

Pentecost 22, Year C,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

10th November, 2019

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17 NIV / Luke 20:27-38 CEV

What is real? How do you define reality?

Is it what your senses can perceive?

As human beings, we are largely limited

by what we can see, smell, taste, hear, and feel with our body.

When we think of what is real, our minds tend to define reality

by what we can witness with our physical senses.

As higher functioning mammals,

with incredibly complex brains and thought processes,

we can also imagine realities that we've never personally encountered,

but we still define those imaginary dimensions

with the same criteria we perceive everything else:

through things like

color, texture, temperature, smell, taste and sound.

Who hasn't been carried away by the vivid details of a good book,

or gotten lost in the tales of a friend or family member

describing far away places and cultures.

Yet we still see all those things from our physical perspective.

After all, it's the only frame of reference we have.

Even in science fiction, the technology and science

expands from what we already know

to be the nature of our universe.

Concepts without definition, without rules and boundaries,

are often beyond our capacity to conceive.

But what happens when we are confronted with situations and experiences

that are beyond our mental capacity to make sense of?

SLIDE

I'm reminded of the movie *The Matrix*,

where most of humanity lives in a computer generated reality

that mimics the late 20th century.

In order for the human beings plugged into the simulation to accept the program,

there had to be imperfection and tragedy;

the human mind would not accept

a perfect, heavenly program without drama and imperfection.

SLIDE

This inability to grasp any reality that differs

from what the human senses can experience and define as normal reality

is not unlike the mindset of the Sadducees

in our gospel lesson this morning.

Their reality is defined by a corporeal human life lived

in the material world around them.

According to traditional Jewish theology, one lived a life in this world

that we are all familiar with,

then one died and slept in the grayness of Sheol for eternity.

Just gray sleep, nothing else at the end of the tunnel.

So Jewish tradition was all about living a vibrant, meaningful life

while you were alive here on Earth,

because there was nothing beyond that.

Much of the wisdom of the First Testament

pointed to God blessing one

who lived a faithful, just life in this world

with success and tranquility here and now.

If meaningful existence ended with death,

then what incentive would there be to a faith

that didn't deliver in the here and now?

At surface value, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Torah,

do not promise anything after this life.

The whole story of the garden of Eden, the Exodus,

and the early kingdoms of Israel are all about life in the present,

not the future.

So this background explains why the Sadducees are skeptical

about any suggestion of something more.

This has been the foundation of the faith all along.

Yet in the century or so before Christ, other ideas,

spurred by new scriptures being circulated like Daniel,

begin to suggest that this life is not all there is,

that there is a resurrection of people at some point down the road.

This concept begins to gain some ground

in the debates and doctrines of the Pharisees, scribes, and Priests.

Jesus, as the Incarnation, certainly teaches the same

and knows the reality beyond.

But the Sadducees can't get out of their human framework.

They try to present Jesus with an example to debunk his argument.

They ask him who will be the true husband of a childless woman

widowed to seven brothers.

In this world, that is a valid question.

Women needed to be linked to a man to be supported, to survive.

That's why she would be passed, sadly like chattel,

from one brother to the next until she could bear a male heir

who would then inherit her to care for

should her husband die before her.

They can only imagine any potential afterlife as simply an extension of this world,

with all the same problems and all the same solutions,

kept working with the same rules

that are meant to provide justice and compassion in this reality.

Yet Jesus upends their whole argument by presenting a reality

that just doesn't compute in their system.

The resurrection is different.

There are no marriages, no need for marriage.

In the ancient world, the primary purpose of marriage was procreation.

One needed to have a male heir, to have honor and status,

to be able to have a tangible legacy.

In the resurrection that Christ presents, there is no death.

In fact, Jesus indicates there never has been.

He makes the words of the God of the burning bush in Exodus,

present tense,

“I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

Not nameless dead ancestors in the gray of Sheol,

but the living resurrected forefathers of Israel.

The quandary the Sadducees attempt to stump him with is no quandary at all.

The Sadducees, however, cannot accept that the quandary simply disappears.

