

The Rev. John Sampson, Pastor  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church  
“God of the Living”



Sunday, November 9, 2025  
Luke 20:27 – 38

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

What is Jesus talking about in this passage?

One way to think about it is that Jesus is talking about the popular belief in which those of us who do good in this world will be rewarded with an afterlife in a place called Heaven.

Fair enough.

But I wonder if there's another way we could hear what Jesus is telling us today. Because Jesus never uses the word “heaven”. The word he uses for the afterlife is “resurrection”. Jesus never says that we will become angels. He says, “In this new time, we will be *like* angels.”

I think Jesus doesn't use the word “heaven” because he's not talking about Heaven. I think what he's talking about is Eden.

Do you remember those ancient stories that open the Bible about the creation and the first humans? In those stories, it is said that God plants a garden in some place called Eden. And there are all of the animals and all of the plants and the first humans. Humanity is in a beautiful communion with all of creation.

But I think more importantly, humanity is in communion with God deeply, intimately in relationship with the Holy One. It is said in these stories that God walks through the garden in the afternoon that God speaks to us and we speak to God. In these stories, God is not the transcendent other, but the deeply personal friend and teacher and parent.

The stories go on to say that this paradise was not to last, that it fractures and fragments and that we leave Eden. We leave the intimacy of God and we move out to a new life, a life lived east of Eden. Human history for those who wrote the Bible is an account of our life lived east of Eden.

But God loves us. God can't get enough of us. And so, God tries to restore paradise. God tries to restore that intimate deeply personal experience of relationship with humanity. God does it through the Christ.

You may remember, or maybe this is the first time you've heard this, the first Christians were never called Christians. They were called People of the Way. The way that Jesus is offering us is a way to return to a deeply intimate relationship with God. This way is what his ministry is all about. His way is about overcoming all of the things that keep us out of Eden like our selfishness, our apathy, our spiritual blindness and muteness and lameness. And he tells us that the way to overcome these things will be to take up the cross, will be to experience a certain kind of death and to be resurrected.

The death that Jesus talks about not only in the passage we heard today but in other places is not necessarily the death of our physical bodies. It is the death of our broken selves and it is done through the experience of the practice of love. It is in love that we see the another person not as other but as self. It is in love that our eyes are opened and we see those who we have pushed to the margins. It is in love that we get up, walk out into the world and engage with all of its challenges.

The ministry of Jesus is not about death and resurrection as disembodied spirits at the end of time. It is about the resurrection of the image of God that already lives within us and is clouded and occluded by the many ways in which we are broken.

There is an ancient Christian sect known as the Valentinians and they wrote a gospel called the Gospel of Philip, which is not in our Christian scriptures. It is an apocryphal gospel. And in there they tell us the way that the resurrection has been preached all these years is wrong. Because the way that we have been taught what resurrection is about is that first

you die and then you are resurrected. The Valentinians say no actually it's the inverse. First you are resurrected and then at some point you die.

I think they, like how I hear Jesus speaking in our passage this morning, say that resurrection, the resurrection of God's image in us, is the work not at the end of our lives but is the very work of our lives.

And so that's how I think we can hear Jesus talking about those who have been resurrected no longer marry. All of the things that have been created after we have left Eden, after we have left the intimacy of God, begin to be undone as we move closer back to Eden. If you remember those ancient stories, marriage becomes a religious and social structure only after humanity leaves the intimacy of God that they have known in paradise. As we turn back and walk Jesus's way of resurrection, coming closer and closer to that primordial intimacy that is our birthright, the structures we have created east of Eden begin to fall away.

No longer will we need to be married, to have children, to extend our species, because now we will participate in the image of God, the eternal image that sits within each and every one of us. And we will achieve immortality, not of the personal self, but of the eternalness of God.

Now, you may say, "John, what were you smoking this morning? That's not how I heard this story. Did you make this all up? You ran out of time. You didn't have time to create a real sermon. So, this is what you're pushing on us this morning.

You can say that. But I do have Exhibit A. Exhibit A is Paul's words from Corinthians. Paul is writing a letter to real people in a real congregation in the city of Corinth. And he tells them, "For those of you who can, don't marry. Virgins remain virgins. Don't break your marriages if you are already married. But if you're not, don't make that commitment." And the reason he says it is because he says, "The day is near. God's presence is near."

He's not creating some sort of weird ethical structure that we have to put ourselves into. He is saying reminding us of the truth of what it means to be close to God's presence. That we will not need to recreate an image of ourselves physically through our children, but that we will be, we will remember, we are already the eternal children of the one who has created everything. Jesus ends his message today by saying, "God is the God not of the dead but of the living". God is not the God of the dead, of the things within us which will pass away. All of the brokenness we carry and hold on to like an addiction. God is the God of the eternal image of the divine that can never be taken away from us.

Amen.