

God of the Living

Luke 20:27-38

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A couple of months after my husband died, I was in California visiting two of my closest friends. Jim is a Presbyterian minister, and his wife Lena is a hospice nurse. As we sat down at the dinner table, Lena looked at me and asked in all seriousness, “Well, has Ian shown up yet?” I said, “What do you mean?” She responded, “Have you seen Ian since he died? Has he been in the house? Have you sensed his presence in some way?” And, in fact, I had on several occasions. And frankly I was a little embarrassed about it as this was the first time I had admitted as such to someone else.

Come to find out that this is a common experience among those who have lost loved ones, particularly after a decades-long relationship. Science suggests that our sensing the presence of people close to us who have died is the brain’s way of easing the trauma of loss. While that may be true, there may be more going on here than we realize.

Think about it. Loved ones who have died show up in our lives all the time. It may be a television show that evokes a memory, it may be a conversation you have with a friend or family member, or something happens in your life that triggers your awareness of their presence in your consciousness. Maybe something about your son or grandson reminds you of your deceased father...his look, his intelligence, some quirky mannerism of his, some special ability he has, and for one fleeting moment, your dead father is alive for you, which makes you smile. He is alive not in an earthly sense, but alive in a different realm, in an entirely unique way not bound by human mortality. I don’t know about you, but I am grateful for moments like these.

These all-too-common human experiences testify, I believe, to a profound Christian truth, which we celebrate on All Saints Sunday. Of course, we have come to honor and pay our respects to members of this church who have died over the past year, as well as loved ones in our own lives who have passed. But the work of our God and our relationship to this God is not bound by death. We worship a God of living, for all who have died, we profess, are alive in this God. That’s the spiritual foundation upon which All Saints Sunday rests.

Jesus makes the case for this truth in our text from Luke this morning.

A group of Sadducees confronted Jesus the week before he died and challenged him with a reference to Deuteronomy 25. The passage stipulates that if a married man dies without any children, his brother is to marry his widow and have a child with her. Then, the baby is to be named after the deceased man so that his name will live on in Israel.

In this conversation with Jesus, the Sadducees produce a hypothetical situation based on this law in order to discredit the doctrine of resurrection, in which they don’t believe. “Jesus,” they said, “say there was a woman whose husband died childless, so she married his brother and he died childless, then she married his other brother and he died childless, too. This happened seven times with seven brothers—I’m beginning to feel sorry for this hypothetical woman. She never had any kids, and then she died. Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?” I can see the Sadducees grinning and fist bumping each other as if they had presented an air-tight case against resurrection.

But their contention rested on the premise that resurrection life will be fundamentally similar to life as we know it, that people will marry and have children and so on. To the contrary, Jesus replied that “in the resurrection from the dead [people] neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die anymore because they are like angels.” According to Jesus, there is resurrection life on the other side of death, and it will be qualitatively different from life as we know it. There will be no marriage, because we will be transformed

and, therefore, we will need no institution of marriage to propagate further life and perpetuate the family name.

Jesus further explains that we will be “children of God and children of the resurrection.” To be the child of an earthly parent is to be mortal; it is to inherit the inevitability of death. To be a child of God is to inherit the promise of resurrection life.

To make his case, Jesus cites a passage from the law of Moses, the story about the burning bush in Exodus 3. In this passage, God reveals Godself to Moses through the burning bush and says, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” When God said this, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had all been dead for about five hundred years. Yet God did not say, “I *was* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob;” God says, “I *am* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” The implication is that in God’s realm Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still alive.

L. D. Johnson was a twentieth century pastor and longtime Chaplain of Furman University. Decades ago, he lost his 23-year-old daughter, Carole, in a car wreck. Years later, he traveled to England to write a book reflecting on her vibrant life and her tragic death. An Englishwoman he met at a dinner party asked, “What are you doing here all the way from the States?” “It’s a bit hard to explain,” he replied, “but the general idea is to write something about the meaning of death.” “Oh?” said the woman. “I wouldn’t have supposed there is any.”

The woman’s comment motivated Johnson to eventually complete that book he set out to write, and he titled it *The Morning After Death*.¹ Within its pages, Johnson recounted the grief he experienced after losing a beloved family member. Yet, he ultimately expressed faith in the resurrected Christ and unwavering trust in the God of the living. “We shall always miss her here,” he wrote. “Separation was and is indescribably painful to those of us who love her. But I believe that she is as much alive now as at that tragic instant of impact on the icy highway.”

Such is the conviction of those who trust in Christ. And on this All Saints Sunday, such is the conviction of those who worship the God of the living.

Amen.

¹ https://www.amazon.com/morning-after-death-L-Johnson/dp/0805424121/ref=sr_1_1?crd=2PS02HHS6SR42&keywords=the+morning+after+death&qid=1667510691&qu=eyJxc2MiOilwLjg4liwicXNhIjoiMC4wMCIslInFzcCI6IjAuMDAifQ%3D%3D&sprefix=Morning+After+Death%2Caps%2C141&sr=8-1