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## **Underneath the Question**

(Zechariah 7:1-5 and 9-10; Luke 20:27-38)

(Zechariah 7:1-5 and 9-10) "In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chisleu. 2 Now the people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-melech and their men, to entreat the favor of the LORD, 3 and to ask the priests of the house of the LORD of hosts and the prophets, "Should I mourn and practice abstinence in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?" 4 Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me: 5 Say to all the people of the land and the priests: When you fasted and lamented in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?... 9 Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; 10 do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another."

(Luke 20:27-38) "Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him 28 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. 29 Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; 30 then the second 31 and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. 32 Finally the woman also died. 33 In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her." 34 Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; 35 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. 36 Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. 37 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. 38 Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for all people live to God."

Those of you who are parents or grandparents or who have had close contact with small children have learned that when child asks a question there is sometimes a completely different question beneath it; there is often a difference between the question that a child is asking and the question that he or she is **really** asking. For example, as Barbara and I once experienced, when there has been an unusual amount

of quiet from the child's room and then she suddenly appears at the top of the stairs with a face that would grace an angel and innocently asks you, "*Daddy, does green paint stain things forever?*" you had best not simply respond to the literal words of the question, but consider the question that is actually underneath the question. For if you don't, if you just assume that your child is naturally curious about the nature of textiles and pigments and paint, you're likely to discover that many things in your house are green. Forever. Or sometimes questions are asked in such a confused way that you just don't know how to answer and if you're wise, you'll dig to see what's really underneath the question being asked. One Sunday in my first full-time church out of seminary, as folks were greeting me after worship, one woman stopped and said to me, "Oh Reverend, how do you do it? Each Sunday's sermon seems to be better than the next." Hmmmm... Do I respond to the question and assume it's a compliment or do I assume that I am subtly being told that my performance is increasingly poor?

The question underneath the question. The motive behind the question. These are key if we are truly to communicate well with one another. Because sometimes our language hides rather than reveals: Haven't all of us known a person who doesn't like us but hides that behind the language of absolutely chilly politeness? Haven't all of us listened to the diplomats speak of "frank talks" and "meaningful dialogues" and wondered what really happened? Questions indeed sometimes have questions underneath them. Both of our scriptures this morning are good examples of questions that in fact have other questions hiding underneath them, as we continue our summer sermon series on stories from the gospel of Luke. And, as we shall see, these verses

from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah are a good companion to Luke this morning. Now, Zechariah lived in the years just after the Hebrew people had returned from their seventy years of exile and slavery in Babylon. And every year that they were in exile, the people had fasted during a particular month to mourn the destruction of the Temple that the Babylonians done. Upon their return, then, they had begun to rebuild that Temple. But now, back home for several years, our scripture today picks up with a question that a delegation comes to Zechariah with: *“Should [we continue] to mourn and fast during the fifth month of the year, as we have done for so many years?”* Put another way, the question is this: We have been fasting in order to remember the destruction of the Temple during our time of slavery. Now that we are home and the Temple is being re-built, do we have to continue?

On the face of it, it seems a valid question. But if we listen for the question that’s behind the question we might well hear something else: We might hear the question about how much we have to do in order to ensure God’s love for us. We might hear the question of what things do I have to do in order to be on the “right” side of God? We might hear the worry that God is keeping score and wonder how our behavior affects that score? And we might even hear the crisis of faith that they were having, for you can almost hear them thinking: We’ve done all the right things, believed all the right things, but life isn’t what it’s supposed to be. So why should I continue to do those things, believe those things? For they, like we sometimes, had gotten what they wanted and it didn’t make everything all better – they still had to live with the realities of this mixed bag of a life: loved ones who got deathly ill, dysfunctional families, irritating neighbors, jobs that are not as fulfilling as they ought to be, disappointments and

broken dreams. And so they were really asking, “*Do we still have to mourn and fast?*” – because it doesn’t seem to work anyway. We got what we had prayed for for so long but life is still hard.

But notice something: Zechariah’s answer to them doesn’t answer the question they asked, but instead goes underneath that question, challenging their assumptions about God as a kind of scorekeeper who needs the right words or actions or feelings in order to care for you. Here Zechariah’s words: “*Thus says the Lord: ‘Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to your brother and sister, do not oppress anyone, and let none of you devise any evil against anyone.’*” In other words, in response to the question of the “right” actions, or the “right” beliefs Zechariah instead answers the question that underlies those questions: Here is the kind of people that you must be, he says, just, loving, and kind.

