

At the book study this week we were reminded of a well-known and wonderful bit from the American spiritual writer, Annie Dillard, in which she wonders why people in churches so often seem like "cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute." That's not a very nice thing to say about us, but she seems at a loss to explain how it is that people invoke the power of the Living God, the God who raised Jesus from the dead, without first strapping ourselves to our seats and donning crash helmets. She insists that if we had any idea of just whom we are dealing with when we deal with God, we couldn't possibly be casual in our worship. Yet, so often we call out the name of the God of the Burning Bush, while in our heart of hearts we trust that the only fire on a Sunday morning will be the candles we choose to light. Annie can't get over that.

I think that if we find her critique harsh, it's probably worth listening to again. Because she's absolutely right. Of course, it's not that God's presence doesn't bring a peace that's beyond all understanding or circumstance; the Holy Spirit comes like cool water to our parched souls; Jesus calls all of us weary and heavy laden ones to come to him for rest. But the truth is that when we experience God's presence, the peace we receive often brings with it a staggering wonder at the God who would be God with us and for us; the living water comes as a flood of mercy and grace we could never have prepared for; the other side of Jesus' rest is to be launched into the world, fully alive!

The gospels remind us again and again that when we're confronted by Jesus, we come face to face with Truth beyond our control, the Way that defies our boundaries, the Life that is truly life--abundant beyond our wildest dreams. And today's word from Luke's Gospel is no different. We can't really hear it and imagine that life with Jesus is going to be kind of run of the mill.

The passage we heard, with the Sadducees trying to tie Jesus up in knots of logic, is part of series of three confrontations between Jesus and some of the religious leaders and authorities in Jerusalem, that begin just after the Temple-clearing incident. I'm not going to go back quite that far, but I hope you'll forgive me for looking outside our specific text for today, because I think that these scenes have to hang together. I'd encourage you to read all of Luke 20 this week, and perhaps pray your way through these stories.

The first of the confrontations happens when some of the religious leaders want to know just who Jesus thinks he is, and by whose authority he's doing and saying what he's doing and saying. He's caused a ruckus in the Temple, masses of people are flocking to him to hear him preach--because he preaches with uncommon clout--and this is proving to be more than a touch disruptive for folks who have an interest in keeping things the way they are, both religiously and socially.

The second confrontation is just brilliant. This time some spies are sent, by the powers that be, and they have a great trick to get Jesus to slip up. They'll ask Jesus if it's right to pay taxes to the Emperor. Any Jewish rebel worth his salt will have something scandalous to say about the Roman Emperor, who in all kinds of ways has set himself up in opposition to YHWH. And that will be Jesus' undoing; he'll say something treasonous and they'll be able to arrest him. But Jesus says, "Ok, you want to talk about taxes, go get me a coin that you use to pay your taxes.

Whose image is on it? The Emperor's? Tell you what: Let's give whatever has the Emperor's image on it to him, and we'll give God whatever bears God's image."

The third confrontation, we just heard. The Sadducees come to question Jesus about resurrection. They don't believe in it, because one of the peculiarities of the Sadducees is that they only regarded the first five books of the Bible, the Books of

Moses, as Scripture. Resurrection isn't mentioned anywhere between Genesis and Deuteronomy. *But* there are these rules about marriage, which would appear to cause some issues for those who believe that the dead will be raised when God's kingdom comes in fullness. The age to come is going to have some awkward family encounters, if a bunch of brothers all think they're married to the same woman. What do you have to say about that, Jesus?

What he says is a bit odd, frankly. But as far as I can understand it, Jesus is insisting one more time that the point of following the law isn't following the law; it's drawing near to God, getting in on what God is doing in this world, even as all things are being made new. This isn't new. It's all over the Old Testament, throughout the prophets and Psalms; throughout the Torah God makes it clear that the way of life that He is establishing for His people isn't an end in itself. The goal isn't to have a bunch of people who are really good at following rules; the goal is to have a people alive to God, a people eager to witness to God's goodness and grace for the world, ready to be the bearers of blessing to all the nations.

