

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

Jesus said to them, "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. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. 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."

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Every religion has some shared understanding and some in-house differences of interpretations that distinguish one group from another under a common umbrella: Catholics see some things differently than Protestants; Zen Buddhism has approaches different from Theravada Buddhism. Vedantic Hinduism is not exactly like Yogic Hinduism; there are Sunni and Shia Muslims; Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jews, and so on and so on.

The same situation was true for ancient Judaism. They held some notions in common, while others were, let's say, "discussed" or "debated."

In Luke's Gospel, people who claim that there is no resurrection have come to Jesus with a question about resurrection. We don't have to see them as melodramatic evil villains, twirling their moustaches as they seek to destroy the good people following Jesus.

While it is true that the Sadducees were fairly wealthy because of a cozy relationship with the Romans, their question is genuinely grounded in a serious interpretation of scripture. They were firm traditionalists who followed the *written* books of Moses, allowing very little wiggle room for new insights and no tolerance for oral teachings. They begin their case to Jesus by saying, "Teacher, Moses *wrote* for us..."

The embrace of resurrection was relatively new to Jewish theology, having shown up among mostly repressed Jews in the last couple hundred years before Jesus. The Sadducees, living a life of relative luxury, had little incentive to consider a better world.

To be fair, they could also make a theological stand on the fact that the written Torah could not reconcile resurrection with the command in Deuteronomy about brothers stepping in to marry and care for a childless widow. The teaching was family-centered, but it was also anchored solidly in this relative, material world.

These particular Sadducees did something that we've all been guilty of at one time or another: They set up an oversimplified, misrepresentation of the afterlife that is easier to knock down than the actual interpretation of the resurrection that Jesus and the Pharisees are promoting. Picking apart a position that people on the other side of an issue don't actually hold is a favored tactic when we want to be *right* more than we want to *learn*.

Jesus responds by side-stepping the nonsensical argument that the Sadducees present and reframes the question. He picks up a point that he and the Pharisees have in common with the Sadducees. In short, the Sadducees have asked: "Moses wrote something for us; what do *you* say?" Jesus skillfully and simply redirects their assertions: "I say what Moses said."

Luke's Jesus goes on to remind his Jewish cousins that Moses saw life in God. The intent of the command about childless widows was to protect and preserve the woman's life, but continuance of the clan was critical. Jewish tribes decimated by the exiles in Egypt and in Babylon needed to procreate and raise more Jewish children.

In this world, the people needed marriage.

Jesus explains that the threat of extinction dissolves in the resurrected life to come. He suggests that people will not simply rise like zombies and go on living just as they did in the past. He describes a new order of existence defined by the actions of the Holy Spirit and not by the limitations of human skin and bone.

In the next world, children of the resurrection will be more like angels and there will be no need for procreation or marriage.

It's unlikely that the Sadducees were moved by that image, given that they also didn't believe in angels. What Jesus does next is masterful; a move both challenging and yet respectful. He evokes Moses at the burning bush. It was there that God spoke to Moses and claimed to be the God of his ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.

To people who entrusted their faith to a literal interpretation of a written instruction, Jesus pointed to the words of Moses. The scroll of Exodus

captures in writing God's claim to be the God of the patriarchs, who were long dead by the time Jesus spoke. What's still more compelling is that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were dead well before Moses.

And so, if God is both the God of the patriarchs and the God of the living rather than the dead, then God must be sustaining the patriarchs in some way as yet clouded in mystery. Surely, God would not claim to be the God of people who no longer existed.

What's more, God made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as to Hagar, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel. They would have to exist in some way to see God's promises of land and descendants come to fruition.

Jesus would not have had to remind the Sadducees of the perfectly reasonable earthly question that Moses asked God: "When I appear before the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you'; and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?"

Sadducees, Pharisees and any other Jews listening to this exchange would immediately recall God's answer: "I am that I am. I will be what I am. I will be that I will be."

I have learned, with a few years behind me, to be gentle and not mock or demonize people like the Sadducees. I've seen myself far too often slip into that same comfortable blanket of absolute and blind certainty.

And I have been led out of those constraints only by opening my mind and my heart to the ravishing mystery of God's creation – the oddness and unlikeliness of it all. From quantum foam to dark matter; eleven-dimensional space or the molecular clouds of stellar nurseries, creation is stranger than we know; more amazing than we can ever know.

The more God reveals, the more God conceals. The more we learn, the more there is to learn about.

Even our own relationship with God, maybe especially the interpenetration of Creator with creation, the human-Divine correlation, is an essential mystery. We know that God's love brings light into this world and that God is lavishly gracious. And yet, we can't reliably predict how that grace will manifest in unique people with specific circumstances. Revelations of God's loving grace don't clear away the mystery; they deepen it.

What I do know is that I've held people as they came into this life and I've held them as they left. And I am continually humbled at the consistent and astonishing bond between human consciousness and this material world, our

tiny island planet. Life, so precious and so rare, is mind-boggling in its diversity and yet united in the love of God for all God's children, all God's creation.

And so, yes, of course, marriage and families of all kinds have places here in this realm and these are to be treasured. It's just that a far greater union waits for us in the mist and fog of eternal life; a union of *all* the children of God, living and dead, who will see each other as God has always seen us. They are present with us in the communion of saints, the cloud of witnesses that we can see and those we can't, united around this altar even now.

There is a certain thrill in probing the uncertainty of the afterlife and the contemplation of what it might mean to be sanctified. Another fruitful, if more Jewish, contemplation involves the sanctification of *this* world; the blessing of this relative reality that is not other than the Absolute reality.

People have strong drives to seek certainty. And that can be helpful as we navigate this fragile and perilous world. Even so, in our yearning to know God more fully, we have to relax our death-grip on certainty and allow God to cross our boundaries, even for a moment, so that we can be surprised and even challenged by the life of God in ways we might never have expected.

Let me leave you to ponder something that Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about the awesome revelation available in those moments of courageous vulnerability: "Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental; to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant [and, might I add here, "bride or groom"] is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am lover of uncontained and immortal beauty."

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