

Sermon: "Life's Melody"

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Scripture Readings: Haggai 2:1-9, Luke 20:27-38

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Our first scripture reading is Haggai 2:1-9. Although little is known about this prophet, the date of his writing is quite precise, 520 BCE following the 70 year Babylonian exile. The Persian Emperor Cyrus conquered Babylon and freed the captive Israelites. Their joy is mingled with sorrow when they discover their homeland torn apart by war, poverty and drought. Listen to what the Spirit is saying.

*In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Luke 20:27-38. In the previous chapter Luke records Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem. In chapter 20 the tension heightens between Jesus and the religious power structure in three separate confrontations. Today's reading focuses on the third and final interaction initiated by the Sadducees, who do not believe in the resurrection. Listen to what the Spirit is saying.

*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 God is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive."*

The title of the sermon: "Life's Melody"

*The text: "Now God is God not of the dead, but of the living..." Luke 20: 38a*

Let us pray: Holy God, how grateful we are for the gift of life and for those whose lives we honor this day. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Today, we gather to honor the saints of Westminster who have died this past year, to give thanks for the melody of their lives, and to affirm the resurrection. Freidrich Schleiermacher, a nineteenth century German theologian and philosopher alludes to the relationship between life and faith in a metaphor drawn from music.

*"A person's special calling," he writes, "is the melody of one's life, and it remains a simple, meager series of notes unless religion with its endlessly rich variety accompany it with all notes, and raise the simple song to a full voiced, glorious harmony."*

In other words, life without faith is monotonous. A life lived only by a moral code, whether it is religious or cultural, which has not been touched by the grace of God does not reach its full potential. Limited by a narrow sense of goodness and personal pride, this life lacks the joy of celebration or the spontaneity of generosity.

Throughout Jesus' ministry he encouraged followers not to get caught up in the simple meager notes. Time and time again the Sadducees and Pharisees confronted Jesus when his life's melody expanded beyond their moral code. Whether he was healing the sick on the Sabbath or sharing table fellowship with tax collectors, Jesus never limited his special calling to a narrow repertoire. The spontaneity, the joy, and the generosity of Jesus grew out of the presence of God's spirit in his life. Very much aware of who he was and to whom he belonged, Jesus rejoiced in the God of the living.

In today's gospel, the Sadducees seek to discredit Jesus' melody with a question about the resurrection. According to Fred Craddock, *Their aim is to argue, to embarrass, to force Jesus into one particular school of thought, or just to divide the audience. There is among them no spirit of inquiry or desire to learn. They are simply baiting Jesus with a question on which their minds had been settled long ago. There is no resurrection of the dead.*

To appreciate fully this interaction it's important to understand who the Sadducees were. Theologically conservative, they held only the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Pentateuch, as authoritative. Many of this priestly class were aristocratic and wealthy. They were politically well connected with the Roman Empire and, therefore, invested in keeping the status quo. As a group they did not survive after the destruction of the temple in the first century. Ironically, those who did not believe in resurrection did not experience their own.

The resurrection question was one with which the Sadducees were well-versed because of the ongoing debate with the Pharisees, another more liberal party within Judaism who embraced the oral tradition as well as the Pentateuch and who believed in the resurrection. The resurrection is first mentioned in the Book of Daniel and by Jesus' time the Pharisees and Essenes affirm the resurrection.

By contrast, the Sadducees continued to believe that one lived on in the memory of their descendants. They reference the Levirate marriage law, an ancient practice in their patriarchal society, whose purpose was twofold. First, it guaranteed offspring to the deceased brother so his life would continue in the memory of his children. Second, it provided support to the widow who had no rights and who would have been totally dependent on a husband or male offspring. Alan Culpepper reminds us that this interaction between Jesus and the Sadducees took place in a time *“when marriage was viewed primarily as an arrangement of a man’s rights to a woman and a woman’s right to male support. In heaven there will be no need for such arrangements.”*

Jesus’ comments likely had more to do with the limitations of marriage in his lifetime than a description of the life to come. We are reminded that part of the melody of a life lived in faith acknowledges the mystery of the unknown and accepts the limitations of our understanding about this life and the afterlife.

Then Jesus surprises these Sadducees with another quote from their Pentateuch. In Exodus, when Moses meets Yahweh in the burning bush, Yahweh is addressed by Moses as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, all of whom had long since died. Surely God is not the God of the dead, but the living. From this point of view it is absurd to think Moses did not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

In his response Jesus not only affirms the resurrection, he also clarifies that this belief is different from the belief in an immortal soul that never dies. Immortality is a view of human nature that denies death. The belief in resurrection affirms our mortality and accepts death as a part of life. However, resurrection believes that God gives life to the dead!

This week’s World Series Cubs victory is a testimony to the resurrection! Following 108 years of baseball exile, the Cubs miraculously rose to the occasion and raised the simple song of baseball to a full voiced, glorious harmony. It wasn’t without an eighth inning tie, a rain delay, (Thank God!) and the words of inspiration from Jason Heyward. In recognition of the highs and lows of our mortality, he gathered the team during the 17-minute rain delay with words of solidarity and hope. “Hey guys, this is it! Every time we get up to bat we have the back of everyone on the team! We can do this! Believe and give it your all!

My father was among the millions of Cub fans joining the celestial choirs in heaven rejoicing at the resurrection of this baseball team. People across the country shared in the joy of these longsuffering, loyal supporters who refused not to believe and who reveled in the glory and the splendor of this victory that was greater than the former.

Let us live resilient lives that recognize the highs and lows of our mortality, acknowledges the losses along the way, and accepts death which is a part of life. Let us give thanks to the God for the gift of resurrection. Rather than seeking the status quo or our own meager goodness, let us always aim high, work hard and care deeply about one another. In turn, every time we go to bat, remember we have the back of everyone on the team. When we stumble, let us keep faith. When we lose, let us hold onto what is right... Then, by the grace of God, the simple melody of our lives will be raised to a full-voiced, glorious harmony. Alleluia, Amen.