

“The God of the Living”

“Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him” (Luke 20:38).

Yogi Berra was a master of distraction. The Hall of Fame catcher played for the New York Yankees from 1946 to 1963, and in addition to a career in which he won three American League Most Valuable Player awards, one of the things Berra was known for was his ceaseless chatter behind the plate. When an opposing player stepped into the batter’s box, Yogi Berra would pester him about everything from the weather to the fit of his uniform to the health of his family. Today, we call this trash talk, and Berra’s legendary trash talk would often distract hitters from the task at hand and lead to easy outs for Yankee pitchers.

Distraction is a technique that’s often employed in life. Whether it’s a pickpocket distracting the focus of his would-be victim, a politician distracting a reporter from a sensitive issue, or a parent distracting a child’s attention away from a tempting toy, we have all used the tactic of distraction to get things done. And this tactic takes center stage in today’s Gospel reading.

In this account from Luke, we find a blatant attempt at distraction involving the Sadducees and a complicated question about marriage and the resurrection. In Jesus’ day, there were basically two groups that comprised the Jewish ruling Council. The group we are most familiar with was the Pharisees, but it was actually the Sadducees who held the majority of the seats on the Council. These groups often disagreed with each other, yet as the Sadducees confronted Jesus on this day, their intentions were exactly the same as the Pharisees, who were constantly looking for ways to trap Jesus and distract Him from His work.

To understand the conversation in our text, it’s important to know that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. In fact, they felt strongly that there was no afterlife of any kind. Their question about marriage was a sham, yet they based it on Deuteronomy 25, where Moses had given a very specific law about a man’s obligation to marry his brother’s widow so that, by giving her a child, the name of the dead brother could extend to another generation. This was as close to immortality as the beliefs of the Sadducees would ever come, so their disingenuous question to Jesus had only one goal. They wanted to bait Jesus into an answer that would contradict the Law of Moses and open him up to charges of blasphemy. But the result they got was more than the Sadducees ever bargained for.

Not only did Jesus affirm the Law of Moses, but He also used their deceitful question as a chance to clearly proclaim the truth of the resurrection. Pointing back to the name “I AM” from our Old Testament reading, Jesus said, “But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him” (Luke 20:37-38). God didn’t say, “I was the God of Abraham.” The Lord clearly stated to Moses, “I AM,” and the point Jesus made to the trash-talking Sadducees was clear – the children of God who died in the past live in the present by the power of the same God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush. In one simple statement, Jesus avoided their attempt at distraction, He answered their question and affirmed Scripture, and He did it with a clear proclamation of the resurrection.

And this message from Jesus couldn't be more important for us to hear today because in it, we receive an eternal perspective from which we are so often distracted. Sometimes these distractions come from things that, on the outside, look positive. We enjoy the blessing of good health or the fruits of a successful career, but instead of seeing our prosperity purely as God's gift, we attribute our health and wealth to our own hard work and good choices, and our sinful ego distracts us from their divine source.

We are also distracted from this eternal perspective when things are not so good. When we struggle in our marriage, or when we face an unexpected illness, or when we lose a loved one. These distractions, which can take 1,000 different forms, move our eyes away from God's promises, and in this vacuum, we always turn inward, thinking that we must have done something to cause such desperate circumstances, and that there must be something we can do to get ourselves right with God.

We are incredibly fickle in our focus, and whether it is because of prosperity, or adversity, or just plain disobedience, we are far too easily distracted from God's promises, and we all too quickly lose sight of what is truly and ultimately important. And that is exactly why we need today's words from God.

Today, Jesus lifts our eyes from our earthly lives, and He shows us eternal things. Today, the God who is "I AM" proclaims once again the historical truth that on the cross our sin has been dealt with, and that by God's work and word we have been redeemed in the present and accepted for eternity. Today, the Gospel of Jesus shows us a God who loves us, has forgiven us, and has given us a future that the distractions of this life cannot touch.

Peter writes that through the death and resurrection of Jesus we have been given "an inheritance (in heaven) that can never perish, spoil, or fade" (I Peter 1:4). In today's epistle reading, Paul tells us that God has loved us and given us "eternal comfort and good hope" (II Thessalonians 2:16). And Scripture is filled with God's resurrection promises that no matter what distractions may cloud our vision, no matter what failures may erode our confidence, no matter what doubts may batter our hope, our salvation is absolutely certain and secure because it is based on Jesus Christ – the I AM – who was not, is not, and will never be distracted from His saving work.

This is the promise Moses received at the burning bush. This is the promise the Sadducees heard from the mouth of Jesus. And this is the promise I announce to you today. In Christ, the resurrection is real, and you will live again after you die. This is God's Word to you, and today you can put this eternal promise to work in your earthly life by loving, serving, and sharing this saving Word.

In Baptism, your life was hidden with Christ, and now, no matter how dark the road may get, no matter how difficult the distractions may become, and no matter how desperate life in this world may feel, you can take heart because your Savior has overcome the world, and in Him, you have life, now and forever. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

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