The Vanishing Act

November 6th, 2016

25th Sunday after Pentecost

In 1914, Augusto Perez discovered that he was not real. He was just a character in the novel *Mist* by Miguel de Unamuno, a Basque philosopher who also wrote brilliant novellas and short stories. On a side note, *Mist* was inspired by the philosophy and theology of Søren Kierkegaard. Anyway, Augusto got into an argument with the author and tried to take matters into his own hands, but the novel ended ambiguously, and it is not certain what happened afterwards. In much more recent history, a girl named Sophie made a similar discovery. She was just a character within a story within a novel by Jostein Gaarder called *Sophie's World*—but Sophie did fight back and crept away from the plot. Like Augusto and Sophie, we too have our own vanishing acts, but for different reasons. The greatest escape that we think we are making is the escape from being creatures, from being humans made in the image of God. And that is precisely what happens in our story today in Luke 20—the Sadducees vanish from their own storyline by pretending to engage Jesus in some theological discussion to test him on his teaching of the resurrection: "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but not children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as a wife" (Luke 20:27-33). At first, this promises to be exciting. For a change, we hear a parable from the crowd—a parable to elicit answers from the ultimate speaker of parables. It's even a bit scandalous in content. The result, however, is a bit disappointing. Imagine if Jesus said, "The second husband." Or imagine if Jesus said, "All of them." What light does it shed on the nature of the resurrection? What do we learn about the existence or non-existence of the new life? Precious little. Because this is not really a parable or even a real thought experiment. It is not a question so much as a distraction. The question of resurrection is eclipsed by a question of marital definitions and relationships. Moreover, it is not a parable that adequately portrays the Sadducees' position, either. They did not believe in the resurrection, but there is nothing in this parable to suggest what they did believe. Like the topic at hand, they have disappeared. Sometimes we do this as well. Instead of posing real questions to existence; instead of seeking real answers from God, we pose distractions rather than questions. A question can be answered. It may not be an answer you like, but many questions can be answered. A distraction cannot be answered. It merely leads one away from crucial subjects, and at times, it leads us away from ourselves.

Jesus is not only a master storyteller, he is also a master scribe. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said: "For this reason, every scribe who has been discipled in the kingdom of heaven is like a homeowner who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matthew 13:52). What did Jesus mean by new treasures as well as old? Jesus is not Houdini. He does not need to escape the problems at hand or himself. He is able to look backward into time, into the Law and Prophets; he is able to look forward into time—to the dawn of the new covenant and the hope of resurrection. It is dynamic and not static. It values what is changeless while embracing change, something the church would do well to heed. Not everything in the past will be preserved, but not everything in the past needs to be changed or discarded, either. In Jesus we see a cherishing of those traditions that are still valid; we also see traditions that fall by the wayside. And Jesus answers the Sadducees, saying: "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. 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 20:34-38). Luke's version of this encounter is quite gentle. In the Gospel of Mark, the same encounter, or a very similar one, is related in much stronger language. Jesus responds to the Sadducees, saying: "Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?" (Mark 12:24). This statement alone should provoke some thought and soul searching, for a great deal of Christianity on our continent today seems to know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. Jesus could have quoted several instances of resurrection or afterlife discussed in the Law and Prophets (Genesis 5:24, 2 Samuel 12:15-23, 1 Kings 17:17-24, 2 Kings 2:1-14, 2 Kings 4:18-37, Psalm 16:10, Job 19:23-27, Psalm 49, Isaiah 65:17, Jeremiah 31:15-17), but the Sadducees rejected most of the canon. They only accepted the five books of Moses. This is most likely why Jesus speaks of an incident recorded in the Pentateuch, the event of Moses at the burning bush, when God says that God is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. The Sadducees could not claim to be ignorant of this famous scene in Scripture. It was the one thing they might know. Jesus begins there. There has to be more than just stories, though. There has to be faith that God can do the things that He claims. Can God speak through a burning bush? Can God raise the dead? It is strange to believe in a God that can effect so little in our lives. For many people today, God is an ornament to their life and not the anchor. God is an idea, a concept, a force. God is anything but who God claims to be. And if God is only an idea, only a concept, only an ornament or a force—then it is probably better to be an atheist because that seems more honest and straightforward. Of what use is an idea you can never really define? Of what use is a tarnished, ancient ornament? The way we speak of God today is quite similar to the way we speak of foreigners. Most of the citizens of Asia did not know they were Asians until Europeans came and told them so. After all, everyone from the Ottoman Empire to Japan had enough in common to deserve the catch-all term "Asian". The Japanese did not know they were Japanese until the Portuguese and Dutch told them of *Zipangu*, the fabled land in Marco Polo's *Travels.* It is a way of silencing or controlling the identity of the other. And if God is the ultimate Other, have we not engaged in something similar? Have we not tried to make God vanish in some way or other through the way we speak? Have we not done this both individually and collectively? The name that God revealed to Moses is: "I am that I am" or "I will be who I will be" (Exodus 3)—God will not be who you or I want Him to be. God is God and God reveals who God is.

