

Flowers in the Desert

25th Sunday after Pentecost; Series C
Luke 20:27-40

For a few days in the month of March of 2005 a rare burst of color softened the plain looking landscape of Death Valley, California. There were clusters of purple, pink, and white wildflowers that dotted the mountainsides and golden blooms that bordered the white salt flats on the valley floor. The winter storms that brought mudslides to Southern California that year also dropped six inches of rain on the thirsty desert canvas. This amount of rain was three times more than usual. The torrential downpour encouraged the wildflower seeds hidden beneath the desert floor to sprout.

This kind of floral display comes once in a lifetime in a place like Death Valley. The seeds of these flowers have coatings so thick or waxy that they can hibernate for decades. Only continued heavy rains will coax them to sprout. In addition to the rain, the right amount of moisture, sunlight, and warmth is also needed in order to create an “all systems go” type of situation (*Associated Press*, “Death Valley Alive With Flowers, <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/7182113/#.UnKLCFOqIsE>). These particular weather conditions that create this type of “floral frenzy” may only happen every fifty to one hundred years. For half a century or more the life of these flowers is hidden. For many decades the life in these wax-coated wildflower seeds is hidden beneath the sunbaked surface, completely out of the view of the nearly one million annual visitors to Death Valley National Park. That is, until a season of *great rain*. The vast amount of water reveals the once hidden floral life. The life once hidden is now fully revealed in a way so spectacular that all marvel and nobody can deny it.

Yet, not everyone marvels at such a display of life in this undeniable way. In our Gospel reading we were introduced to the religious group in first century Palestine known as the Sadducees. This group was probably most recognized for their lack of belief in a resurrection. That is certainly what the Evangelist St. Luke wants us to know about these Sadducees in our text we heard this morning. He begins the passage by saying, “There came to him (Jesus) some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection . . .” (Lk 20:27). Whereas the Pharisees, the other well-known first century religious group, believed that the Old Testament Scriptures supported the idea of a resurrection, the Sadducees think it is absurd and so they approach Jesus with a question that serves a two-fold purpose: 1. To trap Jesus 2. To point out the silliness of believing that dead bodies can rise again to new life and live forever.

In order to achieve their purposes the Sadducees point to an Israelite law that Moses wrote in the Book of Deuteronomy regarding marriage. If there is a resurrection, a time when all will rise to new life and live forever, then the Sadducees want Jesus to explain to them how an institution like marriage, for example, is going to work.

Now at this point we can easily get sidetracked into having a discussion about marriage and how we should understand Jesus’ words in our Gospel reading when he says that in “the age of the resurrection from the dead they neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore . . .” (Lk 20:35-36a). Those are fair questions and that would be a fruitful discussion. Yet, to have a conversation primarily about those things right now would be to miss Jesus’ greater point. By trying to apply Moses’ words about marriage to the time of the resurrection and eternal life, the Sadducees are making a fundamental mistake. As Jesus tells them, they are not making a distinction between the ages. As we live in the

world, the time before Jesus' return and the age of resurrection life, we live in a different age—the old age. We live in the age where the effects of Sin and death reign supreme. The new age is different. As Jesus reminds the Sadducees, "Our God is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Lk 20:38). We have a *living* God who is making all things new—resurrection life new. With the birth, ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has inaugurated the new age of resurrection life even in the old age of life in this world where the effects of Sin, temptation, and death are still felt. In Christ "the old has gone and the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). At the return of Christ, the Day for which we all hope as Christians, the old age will close completely and all that will be felt is the effects of the new age of life everlasting—resurrection life with our *living* God.

Even now, we as Christians who live in Christ truly *live* with our *living* God. And if you are baptized into Christ and trust in Christ then you have put on Christ (Gal 3:27) and truly live in Christ—today! Jesus proclaimed to the Sadducees in the Gospel reading that God *is* the Lord of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is not that he *was* their God but he still *is* their God, that is, they are still living—experiencing life in the fullest with their *living* God, looking for that Day of Christ's return. God proclaimed himself to be the *living* God to Moses through the burning bush way back at the time of the Exodus. This is who God proclaims himself to be even today for us, the children of our fathers in the faith, the offspring of Abraham, the New Israel, the Church of God. In your Baptism God brought you into participation in the new age of resurrection life in his name even as you struggle now in this old age with the temptations of the Devil, the world, and your sinful flesh.

In some sense you might say you and I as baptized Christians in this world are like *flowers in the desert*. The seed of faith and new, resurrection life in your God is planted through your Baptism as a gift by the Holy Spirit. But the life we have in Christ in the desert of this old age is hidden in our Baptisms. It is hidden in the Word of the Gospel and the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper. It is hidden in various ways in which we suffer here in this world for the sake of the Gospel. But make no mistake, you have true, everlasting life. Though you will die, yet you will live (Jn 11:25). Like those seeds hidden beneath the hard, dry, crusty floor of Death Valley that sprout upon a season of great rain, so also the water of your Baptism has brought life for you.

There will be that Day when your life in Christ that is now hidden will be fully revealed. That Day of Christ's return is the day of the "Great Reign" (R-E-I-G-N). That will be the day that the old age will close fully and completely. No more Sin. No more death. No more suffering. There will only be new life with a new identity in the new creation.

So how do we live in the old age as participants in the new age of resurrection life in Christ? Well, we live by valuing life with every opportunity. We become advocates of life in this old age world where death still exists. We receive the resurrection life from our God in Christ as he offers it in our Divine Service, in the Word and the Sacraments. The life of Christ is given to us so that we may live and grow in our faith and trust in God. We value life in this way.

We also can value life as we are empowered to serve one another with God's love. We value their lives. We value their reputations. We value them as people and not as objects to be used and taken advantage of. We value life when we take time to listen to our spouses and children, and when children do likewise with their parents. We value life when we put the best construction on the words that others say and the actions that they perform. We value life when we help others keep and value their possessions and the gifts God gives to them rather than coveting them and being envious of them. In these ways and many others we can value life as participants of the new age of resurrection life even in this world saturated in the old age of Sin, death, and temptation. Like flowers in the desert we display the beauty of our life in Christ before all. For, our God "is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him" (Lk 20:38). Amen.