

Blessed be the name of God” Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

If you’re around a younger child very much—or even if you remember your own childhood—you’re likely to remember how often the words “I can’t wait…” get used.

“Mommy, I can’t wait ’til I’m old enough to go to school.”

“Daddy, I can’t wait ’til I have a job.”

Or, in my own pathetic case, “Mommy, I can’t wait ’til I can iron clothes.”

As we get to be old enough to do these things, of course, they are not quite what we imagined them to be. School, a job, ironing may seem glamorous from a child’s perspective. But that’s because, as a child, we cannot see everything involved.

The “I can’t waits” are not exclusive to small children. Ever known a teen-ager?

“I can’t wait ’til I’m 18 and can do what I want.”

“I can’t wait ’til I can drive. Then I can go where I want.”

“I can’t wait ’til I’m out of school and can make some money.”

Again, these “I can’t waits” are uttered from a young person’s ideas about the freedoms that adulthood offers.

As we grow older, the “I can’t waits” change—but they don’t go away.

“I can’t wait ’til my vacation.”

“I can’t wait ’til I’m old enough for some of those good senior citizen discounts!”

“I can’t wait ’til I retire. Then I’ll finally be free.”

Many of our “I can’t wait” are based on dissatisfaction with the status quo and some imagined perfection in the stated category: school for the preschooler, a job instead of play, ironing instead of just watching ironing being done.

The teen imagines that the age of 18 is some magical threshold into complete self-rule; that driving a car comes without limitations; that a job comes without restrictions and tedium.

The older person wants to trade in his or her “today” for that great vacation months from now; or somehow thinks that those senior citizen discounts aren’t accompanied by other senior markers such as the aches and pains of being a senior; that in retirement they finally will be free, able to do and go wherever they please.

The problem with the “I can’t wait” is that they often are based on faulty assumptions. Even when the desired state is directly observed, we cannot possibly know all the facets of that next stage we desire so much. We’re also likely to see in them what we want to see, something that is missing in our current situation. We assign values based on the world in which we live: as a child, a world of limited freedoms, we see that adults have all the power; as a teen, we see our older siblings getting to do everything; as an adult, vacations and retirement are free from the hassles of pleasing a difficult boss or just having to be responsible.

But here’s the problem. We are defining that next stage in an unrealistic way. Based on skewed observations, we tend to idealize the thing we can’t wait for. We define it in such a way that it seems to be the solution to our current conditions. A

back door. A loophole. A treasure map that will lead us into perfect existence. Even though we have no actual idea of what that next stage is like, we just keep imagining a future based on what we see in the present.

There's a hint of this very human tendency in today's Gospel from Luke.

“Jesus said to them, ‘The children of this age marry, and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage.’”

Jesus is answering a question posed by some Sadducees, members of a sect within first-century Judaism.

We are more accustomed to hearing about the Pharisees in the Gospels, the most populous of several branches of Jewish believers in the first century. Most Jews of that time, including—most scholars believe—Jesus himself, were Pharisees, and it is their beliefs and traditions that eventually became Judaism as we think of it today.

But there were other groups of believers, the Sadducees among them. Members and supporters of the high-priestly family, Sadducees tended to be wealthy and politically well connected. They accepted as authoritative only the Torah—the first five books of the Old Testament—and reduced the prophetic writings to a lower stature in their system. They rejected oral tradition altogether.

Most importantly for our purposes, Sadducees rejected the idea of resurrection, because it is not explicitly referenced

in the Torah. Pharisees, just for comparison, did believe in resurrection.

In our passage today, while these Sadducees address Jesus as Teacher (a term of respect) it is only to set him up. They are intent on asking a trick question designed to stump rather than to enlighten, attempting to embarrass Jesus should he try to answer their question. They are seeking to undercut his authority as a teacher, and at the same time demonstrate that there can be no resurrection.

In other words, they were up to no good when they invited Jesus into the theological hotspot between the no-resurrection Sadducees and the resurrection-believing Pharisees—a place where they figured he was bound to alienate half the crowd.