The Sadducees stand before the Son of God, Immanuel, the promised Messiah, the Holy One. For them it might have been an ordinary day, but this was in itself a cosmic event, a historical event of grand proportions. And instead of bowing down like the Magi, instead of listening with open hearts, instead of just enjoying with fascination the goodness, truthfulness and compassion of Jesus, they want to play word games, engage in trivial intellectual arguments, and hide God away in a convenient box. To make God vanish. Ernest Hemingway was a great *aficionado* of bull-fighting. He wrote two books about the sport—*Death in the Afternoon* and *The Dangerous Summer*. He was an expert that even the matadors respected. And yet, I do not think Hemingway ever stepped into a bull ring. Many of us know people who are experts on certain subjects—say tennis. They can give you endless tennis statistics and tell you about Bjorn Borg, Martina Navratilova, John McEnroe, Andrei Agassi, Steffi Graf, Maria Sharapova, Novak Djokovic, Serena and Venus Williams. And yet they have never picked up a racquet or played a game. We can do the same thing with religion. We can argue about things, we can exchange ideas about things, and all the while never engage the reality of the things or Person in question. Have you prayed? Have you read the Scriptures? Have you renounced worldly things? Have you contemplated the Godhead? The Sadducees were not interested in God. They were interested in discrediting Jesus of Nazareth. And that is why their parable leads nowhere because it does not really ask a sincere question about the resurrection. I sometimes wonder how long some of our bestselling religious writers and icons would last in a Carthusian monastery. In a Zen monastery. In an ashram. In a rural church. In a poor urban church. When it comes to actually practicing, actually being religious—God somehow becomes an obstacle to knowing God. We lose interest, and God vanishes, or so it would seem.

