

A Game of “What if”

A game of “what if”...not sure there is actually a game with that title, but when dealing with my children when they were young I often thought they had one like that...especially if they were trying to get permission for something they believed would fall into the category of “no”. In today’s text from Luke it seems that the Sadducees want to try out that game...only they were using as a way to test Jesus in an inappropriate teaching. Jesus is in the Temple courtyard teaching to those who wish to learn after his entrance into Jerusalem as the final week of his life begins. He has overturned the moneychangers tables and chased those selling there out. The Pharisees have questioned his authority to teach the things he is teaching, they have sought to catch him in a trap about paying tribute to Rome...in general the religious leaders are looking for a way to entrap Jesus and put an end to his ministry. The Sadducees are a sect within the Jewish tradition which considers only the Pentateuch teachings as valid, only those doctrines found in the books attributed to Moses. Within those texts there is no life after this one...this led to the absolute emphasis on the bearing of a son so that the man’s name would continue...that was how they viewed life continuing...through their progeny...male progeny. Because of this there was a provision within the scriptures which provided for the contingency if the oldest male in the family died childless, then the next youngest brother was required to marry his widow to provide that older brother with an heir and continue his name. When they approach Jesus who was known as being an observant Jew, it was with a scenario based on something called a levirate marriage based on Deuteronomy 25: 5-10. Because they do not believe in the possibility of resurrection, the question they ask is a hypothetical one which takes an ancient practice to the extreme in order to show that the whole idea of resurrection is foolish. The set up creates a situation with seven brothers who remain childless at the time of their death so each succeeding younger brother is required to marry the widow of that oldest brother. The wife outlives them all, so the question they pose is whose wife will she be in the resurrection? Jesus avoids their trap by making two moves. First, he shows them they have misunderstood the resurrection—what resurrection life is like. Jesus tells them their assumption that the resurrected life will be like life here and now...it won’t be. The second point Jesus makes that illustrates their failure to understand scripture comes from another part of the Pentateuch—that crucial Exodus story in Chapter 3 which recounts Moses’ first encounter with God at the burning bush where God reveals God’s holy name. Jesus points out, declares that God is—present tense—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Not that God was their God, but God is their God. Therefore, Jesus concludes that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob must in some sense still be alive; hence the necessity of accepting resurrection. Because our faith has as a central concept the reality of resurrection, of life after death in this time, we affirm our belief in it constantly...but do we have an understanding that resurrected life will be different. What are our expectations? Or are we more like the Sadducees in that when considering resurrection we don’t ask the correct questions to aid in our understanding of it. When thinking about resurrected life and what it is like, the first question probably should be how much will the resurrected life be like our life in this world. And what will our relationships be? This passage gives few specific answers to such questions—though it does strongly stress that we should not limit our imaginations—much less God’s design—for the life after death by

our own experiences. Eternal life will be qualitative different from what we know in our temporal existence. Time itself—and with time death—will have ceased. Because we are such creatures of time—ceaselessly aware of the fleeting present and bound by the past and the future it is hard for us to comprehend or even imagine its absence as a factor in our life. Even trying to describe heaven and resurrection is difficult. Using special and relational references, while also limited, at least draws attention to the qualitative differences rather than the quantitative differences. For example, in the resurrected life our existence will be in the “nearer presence “of God and we will be related to each other in and through our relationship with God. Despite Jesus’ statement that in that in the resurrection from the dead they neither marry nor are they given in marriage, this statement does not mean that in the resurrection people will not know their loved ones from their earthly life. Since in the following statement about God being the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob keeps them in their relationship both with God and each other, that aspect of this life seem to persist. A second issue which comes out in discussions about the resurrected life is the tendency to equate it with immortality even though few will articulate their questions about resurrection this way. This is a common confusion which persists. Immortality of the soul—the belief that some essential or spiritual element of a person persists beyond the physical death of the body—provides a measure of comfort to those grieving a loss, assuring that at least a part of their beloved has not, in fact died. In distinction to this notion, we as Christians profess that while we really and truly die, the resurrection promise is that the whole person in some way be united with God. This is described within 1st Corinthians 15, especially verses 36-49. Although this spiritual immortality understanding is different from the Christian faithful belief that in some way the whole person will be united and living near to God; being unclear about this aspect which bring comfort now is not theologically unacceptable, it just offers a less hopeful and fulfilled vision of the resurrected life. Because we are deeply bound to this world and time dominated way of life, our ability to understand the unbound by time life which will come with resurrection limits our ability to envision it. The issues and questions raised about resurrection are issues with which none of us has direct experience. At the same time, whatever limits we may experience about describing the resurrected life and our expectations about it, nevertheless this passage invites us to proclaim with confidence our faith that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob raised Christ from the dead and promises to do the same for us. For as Jesus taught, God is the God not of the dead, but of the living, both then and now. When Handel took the words from the book of Job for his masterpiece The Messiah, he lifted an assurance which gives meaning to us all: “for I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the end he will stand upon the earth.” Although Job’s proclamation of faith despite all his experiences was not uttered in expectation of the appearance of Emmanuel in history, it described his experience of the God in whom he believed. Job’s faith allowed him to protest the injustice of his life, but to still maintain a hope for gaining a hearing and justice for himself—the one he trusted would redeem him. We may be not be closer to understanding how God’s design will work in the resurrected life than Job, but we have been given the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to give us a pattern and assurance that the resurrection promise is real. We can joyfully proclaim and sing “for we know that our Redeemer lives and is near to us during our walk in this life and will welcome us

to join him in the resurrected life. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.