

Sermon
St Benedict's Episcopal Church
November 9, 2025
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Five Views for the Threshold

After All Saints

Just three weeks ago in this space our daughter Christina was married to an exceptional person, Drew Miller. It was wonderful, enjoying and extending family and friends. During the service rings for exchange were brought forward by Chrissy's dogs Arthur and Marian...yes, Chrissy is an avid reader of English legend. Marian passed less than two weeks later, Friday the 31st from a long ailment, and the week's reading comes amid our joy and sorrow over life of this age, love and death, especially in the wake of All Saints and All Souls Days.

Our Gospel reading from Luke drops us right into the middle of a profound and charged exchange between Jesus and the Sadducees.

In context Jesus had now arrived in Jerusalem, demonstrating himself to be Israel's Messiah. Many received him gladly, with no one understanding fully who he was, or implications of his coming. Jesus' cleansing of the Temple and daily teaching and ministry there were viewed as threat by some Jewish leaders, who plotted to have Roman occupiers put him to death.

Across our chapter of Luke, as Jesus is teaching in the Temple, the Sadducees are the *third* group to approach him with loaded questions hoping to discredit him in the eyes of the people gathered, and to further their agenda.

I must admit I was ignorant of the Sadducees versus other Jewish groups we hear of in the Bible. The Sadducees left no written records, so what we know is from writings of others. They were a Jewish sect made up of the wealthy, aristocratic, upper echelon of Jewish society. They were a majority in the Sanhedrin, the central judicial authority of the Jewish people. They maintained the Temple in Jerusalem, so held a concern for Levitic ritual purity. They traced their origins to Zadoc, the priest of Solomon's Temple. Their sect held importance for just under three hundred years, between the construction of the Second Temple and its destruction by Rome in 70 CE. That broke their status as the elite in the Jewish structure.

This verse is their first mention in Luke, but they will play a major role across the crucifixion and into the Acts of the Apostles. They clung to their strict interpretation of the written Torah, the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch. They debated and rejected the oral culture of the Pharisees, especially on a resurrection, and had many differences with the more fringe Essenes. Rather than seek truth to a scriptural quandary, this complex, perhaps mocking question to Jesus was an astonishing hypothetical, meant to reinforce their belief that resurrection from the dead was unbiblical and impractical. They may have seen it as setting a legalistic trap based on their interpretation of the Law.

The Sadducees asked Jesus: "... Now there were seven brothers; the first married and died childless...in the same way all seven married the same woman and died childless. Finally, the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?

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

This event is mirrored in in Mark and differs slightly: "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken". The Gospel of Matthew has Jesus speaking more sternly: "How far you are from the truth! You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God."

Jesus confronts the Sadducees with their ignorance of the power of God. He confronts their self-proclaimed expertise with the Torah challenging their interpretation of God speaking to Moses through the burning bush. He purposefully adds the resurrected being like angels, opposing the Sadducees lack of belief in either angels or resurrection. In Mark's and Mathew's accounts he lays down additional admonitions overturning their surety.

In all three Gospels Jesus emphasizes the reality of resurrection, reaffirms the promise of life after death, and the significance of the resurrection to Christian faith. The resurrection is like threshold between ages- transformative- believers raised will be like angels, and their relational identity as children of God.

Death has no power over them, or us as believers. In our Old Testament reading the prophet Haggai is told by God to tell the faithful of his age, and we hear it today in our age, "Take courage...I am with you...My spirit abides among you. Do not fear."

A View from Baltimore

Perhaps with less malice than the Sadducees, we may wonder about that threshold and crossing from one age to another. One view of the threshold comes from the 1980's in Baltimore. Ann and I were married over 41 years ago in a downtown church where we met, in many ways like an urban version of our St. Benedicts congregation in outlook and community. Like here, that church's mission attracted retired clergy. Once, one particularly hard drinking, cigar smoking Associate Minister, Wayne Moulder, and I were in a deep conversation, one that may have involved some scotch, and I asked him, "what do you think happens at one's death?". He paused for a moment, and said "I don't know, but I put my total trust in God". I must admit, I like that kind of short catechism.

A View from Slovakia

A few years ago, I was gifted a different profound view. I had the wonderful experience of being granted a chance to teach and study in the Slovak Republic. Prešov University is about half the size of Cal Poly in a city about twice as large as San Luis Obispo. What they share is a great deal of open space between adjacent towns and dramatic scenery across a rural agrarian mountainous region. I researched fifty small wooden churches in isolated villages of 100 to 500 people in the folds of the Carpathian Mountains within a few hours drive of campus. While I was drawn to their intimate architecture, all are a size that could fit inside our St Ben's sanctuary, what struck me most was they manifested extraordinary, continued care, with many still in use after 400 years. In visitations and attending services, Ann and I were also exposed to the congregations who cared for them...and their dead.

