

## GOOD JOB

### *Sermon for Pentecost 25C (Proper 27) -Job 19:23-27a*

LPC, 11/6/16

“I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not as a stranger.”

If those words are familiar to you, chances are it's from one of two things: either you are familiar with the beautiful aria that uses those words from Handel's *Messiah*, or you remember them from a funeral you have attended, because they are part of the Burial liturgy.

Those words, as you heard today, are taken from the Book of Job. Job is a story told in verse, like Homer's *Odyssey* or John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

The man character of this epic, named Job, is a righteous, godly man, who enjoys good health and lives surrounded by prosperity, happiness and love. Job has lots of children, who all like each other, which any parent knows is a source of great contentment in middle and old age.

One day, the story goes, God and Satan, looking down on earth, get to talking about human beings, and God starts bragging on Job, who is a genuinely good and pious soul. Satan sneers and says, “Of course he's good and pious. You've given him everything a man could ever want. Take away that stuff he'd be just as bad as anyone else.” So God and Satan strike a deal. If that notion is offensive to you, please remember that this, like a lot of poetic material in the Bible, is a sort of fable: a story that reveals truth, rather than a history that is true in every detail.

At any rate, God permits multiple tragedies to befall Job. A series of disasters wipe out Job's flocks and herds and crops, so Job is destitute. Even worse, the roof of the house where all of Job's children have gathered for a celebration, falls in, killing every last one.

Despite Satan's prediction, Job remains faithful to God, even in deep grief. Job famously says, “Naked came I into the world, and naked I shall leave it. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

But Satan presses his point with God. “Make him sick,” Satan says, “Put him in constant pain. Waste his very flesh and let's see how his faith in God holds up.”

So God allows Job to come down with some kind of wasting sickness. Job's skin begins to putrefy and he becomes disgusting even to himself. Even his wife turns on him. She says, “Curse God and die!” What a horrible thing to say to someone who is suffering!

Job has some friends who come and sit with him. They must be pretty good friends, for they sit with him in silent commiseration for a solid week, but when Job begins to cry out in pain and sorrow, they speak up.

Their speeches are presented in exquisite poetry, but the substance of what they offer Job is fairly typical of some of the stupid things well-meaning folks often say to people in misery.

Much of what the friends have to say is a series of variations on this theme: “You must have done something very bad to deserve this. If you just confess and appease God, everything will be all right again.” This reminds me of when well-meaning people tell their friends who are grieving, “It’s God’s will.” I have never known this particular phrase to impart much comfort at all.

The conversation goes on for about eighteen chapters, with the friends telling Job to admit his guilt and Job maintaining his innocence and his faith in God. Job eventually comes up with the passage we just heard: “I know that my Redeemer lives.”

Now many pious scholars doubt that Job is talking about God here, and they dispute that this is a foretelling of Jesus’ coming as redeemer of mankind. The word here translated “redeemer” is one that is used for a relative who gets you out of hock and allows your land to be restored to you. Suffice to say, that Job is sufficiently convinced of his innocence that he yearns for some kind of advocate to represent him, plead for justice, and bring about his redemption from suffering.

Job is resisting the immature and simplistic logic of his friends, which holds that God’s relationship with humankind is to reward the righteous and punish the wicked. While this formula is not without biblical foundation, it is totally inadequate when bad things happen to good people, and, incidentally, it is inadequate when the wicked obviously go unpunished.

Job’s conversations with his friends continue for another twenty-three chapters, culminating in a climactic dialogue between Job and God Godself. God declares God’s own sovereignty, and Job declares his submission to God. God rebukes Job’s friends and the friends go away.

Job is restored to health. Eventually Job’s fortunes are also restored, and he even has more good and beautiful children to replace the ones he lost.

There are problems with this story, beginning with the idea that God would willfully afflict a righteous man to win a bet with Satan. As I said earlier, it is best to look upon this as the preamble to a fable, setting up the conditions under which a righteous person suffers through no fault of his own.

There are some other interpretative tools that may help with this and other difficult passages in the Bible, without giving up on the belief that the Bible is a uniquely inspired document through which God continues to communicate with God’s people.

The first tool is to understand that the Bible does not so much represent the way things were in fact, or even the way they ought to be, but the way human beings actually do experience their encounter with the Almighty God. The Book of Job gives an unsurpassed account of what it is like for a faithful person to experience tragedy.

The other tool is to recognize that the Bible is true, and authoritative and precious in the same way a family album is true and precious and authoritative. Here we have a portrait of our relative Job, who shows us what it is like to endure unspeakable grief and emerge on the other side with faith intact.

We need to know that this is possible: that it is possible to survive the worse tragedies and still know that God is faithful. We need to know that our Redeemer lives. This is what Job shows us.