Again, this isn't something that Jesus came up with: the reason that the scribes are nodding their heads in agreement at the end of today's passage is that they agree! That's their experience, both in Scripture and in their life in the company of God; it's what they've seen and know! The Sadducees have settled for a neat and tidy religion, but what they were called to was a reckless relationship with the Living God.

Now, at the end of each of these interactions there's a kind of moment of a pause, a breath. People stop talking. In one instance it says that they fell silent. And the pauses are where I want to land today. Because that's where the questions raised

become questions not just for them, then, but for us, now. Luke refuses to plow through the gospel, and instead, makes us stop and hear the Word for us.

The first question matters tremendously: By whose authority is Jesus doing and saying what he's doing and saying? Whose will and way is Jesus' will and way? We have to sit in that pause. We can't avoid this question, because it makes all the difference in the world.

The testimony of Scripture and the witness of the Church, what we have seen and know, is that Jesus is the authority of God embodied, intimately present. It's stunningly good news if we let it sink in. It means that the way that Jesus is, is the way of God for us. His way of mercy and love, his outlandish affection for us who could never earn it, his death-defying grace, his healing, his restoring, his world-inverting, new-making way, is not just the way of a great spiritual teacher or a rebellious first-century rabbi: it is the way of God.

Of course, when we see it and know it, when the Holy Spirit brings it to life within us, it's not just a truth that we can perhaps believe; it's the truth that makes a claim on our lives. If Jesus really is the way of God with us and for us, then when he calls us to shape our lives around him, to be his disciples--those who do what the Master does--our response really matters. The more we sit in this first pause, the more we will come out of it shaped in the cross-bearing, world-loving, God-glorifying will and way of Jesus. We will start to look like him. We'll start to move through the world like him.

Which leads us to the second pause. I just love how Jesus reminds us that we are made in God's image--that we, in these bodies, flawed and cracked as we may be, bear the indelible image of the One who made the heavens and the earth; in these lives, in all our muck and wonder, we bear the mark of the One who is the source

of all life. That's whose and who we are. What does it mean to claim that, here and now? What does it look like to give everything that bears God's image to God? How much could we let go of, if we were giving up the things that the gods of this world want? And what would we grab hold of if we gave all we are and have to God? Jesus reminds us that who we are and what we do is not dependent upon what the world says of us, not even what the Emperors say about us. Who we are and what we're called to do is relative to who God is and what God is doing. That's a wild thing to say about us. But it's what Jesus says about us.

And I really believe that that's what's at play finally in today's passage. I don't think that Jesus is condemning marriage at all. I don't think he's undermining the value of marriage, or the truth that it really can be sacramental when two people give themselves to one another. (Though this might be a reminder that Biblical family values are not quite as straightforward as we might have believed...)

No, I think that at least part of Jesus' point is that our value is not relative to anyone other than God. If we really fleshed this out, I think we hear a pretty remarkable statement from Jesus when he insists that the woman's worth in the kingdom has precious little to do with whose husband she is or was, let alone whether she had kids. That may not be as relevant a thing for us in 2016, but we have plenty of other ways in which we determine each other's value and place. We have our own rules and allegiances that cramp the expansive grace of God, that tame God's wild vision for the newness of all things.

But that's not what we're meant for. We're not meant to be cramped and tame. We've got a bigger vision. We're resurrection people, who follow the resurrected One! We've been called by the One whom even death can't contain! The world did its damndest to rein him in, and it didn't work. One of my heroes, Shane

Claiborne, says, "We'll dance the dance of Jesus until they crucify us for it; then we'll rise to dance again!" No wonder the Christians in Acts were accused of turning the world upside down!

At the end of the day we are people created in and for and saved by a wild and woolly grace. We have an identity that we could never have earned. We're called into the intimate will and way of the One we could never have expected. And as the saints of every generation have discovered as we sit in that reality, as we soak in it, let it overcome, overwhelm, overshadow us, we come to know more and more what Jesus meant when he said that he came that we might know life, and have it in abundance, here and now and forever.

Because God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

Thanks be to God for that.