30 years ago yesterday, the East German government announced that it would begin allowing people to cross through checkpoints at its borders with West Germany, including at the Berlin Wall. There would be other milestones over the next month or so, but this was a pivotal moment in the falling of the Iron Curtain. Yesterday I listened to the recollections of some people who were there: a generation of Germans rejoined with portions of their own homeland they had never seen before… Those from the East marveling at things the West takes for granted – like grocery stores full of food, some of which they didn’t even know existed – like bananas. … Those from the West seeing the results of a generation’s repressive regime and threadbare economy on half of their great nation. +++ West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl waded into this chaos. The West could have taken advantage of the situation but Kohl insisted on proceeding with all due respect for their compatriots in the East – he insisted on the principles of self-determination, laying aside squabbles, mutual sacrifice for the greater good of the fatherland, and welcoming those from the East into their midst “as Germans among Germans.” +++ The past was the past and there was no denying it… Nazis… Hitler… Berlin in ruins after the war… and then a generation divided by the rising Superpowers – like a time of exile… when the wounds could never really heal. … But now, finally, a new day had come – a day for all the people of a new generation to take courage – a day to look to the future. … And over the past 30 years, Germany has become great again – a cornerstone of a free, united, Europe – and its most formidable economy.

As I read and heard stories yesterday about the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rebuilding of Germany – I was struck with how much it shares with the challenges facing Zerubbabel (za-RUE-bub-el) and Joshua as they led Jews back from exile after 70 years in Babylon. First of all, they are a new generation of leaders with no personal memory of Jerusalem. Zerubbabel (za-RUE-bub-el) is the son of Shealtiel (SHEAL-tile), the governor of Judah. And Joshua is the son of Jehozadak (je-HOSE-e-dak), the high priest. +++ Haggai is talking to them and others in their generation when he asks, “Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?” +++ Clearly, the Lord does not intend for Jerusalem and the Temple to remain in ruins, as silent witnesses to Israel’s glorious past … NO! Jerusalem is for the present and the future – as God had promised generations ago when they “came out of Egypt.” +++

“Take courage,” the Lord tells these young leaders through Haggai, “take courage, all you people of the land…; work, for I am with you.” +++ +++ Look to the future… Yes, God had walked with Abraham and Jacob – with David and Solomon – but that’s not the message here: “I am with YOU. My spirit abides among YOU…” as you step onto the pages of history and make your own mark on the world. +++ Take courage… Rebuild the temple, “and the latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former… and in this place I will give prosperity.” +++ +++ Through Haggai, we learn not to get sidetracked by things that are no longer relevant to us – and we learn that each living generation has its own tasks – its own challenges – its own call from the Lord.: The God of the Living, calling us into courage… calling us to build and to rebuild… to be the Body of Christ – to do justice – to love mercy – to serve the weak – to be a voice for the voiceless…; – to do all of this for our time… in our context. +++ And, to prepare the Church for the generations to come.

That brings us to Jesus’ encounter with group of Sadducees in today’s gospel reading. You’ll remember that last week, when we met Zacchaeus and his sycamore tree, Jesus was almost to Jerusalem. Well, today we find that he has arrived. Palm Sunday just past and so now Jesus is preaching, teaching, and arguing in the temple and the streets of Jerusalem – just days before he will be arrested. We’ve also learned that “the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept [are] looking for a way to kill him.” They keep trying to trap him with tricky questions. In fact, in the verses just before today’s reading, Jesus fields the question about paying taxes, to which he famously responds, “give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” +++ So, that’s what’s happening when the Sadducees hit Jesus with this ridiculous, hypothetical, question about a woman who, through a tragic and freakish set of circumstances, ends up marrying seven brothers: “Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?” +++ +++ Mind you, the Sadducees don’t even believe in the resurrection. There is nothing genuine about this question. They aren’t looking for any kind of insight or guidance from Jesus – they
just want to trap him with words. +++ It reminds me of the kind of question a Philosophy 101 professor hits you with on the first day of class, just to blow your mind:: “If every cell in your body is replaced every 7 years – how can you say you are the same person you were 7 years ago?” or “How can you be certain your dorm room still exists at this moment, when you are only experiencing this classroom?” These crazy questions shamelessly parade logical fallacies which the professor knows first-year students won’t catch. +++ The Sadducees’ question is that kind of crazy question:: But Jesus is no first-year student!

So Jesus challenges them:: what does marriage have to do with the afterlife? In fact, “children of the resurrection, the children of God, can’t die – they live on!” The Hebrew Scriptures speak “of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” – because Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob live on! +++ The Sadducees are asking the wrong questions for the wrong reasons:: “The dead??” “Why are you asking about the dead??” +++ Christ came to save and to serve the living – the living of all times – past, present, and future. +++ And as Christ followers – we – the Church – are each called to take courage and serve our generation:: – to do justice – to love mercy – to serve the weak – to be a voice for the voiceless in our time. +++ Like the generation of Zerubbabel (za-RUE-bub-el) and Joshua – walking in the footsteps of David and Solomon but called to their own moment:: – to rebuild God’s city and temple and give a new future to the Jews… +++; like the generation of Germans after the Berlin Wall fell, called to their own moment:: – to reunite their people and forge a new future in a united Europe.

It seems to me that we can learn something from the Sadducees’ encounter with Jesus. They wanted to argue about things like ancient laws of marriage and inheritance, while in the meantime Rome was brutalizing their people and some Jews were starving in the streets. The Sadducees got sidetracked by their arguments with the Pharisees, and with Jesus, about the finer points of theology. Now, in today’s reading, they used word games and tricks to trip up their adversary. +++ And Jesus hits back, right between the eyes:: you are asking the wrong questions. God is here – now – and is much more concerned about the suffering and grief of real people who are like the woman in your puzzle – much more concerned about that than the technicalities of whose wife she would be in the resurrection.

In the same way, in the midst of our incessant modern arguments over the finer points of economics – national purity – and just what, exactly, qualifies as a Constitutional crisis, Christ is here – now – and is more concerned about the living outcast – the living hungry family – and the living bullied child – much more concerned about that than our petty squabbles… +++ Do we get sidetracked from the paths Christ would have us tread? Do we get so wrapped up in the “x’s and o’s” of issues that we forget about who is affected by them? +++ Today’s texts offer a roadmap to get us back on track:: The Lord calls us to “take courage [and] work, for I am with you.” Each week we pray that God’s “will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” What is the Lord calling our generation to do for real people – for living people? +++ This church has a rich and long history of serving the Lord and this community. God surely walked with our forerunners here – BUT… the GOOD NEWS is that God is with US too… The Holy Spirit abides with US. +++ So, now, I ask you. What are we called to do NEXT – who are we called to be,… NEXT – among the living of this generation – to make the splendor of this house – now and in the future – even greater than the former? What are we to become? Which living children of God are we called to serve? What tasks are laid before our generation – and are we working on them? +++ And what is your role in that – what are you ready to do? +++ As Christ walks the streets of Jerusalem on his way to Calvary – is our generation ready to take courage – to look to the future – then to pick up our cross… and follow him?

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.