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Sermon for 27th Sunday after Pentecost, Series C

Cameron Harder¹

Texts: Job 19:23-27a; Psalm 17:1-9; Luke 20:27-38

There's good news and bad news in our gospel lesson this morning. The good news, as Jesus puts it, is that "God is not God of the dead but of the living; to God all are alive." That also happens to be the bad news.

In this lesson we meet Jesus just after he has cursed Herod's temple as a "den of robbers," and driven out Herod's civil thieves with whips and threats. The backlash from the temple guardians of the temple is swift and deadly. Luke says that immediately "the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people began trying to kill Jesus, but they could not find a way to do it because all the people hung on his words."

Normally these theological masters of Jerusalem are at each other's throats, each scrambling to carve out a bigger piece of religious turf for themselves. But after Jesus' terrorist-like behaviour they form an uneasy alliance. They take turns trying to trip up this rebel rabbi in his own words. Later they'll use those words as evidence at his trial. So they pose a series of verbal traps, loaded questions that will get Jesus in trouble no matter how he answers.

The first group tries to force Jesus into the controversy over John the Baptist. John is Jesus' cousin and he's popular, but John is also baptizing hated Roman soldiers. Whether Jesus supports John or not he's going to make someone mad. Another group springs a political trap, asking Jesus whether the Jews should be paying taxes to their Roman overlords. Say yes and the people will hate him. Say no and the Romans crucify him for a traitor. And then the Sadducees step in. They pose what seems to be a question about life after death. The Sadducees know the common people want to believe in something beyond this life. If life ends in the grave their only legacy is the children to whom they've passed on their blood and values. The childless poor lose everything. But Deuteronomy 25 gives them a way out. "Levirate marriage" as it's called, makes it possible for a man's blood, his life really, to be passed on through a brother who would impregnate his widow after death. This actually happened not infrequently in the early years of settlement here on the prairies when men died in the lumber camps up north, or on farms and ranches leaving childless widows behind.

The Sadducees are hoping that Jesus will be forced to admit that there can't be any life after death because a woman could go through seven sterile brothers in a row and then she'd end up in the resurrection as a polyandrist—a woman with a harem of husbands. And what decent rabbi could condone that kind of indecent theology? Truth is those Sadducees and the Chief priests—all the powerful of Jerusalem, Romans and Jews alike—were not much interested in promoting life after death. Death is the best friend of the powerful. You see it in the way they respond to Jesus' cleansing of the temple. When Jesus challenges their power their first instinct is to plot his death. That's how the Romans enforced the peace. They crucified 2000 men, women and children along the Appian Way. It was a powerful

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disincentive for rebellion. So when Jesus responds to the Sadducee's challenge by saying "God is not God of the dead but of the living; all are alive to God" that's *bad* news for the Sadducees. They want people to fear death. Death is the ultimate weapon of those in power.

It's always been that way. Still is. We see it in our own economic life. Across Canada employees go obediently about their tasks. They don't often complain or blow the whistle when things aren't right because they're afraid to lose their jobs and their income. With no income their family's survival is at risk. Internationally whole countries suffer under the weight of crushing debt. They pay huge amounts to the IMF that should be going into food and education for their people. Why do they do that? It's because they can't risk sanctions or military intervention. Their life is at stake. And corrupt politicians everywhere are grateful to Death. Death buries the secrets of the elderly who know too much about one's indiscretions and abuses of power. Death entombs the past so that they don't have to answer for their greed or cruelty. During the Dirty War in Argentina that's how the government kept its power in place—by disappearing those who didn't toe the line.

So Death is a friend to those who control the lives of others. But Death is the *enemy* of the oppressed, not least because it silences their cries. I've talked before about the long history in Canada of our government's 150-year suppression of the story of the residential schools. That story is only coming out now because our indigenous people fought for decades in court to sue the government and the churches involved and then they used some of the money they were awarded to set up a Truth and Reconciliation commission. In Wetaskiwin, Alberta, where the highest concentrations of residential students in Canada were located, the mayor said publicly, "I taught here for 35 years and didn't even know there were residential schools nearby." That secret was buried for a long time. But, Jesus says, those who have died are not dead to *God*.

Berniece Saulteaux an indigenous United Church pastor on Carry the Kettle First Nation told a story to our DMin class that I want to share briefly with you. She tells of standing on the site of her mother's residential school near Brandon MB. The school had been torn down, but Berniece and a group of family and friends had gathered there to remember and to pray. Berniece said that as they were standing in the rubble in a circle praying, one of the men in the group suddenly left and walked out to where the cars were parked. A few minutes later he returned and explained, "I thought I heard children crying, I thought someone must have brought children and left them in the car." Berniece said, "I heard them too. It was eerie." Others agreed. But no one had brought any children along and the residential school site was in an empty field, far from the nearest farm. They went back to their service, and they came to a point where they blessed the ground and re-sanctified it. And then one of them said, "I heard a child laugh." "Me too" said another. Suddenly Berniece realized "It's the children--all the children that died in this school. They've been waiting for their cries to be heard. Now they're free."

In the book of Revelation the apostle John tells of the "souls of the martyrs under the altar" asking "How long O Lord, how long" –how long until justice is done? Those cries don't fall on deaf ears; they are being taken every moment into the heart of God. Because, Jesus tells us, that "God is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

Jesus defends the resurrection not out of any concern for immortal glory like Herod had, or even the less grandiose, but still ego-centred, dreams of ordinary people who just want to pass on their genes, or play a little golf in heaven. "The resurrection is not about you hanging on to some form of eternal existence" Jesus says. "It's about God eternally hanging on to *you*."

Our hope, Christ tells us, is not in raising children to carry on our name—as good as that is. Our hope is not even in an immortal soul. Our hope is in God—the God who hears the cries of Job. It’s in the God who hears the cries of Hebrew slaves, who hears the cries of childless Sarah and Abraham, who hears the cries of all who long for justice but die before they see it done. God is the Psalmists’ hope too when he or she prays “O LORD; attend to my cry *From you* let my vindication come; let *your* eyes see the truth.”

Sarah and Abraham, St Peter and St Mary, Luther and Katy, your great-great grandparents—*all* are alive to God. And also alive to God are the women who have disappeared from our Canadian highways, the children caught in human trafficking. I believe God even hears the muffled cries of this prairie land—cries from the bleached bone heaps of millions of slaughtered bison, cries from the graves of settlers killed by the Spanish flu. God hears the cries from the graves of indigenous children who died from beatings and neglect. This “geography of blood,” as Candace Savage calls our land, is still alive to God. God hears its cries and will heal it in God’s time. That’s *good* news.

And so, hoping in God, we can tell the truth fearlessly and work for justice now because death cannot threaten us into apathy or silence. And when we don’t see the fruit of that work, when we are weary from our labours, we can still live with sinful selves, with our broken Senate (!), with unhealed bodies and scarred memories because we know that God’s justice is not bound by death. All times, all places, all people live, now, in God. And in God, in the resurrection, all *will* be well.