

“All of Them Are Alive” / Luke 20:27-38 / 10 November 2013

“God is not the God of the dead,” Jesus tells the Sadducees, those stuffy religious traditionalists of his day, who see no need for an afterlife. “God is not the God of the dead,” he says, “but of the living, for to God all are alive.” Is Jesus saying here that all the dead still live on in the mind and the memory of God? Jesus seems to be saying that in the endless being of God, anyone—and perhaps anything—that ever was, somehow still is. He's saying that after all our vain attempts to trick time, to kill time, to escape time, after all of these have failed, in the end, time itself is an illusion that cannot hold us forever, that you and I belong not to time but to eternity. We are facets of the very life of God, expressed in days and years.

In his fiction short story, “Prism,” David Eagleman tells of an afterlife where God couldn't quite decide what age every person should be. Of course, Socrates famously believed that everyone would be thirty in heaven, but in this story, there's a different solution. When you arrive in the afterlife, you are split up into all the different selves you have been at different phases of your life. There's the childhood you, the young adult you, the middle-aged you, and so on. This takes some getting used to because, as you're out and about in the afterlife, you might just bump into another you. Eagleman says, “Typically the different yous are happy to see each other because they possess the same name and a shared history. But the yous are more critical of yourselves than they are of others...and the different yous tend to drift apart. The eighteen-year-old you has more in common with other eighteen-year-olds than with the seventy-three year old you. But once in a while the different yous organize a gathering, like a family reunion, bringing together all your ages in a single room. At these reunions, the middle-aged yous will pinch the cheeks of the young, and the teenagers will politely listen to the stories and advice of the elderly. These reunions reveal a group of individuals touchingly searching for a common theme,” which they never really find because you've been so many different people in the course of a lifetime. Time brings deep changes to a human life, to the earth itself, to the animals and plants. Time keeps marching unsentimentally forward; it never looks back. But Jesus seems to be saying here that somewhere, in a place beyond time, a place we've nicknamed “eternity,” each person (and who knows, perhaps each and every thing!) exists timelessly and forever in the very life of God.

Frederick Buechner says that, for most of us, if we live long enough, there comes a day when we play a sad and dangerous game with ourselves. It's the day when we look around our life and wonder what became of all those other selves we once were, or hoped to be. For men, this might be the day when we look in the mirror and notice that our hair has migrated from our scalp to our ears. Nature sends women their signals of age, too, and many of them are far worse. Things we used to do take a little more effort than they once did. There are aches that never were before, and things jiggle in places where we never even knew that we had “things.” It's on this day that you climb up to the attic to dig out the old high school and college yearbooks, poring over the decades-old photo albums with faded pictures of yourself and those you loved. You spend hours beneath the bare bulb in the chilly air of the attic, or on the floor of the bedroom closet, looking over old photos of who you once were, where you'd once been. It's on that day that you might even ask, “What became of that bright-eyed, energetic, hopeful creature who had all the world ahead of him or her? What happened to the dreams I used to nurture? I'm not ungrateful for the person I am today; in fact, most of the time I'd have to admit that I'm a whole lot happier than the person in those photos, but how did I get from there to here? I hardly remember the intervening years. Look at that Flock-of-Seagulls hairdo, or that beehive, the Nehru jacket, the easy assurance that the world was mine, the whole world just waiting for me to come and get it! What's become of the person I was? What's become of me?”

How many selves have you been down through the years, how many urgently important selves that you would hardly recognize today? If you met one of your former or future selves today at coffee hour, would you even like him or her? Time marks us; time changes us; time carries us in its current, and as Shakespeare said, “Nothing stands but for time's scythe to mow.” Where do they go, those bygone selves? Where do they go, those places where we were happy once, the people who made us

happy, the times we lived, and suffered, and laughed, and struggled to survive? Time swallows them as the winter swallows the summer. And yet, even winter is not forever. All those selves you've been, "all of them are alive" to God. You can only live one self at a time, so the selves you outgrow or discard pass beyond time and are forgotten. But Jesus seems to be saying, and Paul Tillich would probably agree, that eternity quietly collects those lost selves, reclaims them from the drift of time, and keeps them new forever. You and I do not belong to time. We are creatures of eternity. The promise and the hope is that somewhere, hidden away deep in the very life of God—which is just another term for eternity—each of us lives on.

What is it about early November that makes the world melancholy? Here in Pennsylvania, November is the gray limbo between the brilliant reds and yellows of October and the gleaming white of December. With winter setting in all around us, it's easy to become pensive. But even people in the world's sunnier places dwell on death in November: All Saints Day, All Souls Day, the Mexican Day of the Dead. And here again this week, the lectionary assigns us a reading about the afterlife.

In today's reading from Luke, we find Jesus coming into disagreement with the Sadducees, those religious establishmentarians of his day. The Sadducees were the wealthy and powerful religious elite who controlled the Jerusalem temple. Members of this Jewish sect didn't believe in any afterlife. (That's why they were so sad, you see?) They only accepted the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, which make no mention of any hereafter. And so they wished to trap Jesus in a philosophical corner. They made up a story about a woman who married seven brothers, and all of them died in succession. Finally the seven-time bride herself died...as anyone would after putting up with seven husbands. Who will she be in the afterlife? Whose wife will she be? What name will she bear? With whom will she be reunited? Which self will she be?

The Sadducees are basically asking the same question David Eagleman is exploring in his short story, "Prism": Since a person is so many selves throughout the course of a lifetime, which one of those selves will we be in the afterlife, if there really is an afterlife? It's basically a way of saying, "Look, your notions of life after death are illogical for many, many reasons...but here's one of them: Which self will we be?" Jesus' answer seems to treat the question as frivolous. He says, "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to God all are alive." You and me, we live out our brief span of time, full of worries, and joys, and desires. We strut and we fret until one day, our time is ended, and as far as time is concerned we are no more. But—and this is the essence of Jesus' answer—life does not belong to the tyrant, time. Life belongs to eternity, and what has been will forever be. All of the woman's selves are alive to God.

