

“Bushes or Blackberries” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey

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Texts: Haggai 2:3-9 Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says YAHWEH; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. For thus says YAHWEH: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says YAHWEH. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the ALMIGHTY. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says HOLY GOD, and in this place I will give peace.

Luke 20: 27-38S Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him 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. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; 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. Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. 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. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.’

LAST WEEK I met a group of Sean’s classmates from Dominican University in San Rafael. In passing, I asked if any of them were Presbyterians. No. But two kids who claimed to be atheists informed me that they *used* to be Presbyterian.

Why am I not surprised? Presbyterians are notorious for thinking too much about their faith, for making our Creator, the Holy One, the Amazing Almighty, into a bloodless, intellectual phenomenon, an argument you can too easily lose. We may well be descended directly from those Sadducees in today’s reading!

Today’s gospel is set in Jerusalem, just a few days before Jesus’ final Passover. His human life is drawing to an end. The time with Jesus is very short and very precious.

Some Sadducees come to see him, learned men who are members of the branch of Judaism that does not believe in a resurrection after death. These Sadducees finally get to encounter Jesus: miracle worker, famous healer, wise man, the one who raised the girl from the dead, the one who threw out the money changers, the one who came into the city with the people shouting and waving. Some say he’s the next Moses, some say

Elijah, some say he's the Messiah.

This is their moment! Yet, what did they ask? ” Teacher, if seven brothers die in succession and each marries the same woman, one after another, to whom is she married in heaven? “

Excuse me? Here they are before the Christ--the Anointed One--and this is the best they can do?

Of course, the Sadducees, like their colleagues the Pharisees and the Scribes, aren't really looking for answers. They are critics, not earnest inquirers. They are so determined to disprove the idea of resurrection that they miss any real answers that might inform, or transform.

It reminds me of the seeker who asks his Guru about getting a dogma. The Sage replies: "Well everyone has a pet belief, so why should you be any different? We human beings have had dogmas since the dawn of recorded history. Certainly it is comforting to curl up with a warm fuzzy dogma on a dark night of the soul. Or to take him to the park on a fine sunny Sunday in January and watch him sniff and chase other dogmas, and bark at strangers. Some folks keep dogmas for protection. It's reassuring to have a guard dogma to scare away frightening thoughts and it's great to have a loyal companion to fetch you an explanation when you get home from a hard day at work. And dogmas come in all varieties. Some humans like big dumb dogmas, and others prefer squeaky little irritating ones. And someone has to stand for the under dogma. You must beware of menacing dogmas that bite. Or dogmas that run wild and get in everyone's garbage. (I know, I know, you're probably thinking, "It isn't my dogma making all the mess, it's my neighbor's dogma.") But well, if you must, my child, you may have a dogma. But just make sure your dogma doesn't mess on our neighbor's lawn.

So the Sadducees bring their dogma, and Jesus listens to yet more questions in a prolonged parade of wrong questions. Only this time Jesus cuts to the chase. He changes the question from what will happen after we die, to how we might live this eternal life now. In the midst of our joys and sorrows, our hopes and fears, he asks how do we allow God the Giver, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life, to inform and transform our living today?

Even Moses, he points out, talked of God in the present tense. In front of the burning bush that would not be extinguished, Moses heard the living God speak his name.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote  
*Earth's crammed with heaven.*  
*And every common bush afire with God.*  
*And only he who sees takes off his shoes.*  
*The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

In the ordinary realm of life, Moses encountered something, or more appropriately, some One, who transformed the mundane into the marvelous, who would deliver people from slavery into freedom, who would bring life over of death. He could see that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was alive and burning brightly before him.

Standing near the same sacred mystery, the Sadducees did not take off their shoes. They had a disbelief based on contempt prior to investigation. With a failure of intellectual nerve and an inability to dare, to risk, to trust, they decided to sit round and pluck blackberries and dispute until the end of time, the end of their time.

The God of the living, the God “too high above us to understand and too deep within us to escape.” [Henry Emerson Fosdick] calls us to see every common bush afire with God. Too much Presbyterian logic limits God by definitions meant to satisfy our human need for control. Too much rationality tries to discredit God by arguments that refuse to allow for mystery and wonder. We might be better off working with artists and architects and watching children, listening to singers and reading poets, for they can point toward God in a way that leaves God free of our doomed attempts to domesticate and deconstruct the Divine.

It is this very God of the Living, the God who promises us eternal life here and hereafter, that calls us to make faithful Stewardship decisions this month. And Haggai, whom we heard in our first reading, is positively prophetic here! He is another who is also thinking about the future, but hardly in the theoretical and doctrinal realm of the Sadducees.

The people of Jerusalem were recently returned exiles frantically focused on their own economic well being. They felt that rebuilding a city was challenging enough without rebuilding a worship center. Yet Haggai was convinced that they could not prosper as a nation while neglecting the Temple. His people are plucking blackberries instead of seeing the awe of the burning bush. He calls the Jews to an active building program. Asking them to claim their living God with an investment of time and money, he addresses the dilapidated state of the community's spirit more than the dilapidated temple itself. Haggai delivered Yahweh's command: "But now be strong, and work, for I am with you. And My spirit abides among you; do not fear."

Our faith comes down to this: there is a promise let loose in the world, and we call that promise God. In Jesus Christ that promise, that covenant, takes on flesh. The promise is to forgive us, to love us, to save us. Not as the world would, but only as One who is beyond our capability to comprehend does.

Whatever it is that we may see in a shambles, whatever we may despair over rebuilding, be it peace among nations, the environment, a personal relationship, church membership, or a church building, the God of the Living calls us to work toward transformation. Whether we are Sadducees with hidden agenda and closed dogmas, or a returned exile clinging to the excuse of making a living, we are called out of our fear and denial, out of our disbelief, into a proactive courageous stand for community values and concerns, for the Holy One promises to be with us.

Ultimately, religious faith asks us to hold fast to the assurance of an unseen hope that there *is* a higher power, that there is a justice that works against evil, that there is a love that is stronger than death. We Christians understand that such justice and such love is the promise of God. The long arc of history bends in that direction.

We have a choice. We can see the burning bush and respond to it. Or we can sit around and pluck the blackberries.

For all of us whose faith has led us to believe that kindness and compassion are the most important things in religion, that the thing Jesus cares most about is how we treat other people, let us never forget how much the world needs our witness.

We are called to support the church, but only if we let the church support us in being the loving, generous, trusting, forgiving, nonviolent, awestruck, grateful people we were created to be.

May it be so.