Malcolm Clemens Young Haggai 1:15b-2:9

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2C46 Psalm 149

22 Pentecost (Proper 27C) 8:30 a.m., 11:00 a.m. & 6:00 p.m. Baptisms Luke 20:27-38

Sunday 6 November 2022 All Saints’ Day & GC Staff Appreciation

**Cornel West’s Encounter with the Nation of Islam**

*“Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to [God] all of them are alive” (Lk. 20).*

What happens after you die? Jesus cares so intensely about the present moment that he does not say much about this, except that our fear of death influences how we live.

As a freshman at Harvard College my old teacher Cornel West hung two pictures on his wall: Malcolm X and Albert Einstein. His roommate James Brown, (not the singer but the man who later became the famous sports journalist) asked him, “I thought you were more of a Martin Luther King type.” Cornel replied, “I am but one doesn’t cancel out the other. I’m loving them both, just the way they both loved us.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

In his second year The Nation of Islam came to Harvard and black students packed the hall. “Hefty Fruit of Islam guards, the paramilitary wing of the Nation [were] stationed at all the doors.” It had only been six years since Malcolm X’s assassination and when the speaker referred to Malcolm as a dog, Cornel felt startled. The speech went on. When the speaker did it again, Cornel moved to stand up and reply but his friends restrained him.

Finally, the speaker called Malcolm X a dog one more time and Cornel leapt up. He said, “Who gives you the authority to call someone who loved black people so deeply a ‘dog’?” After a brief exchange the speaker said to the 18 year old Cornel. “Young brother, you’ll be lucky to get out of this building alive. And if you do manage to slip out, you’ll be gone in five days.” In his memoir Cornel writes, “from there, it got worse. The crowd went dead silent…” as everyone looked at him. Friends had to negotiate with the guards and then escort him out of the building.

For the next week Cornel went underground going from dorm room to dorm room, too afraid to attend class, hardly sleeping. Finally he went to talk to someone in the Nation. They began by arguing but then Cornel really began to listen, to listen from the heart. For hours they had a wonderful conversation because they gave each other “space to be heard.” His new friend told him he didn’t need to be afraid anymore.

Intense conflict, fear and looming death characterize the atmosphere as Jesus takes up a debate with leaders of the temple. After a long journey to the capitol Jesus arrives in triumph to cheering crowds who wave palm branches. Jesus weeps over the terrible future of Jerusalem. He angrily drives out people who are selling things in the temple. Then he returns there every day to share the good news with the “spellbound” crowds.

Behind the scenes the authorities, “[keep] looking for a way to kill him” (Lk. 19:47). But Jesus’ popularity protects him and so the religious leaders try to discredit his teaching. They want to embarrass him, to get him tangled up in his own words, to provoke him to say something offensive that they might use against him. They have three different debates, the first one about authority, the second on taxes and our story this morning about the resurrection.

Remember, Jesus is only days away from being killed on the cross. The tension and fear among his friends cannot be understated. Jesus wisely avoids the traps that his persecutors set for him. In fact he changes this antagonism into a chance for genuine learning to happen. He is teaching both the people who love him and those who hate him so that some of his enemies even say, “Teacher, you have spoken well” (Lk. 20).

In those days Sadducees were part of the upper class and had an influential role in the temple’s worship.[[2]](#endnote-2) They differ from the Pharisees, Jesus and the authors of the Gospels in two main ways. First, they do not believe in resurrection, or any life after we die.

And second, they were convinced that only the first five books of the Bible were authoritative scripture.[[3]](#endnote-3) I have known this for thirty years and do not completely understand what it means. I often wonder what did they make of the psalms and prophets, for instance? In any event apparently in those days it was commonly believed that the first five books did not include references to the resurrection in the way that the other biblical books did.

The question they use to entrap Jesus has to do with an ancient cultural practice described in the Book of Deuteronomy (Deut. 25:5-10) called “levirate marriage.” The word levir is Latin for a husband’s brother. The idea is that when a woman’s husband dies, his brother will marry her, they will have children and those children will carry on the deceased person’s name.

So in order to make Jesus stumble in his defense of resurrection, the Sadducees ask what would happen if each of seven brothers married one woman and all died childless. Whose wife would she be in the resurrection? It’s what a friend of mine who is a lawyer would call a gotcha question. Their goal is to make the idea of resurrection seem absurd and to expose Jesus as a fake.

But Jesus has a brilliant answer. He says in essence. “You mistakenly assume that the cultural conventions of our time will continue to determine our lives in the coming age of resurrection. Unlike today in that time beyond death we will neither marry nor be given in marriage. We will not be able to die anymore.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Why does Jesus refer to death here? Greek uses two different words for “to marry” and “to be given in marriage.” In that world of the Bible men marry and women are given in marriage. Jesus looks at the marriage arrangements of his time as a way of dealing with the insecurity that follows death, almost as a kind of insurance policy.

Since in the next world there will be no more death, a widow will no longer need a new husband or a child to provide for her. At that point she will not be someone’s wife, or someone’s property. She will simply be a child of God, a child of the resurrection.

Jesus declares that in the resurrection, we will not have power over other people. No one will have power over us. We will all be free. If this were not enough he even goes on to give the Sadducees a reason for why they might change their mind and experience the liberating influence of the resurrection. He gives them an idea taken from the portion of the Bible that they regard as authoritative.

When Moses experiences God after seeing a bush that is burning but not consumed by flame. God tells him, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (Ex. 3:6), not “I WAS the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” In that time when Jesus was surrounded by death and the fear of death he says that God is, “God not of the dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive” (Lk. 20).

And so today we experience again the way of Jesus. He does not hate or attack his enemies. He listens from the heart. He firmly responds to their arguments in the way that my teacher Cornel west did as college sophomore. Jesus wins them over with love so that they say, “Teacher, you have spoken well.”

Jesus also warns us to be careful of expecting God to be limited by our cultural conventions and our intelligence. Even in our moments of greatest imagination, we cannot grasp the beautiful mystery of the holiness that is our deepest desire.

And yet we have these moments of insight. Do you ever feel as if someone you loved but has died is near? Your intuition may be right because, to God “all of them are alive.”

Today we celebrate All Saint’s Day by baptizing fifteen people into the church. They will join this mystical community of people who are liberated from the fear of death and straining to live in love. They will be joining you and me, and all the people of all times and places who are still alive in God.

What happens after you die? Jesus cares so much about the present moment that he does not say much about this, except that our fear of death does not have to constrain how we live and that one day we will be free of the social structures that diminish us. Jesus might ask, “Whose poster would you put up on your dorm room wall? Who would you be willing to stand up for and defend in public even at the risk of your life?”

Let us pray: You know our hearts O God, you see the challenges we face. Help us to listen from the heart and give us a space to be heard. And let us find our hope in the presence of those who have gone before us and in the love of your son Jesus. Amen.

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Production Notes:
1. In the video recording please include the opening Bible sentence “*“Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive” (Lk. 20).*

2. Images: Cornel West, Malcolm X, the Temple in ancient Jerusalem, the burning bush

1. There is so much more to this story and to Professor West’s connections with the Nation of Islam. Cornel West with David Ritz, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud* (New York: SmileyBooks, 2009) 63, 67-70. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I don’t know if it is true but the Wikipedia article claims that the Sadducees name was related to Zadok the High Priest. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadducees> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/11/5/whats-resurrection-for-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-second-week-after-pentecost> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)