Battles of two World Wars, claims of empires, border changes, and socialist and capitalist industrial plans have impacted those villages, yet the churches stand and the dead are recognized by their descendants. While jobs and economies may have moved many from agrarian village life, one is always aware of which village one's family emerged from. Most families maintain still a legacy house there, even if only used by an extended family a few weeks a year. It still remains one's home, there, among those who have passed on.

I recall one wooden church we visited on a sunny Saturday a week before All Saints- five graves were being ornately cared for by obviously intergenerational family groups, each bringing flowers but also lanterns. Most graves across denominations are not set within the ground with a manicured lawn as one may see across Los Osos Valley Road, but under stone slabs, some elevated with stone frames over a foot or more, and with a distinctive headstone. The stone slabs act as a table for lavish assortments of lanterns and flowers. As I took images of the church, I noticed more carloads of families arrive and before I left, the majority of the one hundred or so graves had been prepared for visitation and prayers.

We attended All Saints/All Souls services and vigils across the two days and night. I did not understand any of the words prayed in Slovak, but I totally understood what was said from the heart. It is a time when the villages fill with people returning home coming to remember their dead. The arrays of lanterns and candles give the cemeteries a beautiful glow amidst services conducted outside. Death is a transition, and loss, but bonds with the living are prized, cherished, celebrated. All the cemeteries were all elaborately set to celebrate the lives of those who modeled or shared, and who continue to share, their faith with us from "on another shore and in a greater light".

This remembrance of those passed is not isolated to the villages. Slovakia is recognized as containing the highest percentage of population who still attend church in the westernized world. In the larger towns, including Prešov, shops like our Albertson's will have whole aisles dedicated to cemetery remembrance paraphernalia. In nearby Krakov, Poland, almost one third of the floor space of the urban market hall is dedicated to similar arrays of lanterns and flowers from multiple vendors. Articles in media speak to how to make one's remembrances more sustainable and debate materials and types of flowers. The larger city cemeteries of thousands of graves also glow at night.

A View from Here

Back here, for a third, view I cherished the reading of my family names last week with our own All Souls service, that included my family, and Marian our grand dog, but also those close and recently passing across that threshold: the minister that presided over the wedding of Ann and me, a high school friend, and someone for whom I presided in a wedding service some fifteen years ago. I will paraphrase Emily Chapman's words with my own set of names: "I love the clouds of witnesses the Book of Hebrews talks about- don't look like clouds to me. They look like C. Ray and Edna, Ednaray, Albert, and Susan, Donald, David and Tom, and all the other heavenly friends I hold dear. I know those witnesses. I know their stories.... What a poverty it would be to walk through this valley of tears without them."

Mourning is a requisite sting for the ceasing of new memories built upon experiences with someone dear in this age. Memories sustain those relations in this age, but I trust in a future transitioned life, with, as the New Zealand version of Lord's Prayer tells us, "the Father and Mother of us all".

A View of the Gift

I am still working out a fourth view. My research into the architecture of the wooden churches has moved into the study of their faithful and of the work French philosopher and Catholic theologian Jean-Luc Marion. He initiates a complex challenge to systematic theology and adds a sense of mystery arising from Eastern Byzantine thinking. In essence, he suggests God's grace and presence simply as a gift, from elsewhere, not to be explained. We don't make meaning from our material world; we discover it as gift. That discovery of meaning originates beyond us. This gets me away from the twisted legalisms of the Sadducees and dogma that seem to plague much of the West's thinking. For him, and for me, Jesus' life and resurrection is God's greatest gift. It envelopes us and pulls us forward.

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

Belief in eternal life is not just a theological issue- unlike the Sadducees thinking, it is intensely practical. If we trust the life, words, and resurrection of Jesus, it will impact everything we do from this day forward. It is the grounding of our truth and prophetic mission. Despair is replaced by hope; indifference replaced by living with focus. Our certainty of resurrection does not rest on a speculative doctrine on the immortality of the soul, but on the fact of God's love.

A View from Behind Another Door

I started with a cherished dog, and I'll close with a story related by Rev. David Dyles:

*A country doctor went to visit a man who was dying in the man's home.
The man asked the doctor to describe to him what heaven would be like.
As the doctor thought about his reply, there was a scratching at the bedroom door.
The doctor said, "Do you hear that? It's my dog.
I left her downstairs when I came in.
She has come up here because she heard my voice.
She has no idea what's on the other side of the door—
but she knows I'm here and that's all that matters to her.
We don't know everything about what's on the other side of death's door—
but you can be sure that your Savior is there—and that's all you really need to know.*

Amen.