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### Pentecost 24, Proper 27

*"... Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."*

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#### • **Lectionary Readings (Year C)**

**Revised Common Lectionary**

First Reading	Haggai 1:15b-2:9 or Job 19:23-27a
Second Reading	2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17
Gospel	<b>Luke 20:27-38</b>
Psalm	145:1-5, 17-21 or 98 or 17:1-9

*Luke 20:27-38*

1 Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him  
2 a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife  
3 but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.  
4 Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second  
5 and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the  
6 woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For  
7 the seven had married her."

8 Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage;  
9 but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection  
10 from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die  
11 anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the  
12 resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story  
13 about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac,  
14 and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all  
15 of them are alive."

*Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs*

1. This is the only appearance of the Sadducees in Luke's gospel. In contrast to the Pharisees, they rejected the authority of oral tradition, denied the belief in resurrection and angels, and emphasized free will over determinism. The Pharisees by the first century affirmed the resurrection as initially mentioned in Daniel 12:2.

"The question from the Sadducees assumes the practice of levirate marriage. Prior to belief in resurrection, the Israelites believed that one lived on in one's descendants and in their memory. Hence, if a man died without children, his brother was obligated to take his wife and have children by her. The provision of children in this way also assured the perpetuation of property within the immediate family and security for the brother's widow" (R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, IX:388). See also Deuteronomy 25:5-10, Genesis 38:8, Leviticus 18:16 and Ruth 3:9-13.

2. In your own words, what is Jesus' answer to the Sadducees?

“ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.”

Hearing his response, one of the Sadducees might turn to another and say:

“ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.”

3. When you, like one of the Sadducees, consider “resurrection” and what may be on the other side of death,

what are some of the things you think about?

what do you wonder?

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what are you rather certain about?

what would you like to believe?

what is a question you have?

what do you hope for after you die?

what do you fear when you think about what follows death?

4. If you ever have, to whom have you asked this kind of question? When you posed one of your questions, what did they answer you? Who are some of those with whom you have avoided such a discussion?

Who has ever asked you a question about such things? What did you tell them? How did it feel to answer such questions? How did they seem to react to your response?

How do your certainties about resurrection/what awaits you on the other side of death affect your life? What kind of influence do your questions about the matter have on the way you live these days?

5. *"Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."*

Again, what do you hear Jesus telling them in your own words?

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## Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

Luke 20:27-38 • November 7, 2010

How do these words of Jesus apply to your beliefs, questions, and doubts about resurrection and what is on the other side of death?

What is Jesus saying about God? About your life? About all who have come before you and died? About your death?

Luke 20:39-40 following this verse (but not in the lectionary text) reads:

*Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." For they no longer dared to ask him another question.*

Why do you suppose they no longer dared to ask him another question? What is a follow up question some of them might have liked to ask Jesus?

" \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_?"

What is a question you would like to ask him?

" \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_?"

## *Reading Between the Lines*

The question that the Sadducees bring to Jesus in today's reading is not a real question. From their standpoint, the question can only be meaningless. Since they do not believe there is any life to come, any speculation about how that life will be arranged is pointless from the very beginning. Which part of the Sadducees' question does Jesus seem to challenge? What assumptions does Jesus seem not to share with the Sadducees?

Forrest Church writes in *Love & Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), "After death our bodies may be resurrected. Our souls may transmigrate or become part of the heavenly pleroma. We may join our loved ones in heaven. Or we may return the constituent parts of our being to the earth from which it came and rest in eternal peace. About life after death, no one knows. But about this we surely know: there is love after death" (p. 136).

What do you know about love after death? How does death change relationships? What kinds of relationships are disrupted by death? What kinds endure despite death?



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*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."*

Why do you suppose Jesus says that marriage, which is after all the chief metaphor for Christ and the Church, will be nonexistent in a postapocalyptic world? What is the purpose of the institution of marriage? What does it offer? What might it prevent? What sorts of relationships does marriage engender both in Jesus' day and in our own? Who marries? What does it mean to *marry*? Who is given in marriage? What does it mean to *be given in marriage*?

