November 9, 2025
St. John's Tappahannock
Rev. Nanette Woodworth
Luke 20:27-38

Good morning! Today's gospel is a conversation with the Sadducees, and unlike many other instances when Jesus is challenged by them, he comes across as a true rabbi, patiently and gently teaching and correcting his listeners.

The Sadducees were a Jewish sect that believed in the sole authority of the written Torah, the first 5 books of the Torah, and the importance of the Temple's sacrificial rituals. Unlike the Pharisees, they did not believe in the resurrection, angels, and the afterlife. They held a view of free will, believing humans were in complete control of their own destiny without significant divine intervention, and saw the soul as perishing with the body.

So in this passage, the Sadducees are challenging Jesus' view of the resurrection.

Two basic ideas are at the heart of their question – their love of Scripture, and the way they understand legacy or heritage. In their tradition, marriage and having children keep a man's family name alive here on earth. So this whole scenario of a widow marrying her brothers-law is not about protecting her and taking care of her after the death of her husband (no surprise). It is about how to protect their heritage and lineage. And of course this is especially important since they do not believe in an afterlife. If there is no resurrection, this time on earth is the only time that matters.

Jesus answers by talking about how marriage will not be the way it is now, in heaven. The children of God will be more like angels than people, he says, in that they exist eternally.

Jesus goes further to say that the Sadducees and Jesus both believe in the same God, the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel and Leah – sons and daughters of the living God, so to speak, arguing that they live on in the traditions which they share.

Jesus is showing the Sadducees that they have failed to let the Scriptures continue to shape, refine and correct their beliefs. In v. 39 and 40, we read that, "[39] … some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well. [40] For they no longer dared to ask him another question." This shows at that at least some of the listeners who came Jesus with this question are impressed with his answer.

So what does it mean for each of us that ours is a God of the living, not of the dead? Let's take a look at Luke 9:57-62; Jesus is now in Jerusalem and the time was coming for him to be crucified. He said several things to his disciples while they were walking together about focusing on building the kingdom of God, knowing he would soon not be there to guide them. These exchanges all illustrate the cost of discipleship.

[57] As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

[58] Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

[59] He said to another man, "Follow me."

But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

60 Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

61 Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.”

62 Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

His urgency reflected that his time was near, soon the disciples would become apostles, and while they will be guided by the Holy Spirit, they will need to be strong. *So live! Persevere! Have faith! Ours is a God of the living, not of the dead!*

Back to the Sadducees, maybe they really were curious about the alternative to their belief in “not being anything or anywhere at all after death” that Jesus offered.

What if you were in the crowd as one of the disciples of Jesus, and one of the Sadducees approached you, and said, “So tell me, what *is* heaven like? What does scripture and other Christian literature and poetry of the ages say?’ So here are some images that I find to be helpful glimpses of heaven, especially for the listeners in the gospel who said to Jesus after his teaching, “You have spoken well”.

Inspiring scriptures:

I. 9 But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

[10] God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. (1 Cor. 2:9-10)

We cannot even imagine how wonderful heaven will be. Not that we should not try, and even be comforted by our images. But time and time again in the Bible, we are told that all will be transformed into goodness and love beyond human understanding.

Inspiring Poetry

William Wordsworth from an excerpt of *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*. I like this stanza, because it reminds us, that we were in heaven with God before we began our earthly pilgrimage, and we will return to God. We are all spiritual beings.

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home…

Modern Mystic

“A Billion Points of Light”, poem by Thomas Merton

(a moment of insight while standing on a busy street corner…at any moment in any place, a glimpse of heaven can break in).

“At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak [God’s] name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship [and daughtership]. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely . . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.” 1

Prayer of the Essenes

So this is a the poem, *Be Still and Know I am God* by the Essenes, a community of aesthetics who lived in the hills outside of Jerusalem. It is comprised of images of God’s love and care for His creation, and how he loves to be in relationship with us.

I wrote a simple song that accompanies the poem, which perhaps I can play sometime at an Evensong service. The music is from a dream I had - in the dream I was walking through what seemed like an ocean of tall grass in a field, the wind causing ripples in the grass like waves, and a wooden flute was playing in the distance. I wrote down the melody I heard. I did not see the flutist, I just heard the sound, simple and clear.

It was soon after my 28 year old son Tyler passed away (2018), and I feel he sent me this melody to comfort me. Sometime later I discovered this beautiful poem. I connected the melody with this ancient poem which helped me find peace; it can do the same for others who are in any form of distress.

It reminds us God is with us always, and in Him we can find inner peace.

I added a few verses to fit into a four line verse for the song version,

keeping the refrain 'Be still and know I am God'.

In the verses notice the verb tenses of *to speak*:

I spoke

I speak

I will speak

Just like the meaning of the name God that gave to Moses to share with the people of Israel – Yahweh - which means, *I was, I am and I always will be,* the song and lyrics portray an eternal relationship with God.

A Prayer of the Essenes (adapted)

I speak to you.

I spoke to you at your first breath.

I spoke to you at your first thought.

I spoke to you at your first word.

I spoke to you at your first song.

Be still and know that I am God.

I spoke to you while you were asleep

I spoke to you at the first light.

I spoke to you at the noon of the day.

I speak to you through the peace of the evening.

Be still and know I am God.

I speak to you through the grass of the meadows.

I speak to you through the trees of the forests.

I speak to you through the valleys and the hills

I speak to you through the holy mountains.

Be still and know I am God.

I speak to your through the rain and snow.

I speak to you through the waves of the sea.

I speak to you through the dew of the morning.

I speak to you through the bubbling streams.

Be still and know I am God.

I speak to you through the splendor of the sun.

I speak to you through the brilliant stars.

I speak to you through the storm of the clouds.

I speak to you through the mysterious rainbow.

Be still and know I am God.

I will speak to you when you are alone.

I will speak to you through the Wisdom of the Ancients.

I will speak to you when you have seen my angels.

I will speak to you throughout eternity.

Be still and know I am God.

Amen

Resources

1. Merton, Thomas; Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander; Doubleday Publishing; poem – 'A Billion Points of Light'; 1955

2. Prayer of the Essenes: www.Worldprayers.org; https://www.worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/celebrations/i_speak_to_you_be_still.html