

1) *Whose wife WILL she be in the resurrection?*

That's the burning question you doubtless brought to church this morning,
desperate for an answer.

Ranks right up there, doesn't it, with *How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?*

A question, the likes of which Gautama the Buddha described as:

Questions that tend not to edification.

Compared with questions more down to earth—

intractable questions around impeachment, immigration, income inequality, foreign policy—
immediate questions regarding health, jobs, families, relationships—

compared with questions with which we wrestle daily, *Whose wife WILL she be?*—

It seems eminently dismissible with an exasperated eyeroll: *Much ado about nothing!*

2) But, when first it was asked, that question WASN'T "about nothing."

More was at stake than what first meets the modern eye.

But it might be characterized in a phrase that DOES currently get a lot of play:

Jesus and the Sadducees were engaged in "*competing attempts to control the narrative*".

Story lines that resonate most deeply with those who HEAR them—

those stories predispose listeners to believe and follow whoever TELLS them.

And this verbal skirmish is a contest about whose story rings most true.

3) Tension has been rising since Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt to shouts of praise.

Tell them to stop! the Pharisees had demanded.

If these were silenced, the stones would shout, Jesus had retorted—

and then He had broken into tears at the looming devastation

He could foresee on Jerusalem's horizon.

Jesus had as much interest in saving His people from the mindset of their leaders,

as those leaders had a vested interest in keeping firm grip on the mindset THEY controlled.

Into the temple, Jesus had stormed, sending entrenched commercial interests flying.

Then He'd gone on a teaching tear, with crowds in rapt attention.

Those pushing a conflicting narrative needed to delegitimize His words.

What sounded like truth in what Jesus said had to be debunked as hoax.

What He proclaimed as GOOD News needed to be branded as FAKE news.

And thus begins a desperate attempt by those with interests deeply threatened

to take back the story line, to reestablish their control of the narrative.

4) *What gives you the RIGHT?* they thunder. *How dare you? Show us your authority!*

Any answer He gives, of course, they will dismiss out of hand.

But if He doesn't answer, He'll also be discredited.

Jesus counters with His own question about the authority of John the Baptist—

a question His adversaries dare not answer—*If you can't answer, I don't have to,* He says.

End of Round One: JESUS--ONE; Alternative Story-Tellers—NOTHING

They try again: *Pay taxes to Caesar—should we, or shouldn't we?*

Give each what's theirs—God and Caesar—Nothing less to God, but nothing more to Caesar!

End of Round Two: Jesus--TWO, Alternative Story-Tellers--ZERO.

The discreditation window is closing fast—a new band of opponents steps up to keep it open.

They are Sadducees—they believe the Sacred Story only in its oldest telling.

They accept as true nothing but stories in the Five Books of Moses.

Those stories make no mention of resurrection, so the Sadducees don't buy it.

They pose a question Jesus cannot dodge: *Whose wife will she be in the "resurrection"?*

Their story line about the prospect of Life Eternal is

that life unending is only possible if passed from parent to child.

So, when a man dies childless, say the Sadducees, his lifeline comes to a total halt.

Hence their practice of Levirate marriage—

If an older brother dies, a younger brother

must take up husband and progenitor roles with his deceased brother's wife.

The prospect, therefore, of a woman having EITHER seven brother husbands,

OR one but NOT the others "in the resurrection"—*Well now*, sneer the Sadducees,

that renders the whole notion of "resurrection" utterly unintelligible—DOESN'T it, Jesus!

This gambit— ever so clever—

it puts the Sadducees in prime position to reassert control of the narrative—

the story of HOW human life is to be understood, and WHO gets to spell out the terms.

5) I see Jesus taking a deep breath, and responding in quiet, measured tones.

You assume that life is something that only humans can "pass on" before they "pass away."

That assumption is limited and unfounded, He declares.

LIFE is WHO GOD is and WHAT GOD GIVES—

Biological reproduction is only one expression of God's Being and God's Gift.

Human life that comes and goes—life that is first born, then dies—

that life, says Jesus, is deeply, firmly grounded in Divine Life—Life unbounded and inexhaustible.

Your counter narrative of human life as a commodity—to be controlled as BEST we can

until we NO LONGER can—men "taking" women merely as means of reproduction—

that narrative, Jesus insists, only makes sense from a grave-yard point of view.

There is another vantage point from which to tell the story of our lives, He continues.

And from THAT vantage point, those who see God as their maker and their model—

THEY are children of the resurrection,

regardless of how they may currently be registered in the bureau of vital statistics.

6) So YOU say—that's not what MOSES says, the Sadducees counter. **MOSES is OUR authority!**

Well, as a matter of fact, Moses says what I am saying, Jesus replies.

When speaking to Moses from the Burning Bush, God Self-describes,

NOT as the One who WAS the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

NO! God Self-describes as One who IS their God.

SO—even in the narrative you accept as true, the message is clear: To God all are alive!

Life is NOT ultimately under OUR control. Our life is HELD in the Life of God.

End of Round Three: Jesus—THREE, Alternative Story Tellers—ZIP.

- 7) But this isn't just a contest about who can spin a better story—
who can wrest control of the narrative from the other—a match won by quick-witted Jesus.
The stakes are far higher—for these questioners, and for our questions.
I am struck with how our seemingly more immediate, seemingly more important questions—
questions both political and personal—these questions ARE about WHO controls life, and HOW.
See what you think, but what I'm thinking, is that many of our pressing personal questions
derive from concerns about how we can best establish or maintain control of pieces in our lives.
And many of our pressing political questions are driven by concerns
about how others can be enlisted and employed to do the same, namely,
extend our agency over our own lifelines, and the lifelines of those with whom we identify.
All of these are life legacy concerns not unlike those driving those seven hypothetical brothers,
one after the other, to marry that poor woman—all unsuccessful in securing an heir).
- 8) If you and I, are fundamentally “beings toward death,”
as Existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger mordantly describes us—
beings whose existence consists in TRYING to control what ultimately we CANNOT control—
that story line will have profound, pervasive implications for how we address life's questions.
And our answers will often come down to some version of a Zero Sum Game.
If, on the other hand, we are, as Jesus claims, “children of the resurrection;”
that will set us free to engage one another in ways not driven and determined
by restless, fruitless quests for control.
Our questions will be more directed to how we can SHARE, as gift
the lives we are GIVEN as gift, a gift that comes with a God guarantee.
Even in the face of what seems to be loss of life, loss of meaning, loss of control,
we will be able to declare with Job, even through clenched teeth, as surely Job does:
*I know that my Redeemer LIVES, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God,
Whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold—and not another.*
What Jesus says to the Sadducees, Jesus offers as assurance to us:
In the stories of our lives, it is God alone who is in ultimate, gracious control of the narrative.
A control to which we can respond, and in which we can participate with acts of gratitude.
For, God is the God of the living—and to God we are all alive.