(If you are or have been married, consider the following questions based on your personal experience. If you have not ever been married, call on your experience of weddings and of married friends.)

If you were *given in marriage*, who gave you? What did it feel like to be given? If you were on the receiving end of the ceremony, what did it feel like to *receive* your bride? How has this particular part of the ritual enacted in your wedding ceremony become an ongoing dynamic in your marriage? How, if it has, has it enlivened and enriched your life together? How has it been a source of friction or resentment? What might a marriage without such a ritual be like? What might a world without such an institution be like? If marriage is a myth of the preapocalyptic world (before the arrival of the Kingdom of God), what myth might replace it in a postapocalyptic world (the Kingdom of God arrived)?



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## Parallel Readings

### From *Playboy Magazine*

#### *Interview with Saul Alinsky*

Alinsky: Sometimes it seems to me that the question people should ask is not “Is there life after death?” but “Is there life after birth?” I don’t know whether there’s anything after this or not. I haven’t seen the evidence one way or the other and I don’t think anybody else has either. But I do know that man’s obsession with the question comes out of his stubborn refusal to face up to his own mortality. Let’s say that if there is an afterlife, and I have anything to say about it, I will unreservedly choose to go to hell.

Playboy: Why?

Alinsky: Hell would be heaven for me. All my life I’ve been with the have-nots. Over here, if you’re a have-not, you’re short of dough. If you’re a have-not in hell, you’re short of virtue. Once I get into hell, I’ll start organizing the have-nots over there.

Playboy: Why them?

Alinsky: They’re my kind of people.

### From *Faith, Interrupted*

“The interesting part about this story is that the Episcopal Church tolerates ambiguity. We talk about Father God and Jesus Christ and Joseph and Mary, but I think Jesus was kind of bewildered by His life’s mission. He represented a certain kind of entity; a certain kind of ethic in the universe that I really think makes a lot of sense. The Christness of us has to die and the Christness of us has to be resurrected again. We have to kind of sacrifice ourselves. You know that. When you and Karen came to the crossroads of your marriage, that was the sacrificial time of that relationship. It was time to fish or cut bait. Everything in our world that has that kind of meaning has that kind of death and resurrection. I’m expecting that to happen again. I see it all the time.”

Eric Lax

“Interview with Saul Alinsky, Part Twelve” in *Playboy Magazine*, Playboy Enterprises Inc, copyright © 1972.

Eric Lax, *Faith, Interrupted: A Spiritual Journey*, (New York: Random House/Alfred A Knopf, 2010), p. 263.

**From *The Evolution of God***

*How Heaven Became Heaven*

The idea of followers of Jesus getting to join him in heaven upon dying probably didn't take shape until about a half century after he died. To be sure, his followers believed from early on that the faithful would be admitted to the "kingdom of heaven," as the New Testament calls it. But "kingdom of heaven" is just Matthew's term for what Mark had called the "kingdom of God"—and, as we've seen, the kingdom of God was going to be on earth. In Matthew, Jesus says, "Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age." Angels will come down and scour the land for "all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

Note the dynamic: angels come to earth from heaven and weed out the bad people, after which the good people remain on the new, improved earth. There's nothing about the souls of dead people ascending to heaven.

In fact, there's nothing about *dead* people at all. Jesus, convinced that the kingdom of God was "at hand," didn't spend much time describing the afterlife; he spoke as if the day of reckoning was going to arrive any moment, before his listeners had a chance to die, and told people how to prepare. Judgment Day was about the living, not the dead.

But just out of curiosity: What *was* going to become of dead people? Would they be resurrected and enter God's kingdom? And what was existence like for them in the meanwhile? In the years after the Crucifixion, such questions would grow salient as Jesus's followers saw friends and family, people with whom they'd expected to enter the kingdom, die. In a letter Paul wrote to Christians in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica—probably the earliest document in the New Testament—he confronts the unease: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." Those who stand in God's good graces, Paul assured his fellow believers, can look forward to an afterlife even if they die before Judgment Day.