But that small, 3:00 a.m. voice in our heads sometimes still wants to respond: Why? Why bother? Why bother to seek justice, to be kind, to be loving? It sometimes seems that kindness too often gets repaid with apathy, or loving acts sometimes get met with hostility, or attempts to do justice encounter indifference. Why bother? Well, although it might appear to be an odd place to find an answer to such questions, the story from Luke today actually has an answer for us for those 3 a.m. questions about the meaning of it all. So let’s turn to that story. And here we are met again with a question that actually has a question underneath it. Recall the scene: Some of those whom Luke calls the Sadducees asked Jesus this rather involved question: “*Under the*

*law it is a man's duty to take his dead brother's widow as his own wife. Now," the question continues, "what if a woman had been married to seven different men, brothers all, who each married her after the previous one had died – in heaven, then, who would be her husband?"*

Quite a question. It reminds me of those "what if" questions that our children used to ask at bedtime to delay going to bed. After I had told them that it was bedtime and they weren't to get up anymore, then the questions would come: *"What if I have to use the bathroom? What if there's a fire? What if a robber comes in the window? What if all the pictures fall off the wall."* But those of you who know what I'm talking about here also know that if you end up answering all these questions on the level at which they're asked, then pretty soon you have this very involved, complicated body of "law" about when it is and isn't ok to get out of bed – a discussion that leaves you irritable and, of course, prolonged the actual going to bed! Which was, of course, the question and the motive behind the question all along!

So how does Jesus respond to this complex hypothetical question about marriage and heaven? Well, he does not answer the question that is asked, but goes beneath it, he does not get into a complicated discussion of case law and the various permutations. Instead, his answer is this, *"God is the God of the living."* Now this is curious. Just what question – what question underneath the question – is Jesus answering here?!? I think the answer is actually rather simple and it brings us back, too, to our 3:00 a.m. question about why we should bother. For the question that Jesus is really answering here, the question underneath the question, is the only question

when all is said and done that there is – “*Why does **anything** matter?*”

And, again, we do know that question sometimes, don't we? Why does it matter? Why does anything matter? Those are the questions that every religion around the world has sought to answer. They are the questions that underlay the Sadducees' question to Jesus. They are the questions that underlay the people's question to Zechariah. *“If life is short and then we die, why does anything matter? Why does it matter that we behave well? Why does it matter that we should try to be just and loving and kind when that small voice whispers in our ear ‘In fifty years, what difference will it make if I was kind or not?’”*

Well, my friends it matters precisely because, as Jesus' answer has it: *All people live to God.* What we do matters precisely because it affects God. Now, I am not claiming that what we do matters to God in the sense that God is tallying statistics to make sure we make the cut, for we have seen too many instances of God patiently working, hoping, nudging and luring that **everyone** would find life abundant and eternal. But it does matter because our lives live in God, our lives affect God. For you see the lesson of the cross is that God Himself shares our lives completely. God hurts when we hurt, God celebrates when we have joy. What we do affects God. And that's the simple truth of why it matters.

But that is all very abstract, so let me put it even more plainly: You and I can by our actions make the world a place where God's will can take root more easily, or we can sow weeds that make it more difficult. When God's call for justice is ignored, it makes it that much more difficult for God to break through next time to a heart that is

now a little bit more hardened. When you or I offer rudeness in the place of kindness, it that makes it that much more difficult for the grace of God's gentleness to touch a needy heart. When you or I turn an indifferent ear to a cry of pain, it makes it that much more difficult for God to move in healing ways on the next occasion. Do you remember in the story leading up to the Hebrew people's exodus from slavery in Egypt how the story says that Pharaoh's heart was hardened? The truth here is that by our actions we can both inadvertently harden our own hearts against the lure of God next time, and we can make it that much more difficult for our fellow human beings to find God too.

That's why it matters. That's the answer to the question underneath the question. You and I make a difference to God in every moment, and therefore we make a difference to the world in every moment. It is both a wonderful opportunity and a comforting hope indeed. And so I invite you this week to find one time, one way, one opportunity in which by your action you can make it easier for God to break through in someone else's life. It may be by a word or an action. It may be by not saying something! And while you cannot guarantee that someone will respond to what God is offering them, you can surely, surely make it more of a possibility. For just as we and our daughter found out that indeed green paint does stain things permanently, so too can we can discover and re-discover on this day that God is the one who permanently, forever and always, is seeking to offer grace to each life, hope to each life – and when we realize that the possibility of God's being able to do that is ever so much better when we can help God through our words and our actions to show folks that God is not a scorekeeper, not a bully, but a caring friend. For that possibility, for that good news,

thanks be to God indeed. Amen