

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
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Luke 20: 27-38

“This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through.” These are words from a hymn I remember singing growing up. “This world is not my home / I’m just a passing through / My treasures are laid up / Somewhere beyond the blue. The angels beckon me / From heaven’s open door / And I can’t feel at home / In this world anymore.”

I grew up among people who worked with their hands and were familiar with the toil of work tied to sin and the fall of Adam and Eve. And we looked forward to lifting that curse in a kingdom where the streets were paved with gold and where there were no more tears.

Jesus says in the sermon on the mount, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.” And while he did not elaborate on what those treasures are or how we lay them up, he contrasts what it means to live for this world and what it means to live with a longer view. For if we are laying up treasures in heaven, it invites us to see life in a longer arc, to invest not just in the limited number of years our physical bodies will hold out for, but to invest in a way that envisions fruit that endures, that contributes to God’s eternal purposes.

Now, this focus on heaven and the temporariness of earth that I grew up with has had side effects. It contributed to not being great stewards of the earth at times because we were taught that the earth is not forever. The earth is passing away and may be treated as dispensable rather than something to be held lightly and handed over to those the generations that will come after. Furthermore, the spiritual focus of my growing-up years was on eternal comforts, not on alleviating suffering or lack here in this world.

But, in this season of stewardship, as we consider how our behavior is derived from our perceptions of who God is, we consider God’s long imagination, God’s long view of life, God’s eternal coming that will someday come to fulfillment. We consider what it means to lay up treasure, to invest in things not just limited to this physical world and its constraints but in things that will outlast this life.

This issue of eternal perspective versus earthly rewards comes up in our gospel passage. For, some Sadducees come bringing the question. And whereas Jesus is usually the one telling the parable, this time, these Sadducees come with a parable of their own for Jesus, a story about a woman who racked up seven husbands in the course of her life. It is an exaggerated story that functions like a meme or a joke, told to make a certain perspective sound absurd. The story is of seven sons of the same family. Each dies when married to this woman, and the question of whose wife she will be when they all get to heaven. It is an attempt to make the possibility of bodily resurrection and a Kingdom, or reality, in the hereafter (i.e. heaven) sound absurd.

The Sadducees do not believe in bodily resurrection or life in heaven hereafter. They have no imagination for some eternal Kingdom of God yet to break into their reality. They are rooted in this world, both its pleasures and unpleasant realities. This is the kingdom of God; this world. They have no imagination for being personally and communally transformed in light of some larger Kingdom still waiting to break into this one.

Now we are modern, rational, scientific, enlightened people. We might side a little with the Sadducees. We too might think that this earthly life is all there is. We too might be more interested in focusing on this world that we know with its comforts and constraints, rather than being preoccupied with some heaven off in the sky that we do not know or see. We may have come to accept certain realities and our limited time. This feels more practical and realistic. And yet, there is a connection. There is an important implication. How we understand the larger trajectory of God's plans and purposes affects how we live in this world. If what matters is our physical pleasure in the here and now, it will affect the way we live.

Now the Sadducees, on the whole, have no interest in the Kingdom of Heaven for a good reason. The current kingdom is serving them quite well. A few things might be helpful to know about the Sadducees. They are priests. They are of a priestly family line. They are serious about worship, and the temple—that is their reality, the Kingdom of God on earth, in their eyes. So, preservation of the temple is their utmost priority, which is why they are all for striking a deal with the Roman government to maintain and secure the temple and its functions, even if it means accepting certain accommodations.

Others, such as Galileans and the Pharisees live with a sense of unrest and discontent and anxiously await God's new kingdom that will uproot the Roman governance and break in. But the Sadducees, for the most part, were quite content. The Sadducees liked to exercise what my good friend Frank calls "realized

eschatology.” Why wait for heaven, when you can enjoy the good life now. Like my friend Frank, they liked good savory foods, and nice soft linens, and beautiful decorations, and they didn’t mind buying on credit in order to enjoy them.

The Sadducees’ priorities and convictions were two-fold – That obedience to God was primarily fulfilled through fitting worship in the temple; the rituals and sacrifices performed appropriately and according to the Torah. And two, they believed if there was proper worship and sacrifice in the temple, God would bless them with material prosperity. They would enjoy the good life.

When I was in Israel, we toured through one of these homes where some Sadducees lived, which have been discovered and excavated. These are inside the walls of Jerusalem, in the high-rent district of the city. Contrary to the typical meager four-room Israelite home, you will find spacious, luxurious estates with many rooms. Separate bedrooms, banquet halls, mosaic floors, bathrooms, their own cisterns, ritual immersion tubs, flowing water. They are doing quite well.

They were firmly planted in this world. They did not need and had no interest in a kingdom that breaks in, a kingdom different from this one, that shall upend this one and which shall last forever. They had no need to confront the abuses of this world, and they did not have the imagination for a more just society rooted in an eternal Kingdom of God.

Even while they enjoy certain luxuries, they tell this story of a woman whose body has been passed around between the males of a family line like a baton. You see, Levirate marriage said that if a man of a household dies, then his brother must take his wife and bear children by her so that the deceased man’s seed and line will go on; that he will live on after the grave in this world, through his children; live on in this world, the one that matters. But at this point in their little parable, seven brothers die, and the wife has been passed around. And the big dilemma the Sadducees propose to Jesus is, if heaven exists, then who will own her; who will she belong to when she dies along with all these former husbands, and they live on in heaven? This is their argument for no heaven, for no resurrection.

It is a parable and an argument that shows their lack of imagination, not only for the world to come, but for this world as well. Would a perspective of God’s eternal purposes change the way we live in the here and now? To imagine God’s fulfilled kingdom, to invest in it, and to pray that it would come on earth even as it is in heaven. Can we imagine such a thing, would we dare to invest in such a thing?

What if what we feel at the death of a loved one is true? That we are deeply connected to those who have transitioned to the next life, and that God's care for us is not limited to a handful of decades, but forever? What if we believed these seemingly absurd things? Would it change the way we live in this world? Would it change how we serve others and steward what God has given us?

Jesus preaches a Kingdom of God, which stretches much farther than our human eyes can see. In the kingdom to come, there is a new bodily reality. "But those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead," Jesus says, "neither marry nor are given in marriage." And we scratch our heads, because we struggle to imagine such a reality because we are so rooted in this one.

I do believe it is important to steward this earth well and to attend to the physical needs and trauma and well-being of all those living this life. But, I also think we may have swung the pendulum too far, and we ought to remember that this world is not our ultimate home. We are just passing through. And we ought to invest ourselves in ways that bear fruit beyond the physical needs and temporary pleasures of a few years. We ought to invest ourselves knowing that the God who brought Jesus from the grave will preserve our lives in the here and now, and after, in the kingdom eternal.

And all God's people said...

*The Question about the Resurrection*

*(Mt 22:23–33; Mk 12:18–27)*

<sup>27</sup> Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him <sup>28</sup> and asked him a question, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. <sup>29</sup> Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; <sup>30</sup> then the second <sup>31</sup> and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. <sup>32</sup> Finally the woman also died. <sup>33</sup> In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

<sup>34</sup> Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; <sup>35</sup> but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. <sup>36</sup> Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. <sup>37</sup> And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. <sup>38</sup> Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”