

Do you remember these sort of problems in your mathematics classes? Problems about various trains leaving different stations at various times, and then having to answer which one arrived where, when? Problems about oranges and bananas and buying twice as many of one and dropping half and how many were left to give to your neighbour if you'd already given a fourth to your friend? I hated those sort of problems. They were theory wrapped in practical packaging, but I always thought if I really wanted the ice cream I'd work out if I had the money or simply count how many oranges were left after the series of unfortunate events that had befallen them and me. These problems felt like mental exercises with little real world benefit. As I read this passage from Luke today, those sort of problems came to mind.

A group of Sadducees came to Jesus and asked, "Jesus, you see, there was this woman and her husband died, leaving her childless, and her husband's brother married her, but they had no children. After this he died, this happened repeatedly - and a few more times. So... based on the law of Moses, whose wife will she be in the resurrection?" It is a theoretical question dressed up in practical garb that has absolutely no real world application. But even worse than that is the intention with which it is asked. The Sadducees don't even believe in the resurrection. They could not care less about whose wife she will be. They are asking the question to entrap Jesus, make him look foolish, and to embarrass him in front of the ones who've gathered day after day to hear him teach in the temple. It is an intellectual gotcha question posed by those who have the luxury of theoretical religion.

I can't help but think of the so-called "New Atheists" of our time who wrote pages and pages in order to prove that God couldn't exist. I think of the Jesus seminar scholars who gathered in a room voting with coloured beads, regarding which sayings of Jesus are authentic and which are not. Red, the voter believed Jesus did say it or something very much like it. Pink, Jesus probably said it. Gray, Jesus didn't say it but it contained Jesus' ideas. Black, Jesus did not say it. How could they possibly really know, and what, in the end, is the point of all their debating? Theoretical, hypothetical religion is a luxury and I can say emphatically Jesus went well beyond a theoretical faith. We Christians follow Jesus, the incarnate God, Emmanuel. God with us, the one who answers the Sadducees' question with a declaration: "God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God not of the dead but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

Our God is a God in practice, not theory. Our God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob then, now and always. Our God, the Triune God, the incarnate God, the advocate, the stand-along-side-God, is not a "what if" or a "how about this" God. Our God is the one who calls real people like Abraham. Our God resides with real people like Abraham when they are outcasts in Egypt. Our God is the God who assures a heart broken Abraham that Ishmael won't be abandoned. Our God is the God who is there when Isaac is bound on the altar. When Abraham is prepared to be faithful even if it means the death of his long awaited son, there is no room for debate, no time to speculate about one widow and seven husbands, no luxury of voting with red or black beads, no hope in disembodied spirituality. There is need only of a God in practice, a God who saves, a God who provides a ram in the thicket before it is too late. Our God is that God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, an incarnate God who enters the messiness of our lives and will not let us go, a God not of the dead, but of the living and all of them are alive to God because once God claims us, God never lets us go.

Whose wife will she be, Jesus? How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it still make a sound? The Sadducees then and now ask Jesus hypothetical, theoretical, gotcha questions.

And Jesus answers with his incarnate, crucified, dead, buried, and raised life, making tangible the truth that our God is the God not of the dead but of the living and to God, through Jesus Christ they are all alive. Our God is with us when we are wandering in the wilderness, unsure of where we are going and if we are ever going to get there. Ours is the God who works through our mistakes, our lies and our deceptions, the one who never breaks covenant with us even when we are a stiff-necked and rebellious people. Ours is the God who takes what we mean for evil and uses it for good, reconciling brothers, reuniting families, granting peace where no one thought peace was possible. Our God is not a God in theory, but a God in practice. The God so invested in us and in our real world lives that God sent His only Son to become one of us, to know what it is to laugh, cry, and hurt, to love and die, and to be raised from the dead so that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God any longer. Our God shows us through Jesus Christ that forgiveness isn't theoretical, it is arrested, scourged, words from the cross, tangible. Mercy isn't abstract, it is lifesaving bread from heaven, manna in the desert, living water at the well. Grace isn't out there somewhere, it is right here, as Jesus wrote in the dirt and all of our accusers put down the stones they'd just moments before been so eager to throw. No, ours is not a God of hypothetical debate, ours is the God who became flesh and dwelled among us.

Our God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel, the God whose grace sometimes comes in the form of the unexpected. Our God is the God not of the dead, but of the living, who meets us not in theory, but in practice, the incarnate God, Emmanuel, God with us, Jesus Christ who cleanses the leper and heals the paralytic, the one who raises the widow's son and forgives the woman caught in adultery, the one who eats with sinners and blesses dirty-nosed children. The one to whom Mary pleaded, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." And to Mary, who wasn't asking in theory, or hypothetically, to this grief stricken Mary, Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." She believed not in theory, from the luxury of a distance, but in practice at the grave of her brother Lazarus who'd been dead four days. That's when we need God most and that's exactly where Jesus Christ was and is and will be, a God not in theory but in healing, weeping, forgiving, reconciling, crucified, and raised from the dead practice. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, my God and your God and the God of our children and their children, too. God with us, yesterday, today, tomorrow, and forever. Amen.

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