This probably reflects Jesus's own view. The idea that the dead would be resurrected at the culmination of history is found in the Jewish apocalypticism that Jesus inherited (include the book of Daniel), and Jesus affirms the idea in the earliest gospel. Besides, Paul's credentials as a witness to Jesus's teachings are good, as such credentials go. Paul was alive when Jesus died and was attuned to the doctrines of Jesus's followers—first as one of the persecutors and then as one of their brethren. In that sense, this passage from First

Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God*, (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2009), pp. 305-6.

Thessalonians, written some two decades before the book of Mark, is the earliest written evidence we have of Jesus's view of the afterlife.

In any event, Paul's view of the afterlife is the earliest documented Christian view, and it is notable for two things. First, though Jesus, being the son of God, went to heaven shortly after dying, ordinary Christians don't follow that path. They have to wait for Jesus to return before things get blissful; "the dead in Christ will rise" only when "the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven." Second, even then, heaven isn't where the dead are going, rather, they will live out eternity on earth—the much improved earth of the kingdom of God.

Robert Wright

**From *The New Yorker***

*The Lightkeeper*

A night without ships. Foghorns called into walled cloud, and you still alive, drawn to the light as if it were a fire kept by monks, darkness once crusted with stars, but now death-dark as you sail inward. Through wild gorse and sea wrack, through heather and torn wool you ran, pulling me by the hand, so I might see this for once in my life: the spin and spin of light, the whirring of it, light in search of the lost, there since the era of fire, era of candles and hollow-wick lamps, whale oil and solid wick, colza and lard, kerosene and carbide, the signal fires lighted on this perilous coast in the Tower of Hook. You say to me stay awake, be like the lensmaker who died with his lungs full of glass, be the yew in blossom when bees swarm, be their amber cathedral and even the ghosts of Cistercians will be kind to you. In a certain light as after rain, in pearly clouds or the water beyond, seen or sensed water, sea or lake, you would stop still and gaze out for a long time. Also when fireflies opened and closed in the pines, and a star appeared, our only heaven. You taught me to live like this. That after death it would be as it was before we were born. Nothing to be afraid. Nothing but happiness as unbearable as the dread from which it comes. Go toward the light always, be without ships.

Carolyn Forché

Carolyn Forché, "The Lightkeeper" in *The New Yorker*, copyright © May 3, 2010, p. 75.

## **Critical Background**

### **From *The Hidden Power of the Gospels***

#### *Birthplace of the Gospel of Luke: Great Antioch and the Roman Empire, Mid-80s CE*

The precise location of origin is not certain with this gospel, but it is highly likely that we find ourselves once again in the city of Great Antioch on the Orontes. Scholarship indicates that Luke probably wrote from the same city where Matthew had written his gospel a decade or so earlier.

In Matthew's time, remember, Messianic Jews were still part of Judaism, and his gospel concerned itself with the pain of these Jews whose center—the Great Temple and the priestly lineage—had been lost. Luke, believed to have been a companion of Paul and a seasoned follower, almost certainly knew Matthew's gospel well; indeed, he had likely preached from it. Matthew's gospel addressed a single community, as did those of Mark and John. Luke, however—writing later than Matthew and Mark (though before John), as Christianity was evolving and spreading—directed his message to multiple groups throughout the Mediterranean region. These communities, only beginning to call themselves Christians, had endured a series of dramatic events in the previous decade, and despite their deep faith and fervor, they found themselves troubled by high levels of pain and resentment.

To understand fully, we need briefly to review some history. Nero had executed the Jewish Christus followers of Rome twenty years earlier, although persecution had not extended to Christus believers throughout the rest of the empire at the time. Then in 70 CE, Vespasian leveled the Great Temple of Jerusalem and massacred all its priests, throwing Judaism into total disarray. In the steps that religion took to survive, a process began that still resonated in the lives of Christians and Jews.

