

November 9, 2025
Lectionary 32, Year C
The 22nd Sunday after Pentecost
Job 19:23-27a
Luke 20:27-38
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The Story

This past Friday was First Friday Faith Formation. This year we are learning about and discussing biblical covenants. Covenant is one way of describing the relationship between God and humanity, a covenantal relationship. In a covenant God gives human beings gifts and makes them promises and invites human beings into a relational response to those gifts and promises. A common thread that runs through the biblical covenants is that the gifts God gives and the promises God makes far outweigh in value the response that is required of human beings.

The covenant we discussed on Friday night was the Edenic covenant, the very first covenant between God and human beings, made in the moment of creation. God gave human beings life, the garden, food, a vocation, to tend the creation, and relationship with each other, the animals, and with God. What God asked of them was relatively simple. They were not to eat from just one tree in the abundant garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The bible does not tell us how much time went by, how much time the human beings had in the garden, before they took fruit from the forbidden tree and ate it, breaking the covenant, and breaking the peace, the abundance, the intimacy of their life in the garden. It could have been years. It could have been days, but that's what happened. They ate from the tree, their relationship with each other, with the creatures God had given them, and even with God was broken. They were expelled from the garden and the life of conflict, strife, scarcity, and toil that we know all too well began.

Friday night was not the first time that I've explored that ancient story of the first humans in the garden of Eden, so I was not surprised at First Friday Faith Formation when someone asked this question. "Why did God put the tree in the garden?"

It's a good question. Why was the tree there? Was it a trick or a trap? Was it there to give the human beings free will, an opportunity to choose obedience or disobedience? Was there to be a test?

We had, as we always do whenever this question comes up, a lively conversation about the presence of the tree in God's perfect garden and it reminded me of another conversation that I had with a group at Prince of Peace. The question about the tree came up and people had a lot of different ideas about why the tree was there and what it meant. During that discussion someone said, "Without the tree there would be no story."

What he meant was that the tree's presence in the garden created the conflict that is an essential element of any good story. And he meant that the tree created the conflict that shaped the story, not just of the garden of Eden, but of the whole Bible. He had a point. The whole plot of the Bible is God pursuing God's erring children and trying through, among other things, subsequent covenants, to restore Edenic peace and wholeness to God's relationship with human beings and to the whole creation.

I thought that was an intriguing idea. After all, where would we be without this story.

Asking why the tree was in the garden is a good question, an honest question, a thoughtful question. The question that the Sadducees asked Jesus in today's gospel reading, was not. It was not a good question. It was not an honest or a thoughtful question. It was a gotcha question, a question that they hoped would make Jesus look foolish, that would make Jesus flounder around looking for an answer, a

question that they hoped would make Jesus and the whole concept of resurrection look silly.

The question that they asked was really a hypothetical situation that was remotely possible based on their laws. In Jewish law, if a brother died without children, it was the responsibility of his next brother in line to marry his widow. The Sadducees used this law, which was designed to protect widowed and childless women from being cast out of a family and becoming destitute, to try to trick Jesus. In the culture into which it was written, it was a good and caring law, but the Sadducees made a mockery of it with the situation that they presented Jesus with. This is what they said:

“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 a woman 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.”
(Luke 20:28-32)

It was a question about heaven, a question about the resurrection of the dead, which the Sadducees didn’t even believe in. They believed that if you were dead, you were dead. That was it. And they wanted to trick Jesus into making the resurrection of the dead look foolish, improbable, and logistically complicated. It wasn’t an honest question. And yet, if we put aside the Sadducees dishonest motives, it raises some good questions.

As Christians, who follow a resurrected Lord, of course, we believe in the resurrection of the dead. At least we say we do, every time we proclaim the mystery

of faith, “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again,” and every time we say a creed, like the Apostles’ Creed, which we will say today:

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection ✝ of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Last Sunday we celebrated All Saints Sunday, we celebrated the communion of saints, the nearness of our beloved dead, the belief that those we have loved and lost live on in the presence of Jesus.

And yet, I suspect that many of us have wondered at one time or another how it all works. How does life after death work? What is heaven like? How do our human relationships play out in heaven? Will we be reunited with our loved ones? What does it mean to say that we believe in the resurrection of the body? When our bodies can give us so much trouble in our earthly lives, can weaken, can hurt, can scar, can sicken, can die, what does it mean that in heaven we will have some kind of resurrected body? How will we recognize each other in heaven? Who will be there? What will we do there?

