

Our Gospel reading for this morning features a tricky riddle presented to Jesus by some learned people at the Temple. They are trying to get Jesus to say something blasphemous or wrong according to the Jewish faith. But Jesus doesn't allow the ridiculous hypothetical of a woman with seven husbands to deter him. He knows that the main thing about these Sadducees in front of him is that they want to entrap him. Jesus pivots seamlessly to talk about the heart of the matter, resurrection.

The question of what happens to us when we die is a very real concern for those in Jesus' day, and in our day. I remember a discussion I orchestrated with the youth group of Trinity Church in Southport back when I was a curate there. What the young people asked that evening made me realize that this is a question that many of us have, but few of us feel comfortable discussing with family, or friends, or even their pastor!

The youth group was ranged around the room on comfy bean bag chairs. We had all taken our shoes off when we came in the door because we practiced what God said to Moses in his burning bush experience: God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

⁵ Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Exod. 3:4-6)

Everyone grabbed a brightly colored bean bag seat and we put them in a big circle. There were about 14 kids in the group that evening ranging in age from 13 to 16.

Everyone was given a piece of paper and a pencil. I asked them, "Write down a question you would ask Jesus if he were standing in the room with us today." They all thought for a bit, some looked up at the ceiling, some started writing furiously, and a couple of kids started throwing bits of paper at each other. Sigh. It was youth group.

I collected all the papers and started to arrange them based on the types of questions. And then Jesus walked into the room.

Well, it was really a friend of mine from seminary who had dark skin, longish hair and a stubbly beard. He was dressed in a long white robe. He looked just the part. (At least what we have come to believe is the part.) He came in the door and removed his sandals and looked around at us all. I have to say, the kids who had been goofing off stopped. The kids who had been looking out the window stopped. The kids who were talking about somebody at school stopped. The room was silent.

I said, “Hey, Jesus. Thank God you are here. These young people have some questions they would like to ask you.” Jesus took the pieces of paper and started reading them to himself and nodding. I grabbed a bean bag chair for him and he joined our circle. The kids couldn’t take their eyes off him!

After a little time he spoke. “You’ve asked a lot of really good questions. And I see that quite a few of you have questions about what happens after this life. Is there a heaven and hell? What happens to us when we die? Will we see God? I’ll get to this, but first I’ve got to answer the person who asked, Did Jesus have a girlfriend? Well let me tell you. I have lots of very good friends. But my life is too short to focus on having one single special person in it. I have to do the work that my Father sent me to do.

So, now, about life after death. Well, from there my Jesus-like friend went on to talk about these questions. What he says, and what we heard this morning from Luke’s Gospel, is that the categories we think of in this life will no longer exist – black and white, married or single, rich or poor, even those we think should be in heaven or the other place. Jesus tells us that we will ALL be children of God, and children of the Resurrection.

There is a parallel between our Gospel reading and the Hebrew Scripture reading for today. The people who Haggai speaks to in Jerusalem are the faithful remnant of people who have returned from Babylon. Cyrus of Persia has conquered Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and the people have come back home. You can imagine how you would have built up this homecoming in your mind after having been in exile for 60 years. There may be some of the old generation still alive, but many of the returnees will have been of the next generation who never saw Jerusalem in its glory except through the stories told to them by their elders.

Imagine how devastating it would have been to arrive back in the Holy Land to find it utterly destroyed along with most of the homes and businesses. There had been some people who were left behind all these years in Jerusalem, but they were a small number and in no way could have had the manpower or the materials to re-build the Temple themselves.

What must have seemed like death awaited the remnant coming home. But Haggai, God’s prophet, rallies them all and says to them: Take courage Zerubbabel, take courage Joshua, and take courage all you people of the land. Why? Even if the city looks dead, there is life ahead. “My spirit abides among you; do not fear.” Didn’t I bring you out of Egypt? God will breath life into the ruins. “I will fill this house with splendor.” Life will follow death.

Looking outside today, with frigid temperatures and the leaves all off the trees gives the impression that all is dead. The grass is brown, the trees are bare. The natural world around us seems dead. And yet we are all certain of what will happen in the spring. We know that the trees will bud and the grass will turn green again. We are certain that there will be new life in the natural world. Why would we then have any doubt about what Jesus says about the Spiritual world. New Life will come to all of us.