

***A sermon preached on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019 based upon Luke 20:27-38 entitled, “God is Bigger than Our Arrogance and Our Despair”***

I’m not good at memorizing lyrics. I have, however held onto a verse from a country song I learned when I was a young man by the great John Prine entitled “Angel from Montgomery” because I found the scene it depicts so compelling. In the song Prine conjures up a middle-aged woman trapped in despair living with a loveless marriage. Life has become a tedious, meaningless thing for her. She longs for an angel to take her away from her life. These are the words I’ve remembered all these years:

*There’s a fly in the kitchen; I can hear him buzzing,  
I ain’t done nothing, since I got up today.  
How the hell can a person, go to work in the morning,  
come home in the evening, and have nothing to say.*

*Make me an angel that flies from Montgom’ry.  
Make me a poster of an old rodeo.  
Just give me one thing that I can hold on to.  
To believe in this living is just a hard way to go.*

A conversation has stayed with me from perhaps thirty five years ago that I had with a woman from my first church who embodied the despair expressed in Prine’s song. On the surface the woman projected a façade of cheerfulness, but underneath she suffered from a good deal of depression. She had married young, and now in her forties she was stuck in a marriage that hadn’t matured with the passing of the years. She took care of the home front, cooking dinner for her husband dinner but he showed little interest in her, and he spent much of his time out of the house with his male buddies. I didn’t know him well, but I suspect he was not depressed the way his wife was. The woman’s children were largely grown, living their own lives. She was clearly lonely.

I was visiting the woman in her home and somehow our conversation turned to the topic of eternal life, and all these years later I still remember this woman wondering aloud whether it would be even desirable to have “eternal” life. If it simply meant an endless continuation of what she already knew of life, how could that be a good thing? The life she knew was one of meaningless tedium.

“To consider this living is a hard way to go.”

The Sadducees who challenged Jesus that day regarding his belief in resurrection were in one way like this woman, and in another quite different. They were like her in so far as the only

afterlife of which they could conceive would be one that was a continuation of this one. They were unlike her in that they were pretty satisfied with this life; perhaps in this way they had more in common with this woman's husband.

The Sadducees were men who lived a privileged life as the aristocracy of Jerusalem, their comfortable lifestyle having been passed down through the generations of their families. They were learned, knowing well the Torah. Their Jewish faith was what you might call "old time religion" grounded exclusively in the five books of the Torah, the oldest books of the Bible believed to have been written by Moses himself. In their minds the psalms and the prophets were too "modern" to take seriously and since there were no overt references to resurrection to be found in the Torah, they did not believe in it. Since their lives were satisfying and comfortable, well one life was good enough for them.

The Sadducees were less troubled than other Jews by the Roman occupation. They were reassured by the theology of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Torah which taught that if you lived the right way then God would bless you with good fortune in this life, so they assumed their comfortable lives were a sign that God was smiling on them. People who were experiencing hunger and homelessness must be reaping what they sowed, which made it easy for them to overlook the injustice of this world.

For the Sadducees the only life beyond this life was the one lived out by one's descendants, which made it supremely important to have children who would survive you.

So it is with smug self-assurance that the Sadducees conjured up a hypothetical situation for Jesus involving a woman who is widowed seven times over by seven brothers without once producing a child. What is striking is their lack of concern for the plight of the woman in their hypothetical. In those days it was absolutely a man's world. Marriage wasn't a covenant of loving commitment; it was a legal contract between a man and the father of the woman the man intended to marry. Women were considered the property of men, and their singular purpose in life was to bear children, particularly sons who could carry their father's name forward after they died.

This woman is barren, and so in the eyes of her culture she lives a meaningless life, having failed to fulfill her primary purpose. She is another woman who could well be singing, "*To consider this living is a hard way to go*", but the Sadducees are deaf to the sorrow of such a song. Their sole reason for discussing this woman is to demonstrate how absurd it is to believe in the notion of a life beyond this one. *Think of the confusion regarding whose property this woman would be in the life to come!*

Jesus responds by essentially saying that the Sadducees have no idea what they are talking about. The life beyond this life is an altogether different kind of life from the one we know in this world – one where among other things women will no longer be considered pieces of property of men. In the life to come we will be like angels, and our worth will be found solely in our identity as children of God.

Jesus went on to call the Sadducees' attention to a verse they had overlooked in Exodus in which Moses meets God in the burning bush and God introduces Himself as the "God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Each of these ancestors in the faith are referred to in the present tense -- a statement that only makes sense if they continue to live to God.

There is something within all of us that is drawn to a kind of tunnel vision that loses sight of the wonder and mystery of life and the grandeur of the living God.

This tunnel vision takes two forms:

The first is the arrogance of the Sadducees in which we come to believe that our way of seeing life is the only one that matters, where our tunnel vision leads us to claim more knowledge than our finite minds are capable of possessing regarding the nature of ultimate reality and the eternal mystery that is God. In such arrogance we claim for ourselves the authority that belongs only to God, passing judgments of others, oblivious to the burdens they carry. We turn a deaf ear to the voice of God calling us to be servants of others.

The second form of tunnel vision is that of despair – the despair of the woman in John Prine's song and the woman for whom eternal life seems like a curse, perhaps also of the barren woman conjured up by the Sadducees. It is the tunnel vision in which we look at our lives and no longer see the possibility of wonder and gracious surprises, where our problems fill our field of vision, leaving us unable to find reason to hope. This despairing form of tunnel vision blinds us to the possibilities given to us to make connection with others, leaving us lonely and isolated. We are left at the mercy of the distorted value systems of this world that leave us feeling worthless, like the barren woman feeling without purpose or value because she has failed to produce the child the male dominated world requires of her.

In both the tunnel vision of arrogance and the tunnel vision of despair the only god we can conceive of is a god who is too small. It was not the living God who is beyond our capacity to fully comprehend, the God who spoke to Moses in the fire of the burning bush, whose name was the unutterable "I am who I am." These little gods made in our own image and likeness are not the God of resurrection whose power can bring forth life where we see only death; bring forth light where we see only darkness.

God is always greater than we can conceive, and the life God created for us to live is always greater than we can imagine.

One of the smartest human beings to ever live was the 17<sup>th</sup> century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, who was also a Christian. Late in his life he had some kind of intense, mystical experience in which he directly encountered the mystery of God. Afterwards he wrote a description of what he had experienced on a piece of parchment, and sewed it into the lining of his jacket, as a constant reminder of what he had glimpsed when the world would tempt him to narrow his field of vision. The parchment was found after his death by his steward and included the following words:

*From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight,*

*FIRE.*

*GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob*

*not of the philosophers and of the learned.*

*Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.*

*GOD of Jesus Christ.*

*My God and your God.*

*Your GOD will be my God.*

*Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD...*

*Grandeur of the human soul.*

*Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.*

Now we see in a mirror dimly, Paul wrote. But one day we will see the great holy mystery of God face to face.

We treasure the glimpses given to us if we are willing to pay attention.

If you are feeling the temptations of darkness, overwhelmed by the problems that leave you feeling despairing of the future, I pray this week you will capture the glimpse of God's grace you need that will allow you see your life from a whole new perspective, with renewed confidence in that God's resurrection power is greater than all the powers of death.