What Jesus says is hopeful, though. God is not a God of the dead but of the living. God wants life. Why would death be remotely interesting to God? What pleasure could God have in extinction? The Sadducees did not like the idea of resurrection, and Jesus corrected them. Too bad for the Sadducees—it is not their universe! It is God's, and in God's universe there is a resurrection! In God's universe, there is going to be hope and there is going to be salvation. There is going to be an abundance of life! There is going to be the possibility of a future for humanity. Moreover, there is going to be meaning for human beings. The Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset once said the following: "The stone is given its existence; it need not fight for being what it is—a stone in a field. Man has to be himself in spite of unfavourable circumstances; that means he has to make his own existence at every single moment. He is given the abstract possibility of existing, but not the reality. This he has to conquer hour after hour. Man must earn his life, not only economically but metaphysically" (Jose Ortega y Gasset, "Man Has No Nature" in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Plume, 1975. 153). With the stroke of a pen, Ortega y Gasset likewise escapes himself. Essentially, Ortega y Gasset is suggesting that we have no real character but what we can make for ourselves. Further on, he says something even more intimidating: "Man is what has happened to him, what he has done. Other things might have happened to him or have been done by him, but what did in fact happen to him and was done by him, this constitutes a relentless trajectory of experiences that he carries on his back as the vagabond his bundle of all he possesses. Man is a substantial emigrant on a pilgrimage of being, and it is accordingly meaningless to set limits to what he is capable of being…If we do not know what he is going to be, we know what he is not going to be. Man lives in view of the past. Man, in a word, has no nature; what he has is history. Expressed differently: what nature is to things, history, *res gestae*, is to man" (Ortega y Gasset 157). I do not want to belittle a great philosopher or diminish the importance of human works, philosophically or theologically, but I want to demonstrate something. Follow me into a hospital. We are going to visit a woman who has suffered chronicle sexual abuse. We are going to tell her that she has no inherent nature other than what she has done and what has been done to her. Now follow me to a *maquiladora*. We are going to meet someone who has suffered in the textile factory for decades and has done nothing more than operate a sewing machine. And we are going to tell this worker that she has no nature other than the grinding, monotonous years of labour and the ever imminent threats against her life for not belonging to the drug trade. Follow me into prison where we encounter a murderer who suffers physically and emotionally for what he has done. He has no nature and no future. He has only his crimes. And now follow me into the lives of many in our communities. They, too, have no nature. They are nothing more than their tweets, their pins, their posts on social media, their commutes, the few hours of romance they manage a week, the drinks they have drunk, the plates of food they have picked at, the hours they have sat in office chairs, the lives they have measured out in coffee spoons, as T.S. Eliot once said ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" 1920). All of them have only their history, their *res gestae*. And when they are dead, they do not even have that, for life is cruel and memory is short lived. It does not have to be Ortega y Gasset's definition of human nature—we could have picked any number of them from philosophers, scientists, and anthropologists—but eventually, we would run up against the same limitations.

Whether we look forward or backward, we reach limits. The planet 90377 Sedna is thought to be a minor planet beyond Pluto. It takes 11,400 years to complete its orbit of the Sun. Sedna will reach its perihelion in 2075-2076, sixty years from now. If we do not launch something between 2033 and 2046 to reach it, it will be another 12,000 years before we can try again. This is one planet in our solar system. Imagine all of the other planets out there, the other galaxies beyond. Even a thousand years from now, we will not have scratched the surface. We live in worlds we can never fully know nor understand. We live in bodies we will never fully use or understand. For us to find the meaning of who we are, where we are and what anything means would require something timeless, something powerful, something able to cross the universe, or someone who can contain the universe. That Someone is God. Our world is a view of other worlds, of jigsaw puzzle pieces we can never assemble. Resurrection is not merely an argument about materialism against spiritualism. Resurrection is an invitation to being who we are. It is about the gift of life. The life we do not have to make and can never make, but the life that is given freely. If we are not interested in resurrection, it is possible that we are not interested in life, and not interested in a God who transcends time and space, in the conversation between the mortal and the immortal, in the God who saves and loves, the God who creates and gives life, and is Life itself (John 11:25). Today, like the Sadducees, we stand before God, before Christ, for God is everywhere. What kind of parables and distractions are we bringing to God? What kind of stories are we spinning to make God disappear? The truth is that God does not vanish. It is we who vanish when we hide from God. Without God, we do not have humanity because we cannot even define what humanity is. It is said that it is impolite to speak of someone in the third person when they are right in front of you. For decades, we have been speaking of God in God's presence without inviting God into the conversation. Today, let us rewrite the story of the Sadducees. Let us bring real questions to God, let us bring searching hearts, let us talk to God instead of talking past God. God, help us to invite you into the conversation. God, help us to be open to being invited into Yours, into Your story, which is a great story. It is a story of grace and redemption, and it is a story of worlds without end that only You can comprehend, and which You would share with us, if only we would follow. God, grant us hearts that are willing to remain in Your presence, and deliver us from our vanishing acts. Lord Jesus, may we behold Your glory, for You are the resurrection and the life (John 11:25).