The question the Sadducees pose has to do with the levirate marriage law that is cited in Deuteronomy that requires a man to marry his brother's widow if that union had produced no children. The hope was that the second marriage would result in offspring. The firstborn child of that union would bear the name of the deceased brother so that his lineage might continue. This law also benefited the widow, whose circumstances would be considerably diminished without a husband.

From this very good law, then, the Sadducees concoct a scenario in which one brother is married and dies, without having fathered children. The second brother, according to the law, marries the widow—and so on until the seventh husband also dies, none of them producing children. Ultimately the wife dies, too.

Then the question:

“Therefore in the resurrection whose wife of them will she be? For the seven had her as a wife.”

Here is the trap they set for Jesus: If he says that all seven brothers will be the woman’s husbands, he will alienate everyone. While first-century believers can imagine a man having seven wives, they could not imagine a woman having seven husbands.

Jesus, of course, dodges the question in a way they do not expect: “The children of this age marry, and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage.”

We expect Jesus to outsmart even the cleverest opponent. He does so again here. That’s no surprise. So what do we suppose this passage has to say to us? What is the new insight?

Resurrection. It is a staple of the Christian faith. But no one actually knows the full range of what it means nor do many of us even share a common understanding. That may sound a bit challenging, and yet I believe it is true. What is the meaning of resurrection for an individual believer? If you asked your neighbor in the pew what resurrection means to them, I’m pretty certain you will hear something in their response that is different from your own viewpoint.

Trying to explain resurrection life to another earthbound person is rather like trying to explain the Pythagorean theorem to a preschooler. The preschooler has no basis for understanding the geometric theorem just as we have no basis

for understanding the resurrection. Except, that is, for a few—a very few—hints we get from scripture.

One of the hints we get from scripture about resurrection life is our Gospel reading today. While it may not as go far as we would like, Jesus' answer to the Sadducees gives us a view, a very limited view, granted, but a view as to some aspects of the resurrected life.

In the resurrected life we neither marry nor are given in marriage.

If any of you are worried about that statement, I ask you to move beyond the discomfort you might feel at not being married in heaven and see in Jesus' response a broader meaning of what our eternal life might look like in its next chapter. Perhaps he used the example of marriage because that was the context offered him, or perhaps he used it metaphorically rather than literally. But my takeaway from his words is this: The resurrected life is not like the one we have now. While we only have this life and its particulars from which to imagine heaven, apparently that is not an accurate place to start in our imaginings. If we do that, we risk creating heavenly life in the image of earthly life.

I guess we all do that to some extent because, one, what options do we have and, two, mostly it comforts us. The thought of being with loved ones again is heartening. And we probably imagine we will be in the same relationships in heaven as we are here—parents and children; spouses, siblings; friends, and so on. Why wouldn't we want to be with all those whom we have loved and who have loved us? Count me among those who think this would make a fine heaven.

But if God has a slightly different idea, or a big God-sized idea of our ever-after life that doesn't exactly match mine, I'm trusting that it will be an existence that surpasses any good thing I could think up on my own; that it will be a place of love and justice and dignity for all.

Billy Graham, who turned 95 this past week, talks about heaven this way: "Heaven will be the perfection we have always longed for. All the things that made earth unlovely and tragic will be absent in heaven. There will be no night, no death, no disease, no sorrow, no tears, no ignorance, no disappointment, no war. It will be filled with health, vigor, virility, knowledge, happiness, worship, love, and perfection."

Like that teen-ager who imagines that life becomes magically easy at age 18, or the child who longs for her school years to begin, we may tend to read into the resurrected life things we imagine to be there, or things that we want to be there.

Nothing wrong with that, as far as it goes.

And, as people of faith, it seems we also are asked to trust God to give us the heaven that will make us happier than anything we've ever known. Or could ever imagine.

It is an interesting and wonderful thing to contemplate, the idea of what the resurrection life will be. No, don't take me wrong, I'm in no particular hurry. And yet...I have to confess, I just can't wait to see how it all turns out.

Amen.