



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Pentecost 22 – Proper 27 (C)

#### God of the Living

[RCL] Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalm 145:1-5, 18-22 or Psalm 98; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17;  
Luke 20:27-38

“God is God not of the dead, but of the living...”

One of the most ancient claims about God made by our Jewish siblings is that God is the God of the living. The ancient Hebrew moniker for God, *Elohim Chayim*, means “living God” or “God of life.”

Here in Luke, chapter 20, Jesus drives the point home.

But wait a second: Don’t Christians believe that when our mortal bodies die, that is the gateway to life with God? What’s that delicious line from the Eucharistic prayer at funerals? “For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended; and when our mortal body lies in death, there is prepared for us a dwelling place eternal in the heavens” (BCP, p. 382).

So, what could Jesus possibly mean?

The first thing that Jesus is teaching us is a gentle grammatical correction: It is not enough to say that God is *alive* or the God of the *living*; rather, God *is* life. It is from God that all life flows forth, and to God that all life finds its ultimate fulfillment. We do not live in a “closed system” created by God a long, long time ago, then left mostly to run its course; rather, we live in a universe which is, at this and every moment, constantly being suffused and sustained with Divine life. If God were to hold God’s breath, even for a moment, all creation would cease to exist.

Jesus is employing the oldest trick in the teacher’s handbook: shaping and molding a teachable moment in response to a silly question. The Sadducees, Luke says, didn’t believe in the resurrection in the first place. When they ask Jesus about whose wife the woman who had been married to seven successive brothers would be in the resurrection, the trap is set from the beginning: they don’t believe in resurrection anyway!

The fact that the Sadducees created their hypothesis based upon a Levirate marriage is also no accident. Levirate marriages, which were the custom both in those days and centuries after, aimed at providing

physical and financial care for the widow. These were inherently complicated arrangements, and seven successive marriages under this practice would have meant a level of complexity bordering on absurdity.

The Sadducees don't care about the woman or the resurrection; they care about entrapping Jesus. They may as well have come asking the perennial 'gotcha' question, "Can God make a rock so big that God cannot lift it?"

"God is God not of the dead, but of the living..."

For much of human history, death was a barbaric, agonizing ordeal replete with suffering so great as to rival torture. As Jesus was dying on the cross, he was offered wine mixed with myrrh—an ancient herbal pain reliever, and likely one of the few medicines in existence at the time that was in any way effective at treating such grueling pain.

Fast-forward to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, and the landscape looks quite different. Thanks in large part to the advances in modern medicine and science, and the great advances in palliative and hospice care, the sheer agony and brutality of death can largely be treated and managed much more successfully than at any other time in human history—though access to this important care is still limited in many areas.

While the holy work that palliative and hospice care centers do must be celebrated, somewhere along the way, as our fear of the agony and barbarity of death began to diminish and subside, much of the Western world, America included, began to try and make peace with death—to treat it as something other than the final enemy.

In some circles, death came to be thought of as a "friend," as a gentle guide that takes us by the hand, leading from this life to the next. In other circles, death began to be altogether avoided. "Celebrations of life" replaced funerals; large, attractive portraits of the deceased took the place of the casket or the urn in the chancel.

"Preacher, talk to us about memories and legacies, would you please; sing one of those comforting songs about 'by and by,' but please spare us the d-word, would you please? And don't dare make us sad! Talk about the good times!"

Christians must work to ease suffering and to bear one another's burdens together. Sitting vigil at the bedside of a loved one who is dying is to come on bended knee onto holy ground. Christians must support the incredible care that hospices and palliative care centers can provide. Death requires the utmost pastoral sensitivity, and there are good and right reasons for a variety of decisions families make in the wake of death, but at the end of the day, to make a deal with death and treat it as anything other than the enemy of life is to exchange the truth for a lie.

“God is God not of the dead, but of the living...”

For the Sadducees, death was simply the fate of every human when we’ve run out of life. The grass withers in autumn and dies in the winter frost, so too, at the end of our days, are we made ready for the worms...

...But God isn’t satisfied with that outcome, it seems.

No, to believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, is to believe in the God who is life; who is giving and sustaining all life, and ultimately, the God who breaks death’s back once and for all in Christ’s resurrection from the dead on the first day of the week!

At every corner of our existence, at every moment since God called forth creation out of nothing and called it good, God’s life is at work, swallowing up the defeat of death in the victory of Christ’s resurrection and life.

The Blessed Apostle’s taunt of death in light of the resurrection puts the Christian hope of resurrected life in the face of death plainly before us: “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55)

“God is God not of the dead, but of the living...”

We affirm this central tenet of our faith at every funeral, when we stare death in the face and sing that ancient song of defiance: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

May *Elohim Chayim*—the living God; the God who is life continue to sustain our life until we stand at last on that other shore in that greater light, among the saints whom no one can number, whose hope was in the Word Made Flesh, as the words of our Savior enliven our hearts: “Servant, well done!”

Amen.

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