

# Eternal Hope

**TEXT:**  
**Luke 20:27-40**

November 11, 1007

**T**here is a story about a Scottish physician who received a visit from an old friend who was near death. The patient asked the doctor, “What will it be like after I die?” Before the doctor could begin his answer, there was a scratching at the doctor’s door. The doctor said to his friend, “Hear that? That’s my dog. He’s waiting downstairs for me and he’s growing impatient. He’s never been in this room, and he has no idea what it is like. He knows only one thing about this room, that I am here. That is all I know about the future.”

One of the great mysteries of life is what comes next. We have a great longing to know is there more to this life? Is there a life which comes after this life?

Bruce Yandle teaches economics at Clemson University. He also has a side hobby of collecting graffiti for his enjoyment and for use in his lectures. One of the first pieces he collected was also one of his favorites. Beneath the question, “Where will you spend eternity?” a student had answered, “The way it looks now, in Economics 101.”

Our text this morning raises the question of eternity. A group of Sadducees came and asked Jesus a question. In the introduction to the story we learn something about the Sadducees. We are told that they did not believe in the resurrection.

What we have in this encounter between Jesus and the Sadducees is a short glimpse into a family dispute. One of the misconceptions that many Christians have about the religion that birthed our own is that the idea of resurrection and eternal life were concepts inherited from our Jewish ancestors. Resurrection and the belief of life beyond physical death were new ideas in theological circles of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. It was one of the key differences between the Pharisees, who were a new movement dedicated to the renewal of their faith, and the Sadducees, who were the old guard and read the Law of Moses as strict literalists. If you can imagine the Pharisees as the Unitarians of their day, pushing the theological envelope, than the Sadducees would be the Southern Baptists, holding the line on theological purity. The Pharisees believed in resurrection and the Sadducees did not.

In this story, Jesus has reached his destination in Jerusalem. For the next few days, before his arrest, he was in the temple area teaching the pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover. Along with them, was the religious leadership who began to take advantage of the situation to learn what he was teaching. Notice that the text says, “They came to him.” [Luke 20:27] This was clearly a test. There is danger behind these questions.

The illustration the Sadducees used was somewhat obscure. Their query was based on a text in *Deuteronomy* which determined that if a man died without bearing a child, his brother was to marry his widow.<sup>i</sup> And if that brother died, the next brother would marry the widow. The idea behind the law was the continuation of the first brother’s life among the people of God and the continuation of his name.<sup>ii</sup> When a child was produced, he or she would be considered the child of the first brother.

This was one of those, number-of-angels-dancing-on-the-head-of-a-pin kind of questions. It was a question designed to show how impractical the idea of resurrection to eternal life was. It was like focusing on a grain of rice and missing the aroma of the meal.

But Jesus offers a profound answer to their somewhat silly question. Jesus responded to them saying that Moses spoke of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as being alive to us now. God is the God not of the dead,” he went on to say, “But the God of the living; for in God all of them” – that is Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – “are alive.” [Luke 20:37-38]

In this answer, Jesus put God into the present context. “God is the God of the living, not the dead.” God’s life with Abraham, and the others, did not end with their death. God continues to be their God, as

God continues to be God with us and for us. No matter where we are on the spectrum of life into death, we continue in God's presence.

This answer, it seems to me, comes out of the very definition of God. If God is without beginning or end, then our relationship with the Holy One is without beginning or end. What this says to us is that God is no different toward us whether we live or enter into whatever capacity we exist in in the life beyond life. Wherever we lay, we are always in God's care, always in God's presence and always in God's fullness. No matter where we are in the journey from life to death, we are with God and God is with us. That is the meaning of eternal life. This is what we mean when we say in our confessions, "In life and in death, we belong to God."<sup>iii</sup>

In a moment we will read together our Affirmation of Faith. This morning we will read St. Paul's profound confession of life lived in the fullness of God. From Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, we read:

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword...? For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*<sup>iv</sup>

Here is where our understanding of eternal life begins. Frederick Buechner, the novelist, writes:

*We think of Eternal Life, if we think of it at all, as what happens when life ends. We would do better to think of it as what happens when life begins.... To live Eternal Life in the full and final sense is to be with God as Christ was with [God] and with each other as Christ is with us.*<sup>v</sup>

Does this text settle the question, what happens to us after this life? No, neither this text nor any other text in the sacred scripture offers a definitive answer to that question. But what this compelling text does do is tweak the imagination and offers us a preliminary understanding of our eternal hope in the on-going life of the Holy One. A God of the living (whose children we are) is a lively God, whose love for us is the basis of all of life.

Writer and pastor, Bruce Epperly calls this a "koan" text, a kind of mysterious saying, challenging us to let go of our rational control<sup>vi</sup> and embrace the mystery that lies at the heart of life, at the heart of faith, and at the very heart of God; the mystery that God is the God of the living, in whom we always live.

Ted Wardlaw is the President of Austin Seminary. Before going there, he was the pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, across the street from the Georgia State Capitol. While he served that congregation he visited a member of his church who was in the hospital.

It was a young man who was in the AIDS unit, suffering with pneumonia. He had great difficulty breathing. When Ted entered the room the young man was holding and oxygen mask to

his face and breathing as deeply as he could, but all he could muster were rapid, shallow snippets of breath. It was painful to watch and to listen to.

In that uncomfortable moment, Ted was uncertain what to say. After a few moments of silence, the patient found the strength to speak. With a halting and rasping voice, he said, "When this is all over, I want the first hymn at my memorial service to be one of Bach's finest pieces."

"Which one is that?" Ted inquired.

"The one titled, 'I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath.'"

What a profound affirmation of faith, and a proclamation of our belief that "In life and in death, we belong to God."

Jesus said, God is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to God, all are alive." Therein lies our eternal hope.

Thanks be to God.

<sup>i</sup> Deuteronomy 25:6-10

<sup>ii</sup> Sarah Henrich, "Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost," *The Lectionary Commentary: Third Readings: The Gospel*. (Eerdmans, 2001), 444

<sup>iii</sup> "A Brief Statement of Faith," *The Book of Confessions*, 10.1,

<sup>iv</sup> Romans 8:35, 38-39

<sup>v</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, (Harper and Row, 1973), 22-23

<sup>vi</sup> Bruce Epperly, "A Trick Question," *Process and Faith Lectionary Commentary*, [www.processandfaith.org](http://www.processandfaith.org)

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