But I would wager, if we are really honest with ourselves,

we may suffer from a similar dilemma.

Like the Sadducees, we cannot help but make meaning of life as we know it,

from within the perspective of life as we experience it,

from our own human reality.

We value love, friendship, and happiness

because we have experiences of these goods,

and we know that they are good by virtue of our experience of them.

Similarly, we cannot help but experience and engage God

from within the horizons of our creaturely experience.

When we say God is love, for example,

what we mean by love is inevitably conditioned

by our human experience of love,

tied to the ways we have received and have given love to others.

And is there anything wrong with that? After all, that's what human beings do.

We make sense of life with what we are given,

through the human lens we know,

in the physical universe we can conceive.

After all, in Jesus Christ, God stands with us as a human being

and empowers us to respond to God from our standpoint,

as broken, messy, and complex as it is.

The mistake however, is to insist that all that life can mean

is contained within the horizon of our own experience.

In this story and others in this chapter, Jesus explodes the human horizon.

There is profoundly more to life than just the human experience of it,
even if that means we cannot wrap our heads around it.

Death is not an ultimate condition for us,

and it does not permanently bind the experience of life

and its meaning to just this earthly existence.

It is not an easy walk for sure.

SLIDE

As people of faith, we find ourselves existing in two worlds at once.

Jesus highlights the reality that his life has created: there are now two ages,
two eras and now two realms coexisting.

There is the former age, the age of waiting for the Messiah.

There is also now the new age, inaugurated by the Messiah, by Christ.

In this new age, the reality of the resurrection will be revealed.

This dual reality means both that God is living and active in this world now

and also that God will bring the world to the fulfillment God intends for it.

To live in faith is to live in two worlds simultaneously.

Christ reveals that God is with us, as Emmanuel.

Christ reveals that in the end lies God's realm.

So we are freed to live in the varied contingencies of our world

with hope, with patience, and with courage.

But like the Sadducees, we too are stuck in two worlds,

the one we can perceive with our human senses,

and the one that draws near, that is beyond our human perceptions.

It is just as easy for us to get just as lost on the here and now,

and lose sight of the potential of living a resurrection life.

SLIDE

Where is our focus?

Do we focus on the sights and sounds, the pleasures and rewards of life on this Earth,

or do we look at the long game, at the promise we all have of eternal hope?

After all, we are still human.

We still have the same sensory limits

to what we can perceive of what is real.

Yet we also have the knowledge that there is more to come,

that this is not all there is.

Unfortunately, the mindset of the Sadducees did not fade away with them.

We still have voices that would lead us into a blessing and reward mindset.

That if we do the right thing, live the right way,

we will be rewarded by God with a blessed, rich life in this world.

And we may be blessed in this life, don't get me wrong.

But when you have the eternity of resurrection to look forward to,

it should change your understanding of what blessed really means.

It ceases to be keeping up to the standards presented to us in this life.

Material wealth and success in this world

no longer have the same urgency.

Living a life with a different view of reality

can free one to focus on the just, virtuous existence

that God has prescribed since the beginning.

A life of faith and compassion, seeking justice in all that we say and do,

without worrying about all the perks possible

by playing the game in this lifetime.

Though the walk isn't any easier today

than it was for the Sadducees in Jesus' audience.

Our world is still based on that very real human experience.

Our culture still values those creature comforts and sensual standards

of success:

the good, high paying job, the comfortable home,

the stuff that makes life convenient and easy.

Like the Sadducees, do we find ourselves so stuck

in the world of our own making,

that we cannot fathom something different else,

a bigger picture of reality that is beyond what our senses can perceive?

That is the picture Jesus paints for us in the lesson this morning.

There is something bigger, there's always been something bigger.

Our job is to live as if we belong to that world

that is just beyond our reach, our understanding.

Because it is the larger reality that we truly belong to,

the promise we all have in resurrection.

This morning I pray that we seek to live into that promise,

seeking that eternal reality from the false promise that a life

rooted in the empty success and rewards of this temporary existence,

seeking the reality of the resurrected life from the illusion of this world. Amen.