Eternity! Just what is eternity? We tend to think of eternity as the accumulation of all the forgotten years, but it's not. Eternity stands beyond our years, before them and after them. Every once in a great while we might touch eternity, we become aware of it. In rare moments, eternity breaks into our span of time—when the cello hits a certain note that reminds us of something we spend most of our lives forgetting but which cannot be put into words, when for a split second, something as mundane as a child's laughter or a scene of great beauty brings us an instant of clarity that is gone as quickly as it came, when in moments of deepest passion, or conviction, or love we feel ourselves better and wiser than we are—on those rare occasions, we hear an echo of eternity, our distant home, which exists outside of time. In this world, we, all of us, rush from the darkness of not yet toward the darkness of no-more. We sense our own transience in the changing of the seasons, in sad goodbyes, in the aging of our own reflections in the mirror. And yet, every now and again we know within ourselves that we will not always be enslaved to the tyrant, time. Eternity's reminding us that in her calm and endless embrace, we remain her children before and after time. Beyond our season of numbered days, with their trouble and satisfaction, eternity goes calmly about her business of remembering who we are.

We don't always remember who we are, but somehow God does. A Lutheran church in the countryside had a small congregation of faithful folks. But over the years, one fellow, a farmer who had once been very active in the church, began to drift away from the fold. The pastor went to visit

him at his farm and asked why he didn't attend church anymore. The man was embarrassed to admit the truth. "Well, pastor, times are hard, and all I've got left to wear is overalls and work boots. I couldn't come to church dressed like this." The pastor assured the man that he could indeed come dressed in overalls and boots, but the farmer was too proud to do it. Finally, the pastor said, "Listen, I've got a nice suit that will just about fit you; I've outgrown it. I've got some good dress shirts, too, and old ties that are a little bit out of style, but nobody around here will notice. I'll bring them over this afternoon, and you can have them to wear to church." The man agreed, and the minister went to fetch the clothes. The next Sunday, the old farmer still wasn't in church. A little bit annoyed, the pastor returned to the farm and said, "I gave you all those clothes, and you still didn't come to church!" The man replied sheepishly, "Oh, pastor, I got up and put on those beautiful clothes to go to church. I looked so classy that I went to the Episcopal church." Sometimes we forget who we are. God does not.

Many people worry about where they will go in the afterlife, and yet few question where they were in the forelife—to create a new word—in that period before they were ever conceived or drew breath. But isn't it essentially the same question? What exists outside the boundaries of my own span of years? Touch a rock, any little piece of ornamental gravel in your front yard; it's older than the language you speak, older than the Scriptures themselves, as ancient as the stars. Take a drink of water. Those water molecules have been bouncing around this world for millions and millions of years. They've been inside the bodies of other living beings. They've been in the oceans and in the skies. They've made their home in the bloodstream of the mastodons. Your whole span of life is mapped out in mystery, and most of the time, the only way to deal with such mystery is to ignore it and go about our business. But every once in a while we stop to ponder the unknown, and when we do, we stand in awe. We don't know what eternity is or where it is tending, but it's not just a question of where you're going; it's a question of where you've been. Eternity—beyond time—is the fullness of the very life of God from which all other life springs, has its day, then returns. It's the place where all our *was-ness* and our *will-be-ness* are the same. Have no fear! Neither the past nor the future can hold you hostage, for your home is beyond both of these cages, child of eternity!

If that tyrant, time, simply obliterated all things several years, or decades, or millennia after giving them, then life is little more than a dark parade of meaningless actors and scenes, coming from nowhere, going nowhere, all things following each other into oblivion. But there wells up in us, just every once in a while, the awareness of eternity. This is what Jesus is telling the Sadducees. And somehow, in the great mystery of timelessness, deep in the deathless life of God, all good things remain. The wonders of your childhood, which you yourself have forgotten, the flavors, the smells, the sounds, the selves that seem to be no more, and all the people—perhaps even the things—that you loved so dearly, "All of them are alive to God." If indeed God is a reality that exists beyond the limitations of time, then everything good that ever was remains intact. Is it any wonder that Christianity explains itself in stories, parables of death and resurrection? The truth can barely be put into words! The dream, the hope, the resurrection is that on the other side of time, all the selves you have ever been, and those you have yet to become, will be integrated, made whole, and handed back to you, to whom they never belonged in the first place. They are facets of the divine life that you have had the privilege to participate in, forever kept in the very mind of God.

Well, this is all very abstract and philosophical. What does it have to do with the world outside our church doors? Every human life entails a struggle with the past—even the young. There's the desire to recapture it, the desire to escape it, the urge to deny it or forget it. It's said that the measure of a person's character is the degree to which he or she can put things in the past. The past can return to conquer the present and the future. But it need not be so. In the same way, every human life entails a struggle with the future. We long for it. We fear it. We spend so much time in it that we miss out on the present. But it need not be so. People who are never aware of the eternal lose their ability to be happy in the present. They revisit past hurts or image future ones. When have you been touched by

eternity? When have you been reminded powerfully if only momentarily that there is far more to life than meets the eye? Knitting can do it. Praying can do it. Great music can do it. Hiking. Monotonous tasks make us co-creators with God, who weaves nights and days, months and years out of the long, long fabric of time. Child of eternity! Time does not own you, but you have to remind yourself! You must engage regularly in practices that get you in touch with the eternal, the eternal! A reality beyond all time, a reality where, as Jesus says, "All are alive in God." Amen.