The slaughter resulted in a complete lack of religious authority. The Pharisees, educated teachers of Jewish religious law but not officially connected to the Temple, stepped into the vacuum. By the mid-80s CE, the time of Luke's gospel, their role had significantly increased. In many Jewish communities, their voices rose to roles of clear leadership. In others, they represented merely one of the many voices struggling to advise how best to move forward in the face of great loss. Eventually, the Pharisees became the primary voice of the Jewish community, reunifying the people in the absence of the Temple and its priests—but not before Luke began to write.

Alexander J. Shaia and Michelle L. Gaugy, *The Hidden Power of the Gospels: Four Questions, Four Paths, One Journey*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), pp 249-251.

When the Temple stood, all important rituals were hosted there, and only priests officiated at them. After the Temple fell, all rituals were forced to change dramatically. The Pharisees helped to rebuild a new Judaism that centered on home and synagogue life, with larger roles for the family and the rabbi. As one example, Seder—the Feast of Passover—had always been a family meal accompanied by an informal retelling of the Jews' coming out of Egypt. Indeed, it was this simple evening meal that Jesus shared with his disciples before the crucifixion. Now it became more formal. Special, symbolic ingredients were designated, as was the sequence of the service and the manner of the retelling. In the 80s, Jews started to write down and systematize these changes, making it certain that their faith would survive with its solemnity and resonance intact, despite the loss of its hierarchy.

The Pharisees took a further step. Their objective was surely the health and survival of their ancient faith and tribe, and we must assume they believed that wisdom and necessity guided their actions. Nonetheless, the results of the harsh decision they made are with us yet today.

The Pharisees advocated for the removal from Judaism of all variant sects who believed that the Messiah had already come. Chief among these were the "Followers of the Way" (the Christus sect), who maintained that the Messiah had arrived for the salvation of all people, not just Jews. Further, these Christus followers persisted in talking about their beliefs to anyone who would listen, complicating what the Pharisees were working so hard to rebuild. To the Pharisees, these upstarts presented a serious problem, for every convert to Christus belief represented a direct threat to their efforts to sustain traditional Judaism.

The Followers of the Way did not leave their religious home quietly or even voluntarily. The Pharisees reacted by arguing forcible removal and shunning of the sect. Those communities with strong pharisaical influence followed these recommendations. Communities and families were confused and filled with pain by the debate, even if they didn't formally eject the group.

Worse still, the Pharisees wrote a formal curse—making the banishment unmistakably clear—and recommended that it be added to the close of every Shabbat service. Its words entreated God to bring his wrath down on anyone who believed the Messiah had come. Anyone who failed to recite this curse aloud at the end of the service was deemed suspect, further fracturing all trust. The family of Abraham was rent asunder by these spiritually shattering events and filled with pain, anger, bitterness, resentment, and self-pity. Amidst this upheaval, the Gospel of Luke was born.

Luke's audience was reluctantly but surely coming to understand that they were being severed from Judaism. They proudly called themselves Followers of the Way, or of the

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Christus, but were relatively inexperienced as religious communities. They had faith and strength—and no small amount of zealotry. They carried pain, and some of them likely had a touch of arrogance attached to their lingering resentments. They had also migrated all over the Mediterranean basin, which presented them with persecution from another quarter. The Roman government was more than nervous about the Christus followers—it was terror-stricken.

The Roman Empire had skillfully used the ancient tribal antipathies of the Mediterranean world first to conquer, and then to maintain dominance. The mutual distrust of the people it rules was the primary way in which the empire ensured the stability of its far-flung realms. However, as we discussed in our chapter on John, the egalitarian principle of Christianity overturned the tribal beliefs and customs that led to conflict—and therefore, threatened the entire structure of the Roman Empire. Rome's fear of this message led to its oppression of the Christus communities—and the persecution increased steadily.

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