The Bible does not answer all of those questions for us. Today’s Old Testament reading from the book of Job reinforces the idea of the resurrection of the body with these words, expressing confidence in the vindicating power of God that reaches beyond death:

²⁵ For I know that my vindicator lives
and that in the end he will stand upon the earth;
²⁶ and after my skin has been destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,
^{27a} whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”
(Job 19:25-27a)

But Job does not give us the details of how that will all work out, about how destroyed flesh can stand whole and sound and behold God.

Even Jesus, in today's gospel reading, doesn't exactly answer the Sadducees question or all of our questions about resurrected life. He tells us that in the resurrection people do not marry, he tells us that in the resurrection people cannot die anymore, that the children of the resurrection are like angels, and that they are alive with God in the presence of the ancestors of the people. According to Jesus Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob live forever with God. They are people we will encounter in the resurrection.

But even that does not give us a lot of details. In fact, Jesus seemed far more interested in his life and ministry in telling us about how to live now, how we should interact with each other now, how we should be connected with God now, than telling us about what to expect in heaven.

The Bible gives us some clues, some ideas and images about life in the resurrection, life in heaven:

- living in light
- worshiping God with song
- a beautiful garden
- a shining city

- a flowing river
- trees with leaves for the healing the nations
- a feast of abundance
- a table spread where all welcome

but it doesn't give us a lot of details.

Which brings me back to the story of the tree in the garden of Eden. According to the member of Prince of Peace who attended that long ago Bible Study, the tree was in the garden to create the conflict that set the story in motion. There would have been no story if there had been no conflict.

But I wonder if that is true. I wonder if there can really be no story if there is no conflict. Or is it just that we can't imagine a story without conflict because we live in a broken, fallen world, where we live in conflict with one another and with the earth around us.

But that's not how things are supposed to be. We were not designed for everlasting conflict and stress. We were actually designed for peace, for relationship, for harmony with each other, with animals, with the earth itself, for meaningful work, for intimacy with God. And I think that life in the resurrection looks like that. The problem is, I just can't imagine it. And I suspect that it's hard for you to imagine too. It was impossible for the Sadducees to imagine.

I have actually had people tell me that they worry about heaven being boring. They can't imagine doing the same thing for eternity. Because they can't imagine a life without conflict, a life without problems to solve, a life without puzzles to sort out. Conflict, problems that need to be solved, are the heart of most of our lives, what we spend most of our time on. We can't imagine what life would look like without that. What would be the story?

Every year since we moved to New England, at least a couple of times a year, my family drives to South Carolina, where Britton's family lives. When we lived in

Connecticut, it was a 15-hour drive. Now that we live in Massachusetts, it's an 18-hour drive. That's a lot of hours in the car. And so, over the years we have listened to a lot of audiobooks. And the audiobooks we have listened to the most are C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. At least we've listened to the first six books a lot, over and over again. My kids love them and can quote parts of them verbatim, from so many listens. But we've only listened to The Last Battle, the final book in the series a few times, because I really don't like it.

There are few reasons that I don't like it. One is I don't like it because of what happens to the horses. It's heartbreaking. Another reason I don't like it is because of what happens to the dwarfs, what they do to others and what they do to themselves. And the final reason I don't like it is because of the ending. And I'm going to read you the ending, so that I can tell you why I don't like it. Before I read it to you, though, you need to know that Aslan is a lion.

Then Aslan turned to them and said:

"You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be."

Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often."

"No fear of that," said Aslan. "Have you not guessed?"

Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them.

"There was a real railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadow-Lands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning

of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

~The Last Battle C.S. Lewis

That's how The Last Battle ends. It's the end of the book, but it's the beginning of a new story and it's that story I want to hear, I want to know, but I can't imagine that story and no one on earth can tell it to me. Even C.S. Lewis that consummate storyteller couldn't tell us that story, what happened, after the end of the brokenness, the end of the conflict, the end of the war. He couldn't tell us what happily ever after looked like. Just that it was better than every story that had been told before, that it was the great story, the true story, born not of strife and disobedience and struggle, but love and peace and wholeness.

And so, I've always been frustrated with The Last Battle because I have always wanted to hear what happened next. I want to hear that story. The story of the happily ever. But I'm not sure our mind can quite conceive of it, can quite imagine it, I'm not sure if we can wrap our hearts around it. A story born out of love and not conflict. But I do believe that is what God has promised us. The greatest story, better than the best. And I am willing to trust God to be able to write that new story, the happily ever after, better than anything I can imagine, that awaits us in the resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.