jesus.

The *Sadducees* have come to ask a hypothetical question about resurrection to try and trap Jesus.

How do we know it’s a trap?

The Sadducees don’t believe in resurrection.

It’s very easy for us contemporary readers who don’t understand the complex political dimensions of Ancient Israel to lump the Pharisees and the Sadducees together as “religious leaders who didn’t like Jesus,” but it’s more complicated than that.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees differed in their understandings of what parts of Jewish scripture were authoritative.

The Sadducees believed it all lay within the Pentatuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

Full stop.

The Pentatuch said it. I believe it. That settles it.

The Pharisees believed that God continued to reveal Godself through later books, including the psalms, prophets and apocalyptic books like Daniel.

Wrestling with what texts are authoritative and contain the revelation of God is a relatable question for us modern Christians as well.

For some Christians, authority starts with Genesis and ends with Revelation. The answer to all of life's questions lie within those pages.

Don't tell me what Augustine, C.S. Lewis or Walter Wink have to say about it, they aren't the Bible.

For others, revelation has been breathed through history in many ways, long after the Biblical canon was closed, and a discerning Christian reads the Bible alongside contemporary theologians and historians, even when they seem to challenge what was written in the biblical text.

Even reading within the Bible itself there are different conclusions about where the authority lies.

For some the Bible is a flat book, every word is authoritative and carries the same weight.

Many Anabaptists would say all scripture is authoritative but the Bible is not a flat book, the weight of authority lies in the Gospels and the words of Jesus.

If there seems to be a contradiction, the tie goes to the Gospels.

Some Christians spend a lot of time with Paul and his understanding of salvation and the early church.

Others are uneasy with Paul and don't read much past the Gospels at all.

We understand the difficulty of interpretation.

The fact that the Pharisees and Sadducees couldn't agree on where the authority in scripture came from is not only familiar and relatable, it's also oddly comforting.

Discerning where God is moving is a natural and normal part of a community's faith journey.

Where authority starts and ends in scripture mattered a lot in regards to the question of resurrection because there is no developed understanding of resurrection articulated in the first five books of the Bible.

That simply wasn't part of the conversation in early Israelite history.

It wasn't until about 200 years before the birth of Jesus that you start to see references to resurrection in scripture, most notably in Daniel's apocalyptic vision in chapter 12:

But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

This text speaks to a resurrection of the dead, but like I said, Daniel was not one of the books the Sadducees said was authoritative, so who cares what Daniel says.

The Sadducee position would have been: everything comes to an end with death; therefore, life is to be lived as fully as possible within the boundaries of earthly time.

The Sadducees are out to make Jesus look like a fool by proving that the idea of resurrection is absurd.

They set their trap by referring to a known law concerning “levirate marriage” that is found in Deuteronomy 25, which says:

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

In an age where women had few rights, this ancient law was set as a compassionate way to insure that widows were cared for. Instead of a widow being cast out, the widow’s brother-in-law would marry her.

This law actually factors into the story of Ruth and Boaz if you are interested in reading about this law further.

The Sadducees use this law to concoct a scenario in which a woman’s husband dies, she is married to his brother, who dies, she marries his next brother, and so forth until she has married all seven brothers.

Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?

Jesus might not share much in common with the Pharisees, but he does share their belief that resurrection is real. Everything does *not* come to an end with death. There is more to life than that which is lived within earthly time. So how does he respond?

Like the question of the Sadducees, Jesus’ response also takes a little bit of unpacking. Jesus says:

“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.”

“This age” is the present age, with its fallenness and limitations.

Marriage is a part of our present age.

The need for a levirate marriage law to care for widows exists because death is also a part of our present age.

But to talk about marriage in the age to come is to project a “this age” dilemma onto a future that does not function as our fallen world does.

Ben Witherington summarizes:

“The whole drift of the argument about Levirate marriage [that the Sadducees make] assumes the reality of death. But in the resurrection, death is no more and so the questions about Levirate marriage are irrelevant.”

Jesus continues:

“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.”

If it is only the first five books the Sadducees want to hear about, then Jesus will make a case from Exodus 3:6 where Moses stands before the burning bush and God says:

“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”

As Patrick Wilson puts it:

“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; and Jesus concludes, “For all of them are alive.”

“God would not have continued to advertise himself as the God of the Patriarchs if he had finished with them and abandoned them the the grave.
(Witherington)”

To tie in the theme from my sermon last week, the ever widening embrace of resurrection implies that God is not only at work “within time” (as the Sadducees had it limited to), but God is also at work “across time.”

“For all of them are alive.”

Death is the end of many things, but it is not the end of everything. We live in the tension, understanding that the human body is not eternal, and also clinging to an understanding of God’s love that is eternal. We believe of our departed loved ones, that “as they were, so they are now in God.”

The Sadducees may not have asked their question in good faith, but their question is much in line with the types of questions we have about resurrection and that which comes after.

“When Jesus says “for all of them are alive” what does that *mean*?”
It would reduce a lot of our stress and anxiety if we could get a straight answer on these matters.

Yet Jesus, who notoriously answered questions with deeper questions and seemingly unrelated parables, teaches us that straight answers don’t honor the vast mystery contained within the deep questions we ask.

First Mennonite, let us commit to continuing to ask deep questions, but also to be content with answers that seem to only prompt more questions. To continue on this path together is faithful and true.

I conclude with a quote from Wilson, who says
“Jesus does not answer all our questions, though one of our fondest illusions is that he should. What he does is point us to a God whose faithfulness to those whom God has called is immeasurable and inexhaustible, and in that faithfulness we find enough to endure all that life and death will ask of us.”

Amen