

Twenty-Second Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Job's Innocence, Our Guilt and the Savior's Love"

Job 19:23-27a; Psalm 17:1-9; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

November 9-10, 2019

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"I escaped by the skin of my teeth!" By the slightest of chances, by the slimmest of margins. Like a lot of other familiar sayings, this one comes directly from the Bible, in this case from the Book of Job, just a few verses before the 1st lesson we're hearing this weekend. Job is in a really bad way:

*"My bones cling to my skin and to my flesh,
and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth.
Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends,
for the hand of God has touched me!"*

In this instance, being touched by God is not such a good thing. Job is feeling that the Lord has wrought devastation on his life; his health and his wealth are history. His deepest pain, though, is from his isolation, his estrangement from everyone in his social and family circle. Here's how Job describes his situation, as paraphrased in *The Message*:

*"God alienated my family from me;
everyone who knows me avoids me.
My relatives and friends have all left;
houseguests forget I ever existed.
The servant girls treat me like a bum off the street,
look at me like they've never seen me before.
I call my attendant and he ignores me,
ignores me even though I plead with him.
My wife can't stand to be around me anymore.
[The NRSV translation is, "My breath is repulsive to my wife"!]
I'm repulsive to my family.
Even street urchins despise me;
when I come out, they taunt and jeer.
Everyone I've ever been close to abhors me;
my dearest loved ones reject me.
I'm nothing but a bag of bones;
my life hangs by a thread. (Job 19:13-20)*

Can you tell that Job is not **happy** with God?? Job isn't happy with his friends either: Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. (We're probably not going to find **those** names in a newborn nursery or engraved on medallions hanging over our font!) If anyone ever refers to you as one of "Job's comforters," be aware that's not a **good** thing. Job's friends weren't a comfort at all. They kept encouraging him to confess sins he hadn't committed! They were convinced that all these bad things wouldn't have happened to him unless he was being punished. They wanted him to make a clean breast of it; only problem was, he hadn't done anything wrong! He kept telling them he **didn't** deserve this suffering.

So when Job says,

*"O that my words were written down!
O that they were inscribed in a book!
O that with an iron pen and with lead
they were engraved on a rock forever!"* (Job 19:23-24),

...the words he's talking about are his own self-defense, his protestations of innocence that no one is buying! He's saying, "Once I'm dead and can no longer speak for myself, let these inscribed, engraved words speak **for** me and proclaim my innocence till I'm vindicated."

And then Job very importantly adds:

*"For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth...."* (Job 19:25)

The Hebrew word that's translated "Redeemer" is *go'el*. It's a legal term and it means "kinsman-defender," the nearest male relative who would go to bat for you if you lost your land, your property, your freedom. This is the person responsible for bailing you out of debt, taking you into his home if need be, paying your ransom if you became a slave. In the actual context of the Book of Job, this *go'el*, this redeemer, this "someone" isn't God, but is

the earthly or heavenly being who will serve as Job's advocate before God, proclaiming Job's innocence.

We know **we're** not innocent of all guilt, but there **are** times we get upset with the Lord, right? Maybe we're angry because of our **own** suffering or maybe because someone **else's** pain seems especially unjust. Remember Jesus' cry from the cross? "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" He was poignantly stating His sense of spiritual desolation and separation from God, but even in His pain He is communicating with God by quoting Scripture (Psalm 22:1a). A Scripture scholar named Hester has written this:

“...faithful people in the depth of pain may also dare to accuse God, as Job did, and as many of the psalmists did. It is not faith's last word, as it is not for Job, but only faith holding on to God in the face of ungodly suffering can say it.”

The mystery of “ungodly suffering” is never solved in the Book of Job or anywhere else in Scripture. The reality of suffering remains a question without an answer, this side of Heaven. But the reality of **sin** does have a solution: our **Savior**. We don't have to pretend we're innocent of all wrongdoing. We don't have to present ourselves as lily-pure. We don't have to bury the memory of our miserable failures in love. We can lay them out in the open and let them be bleached by Son-light.

Here's part of Martin Luther's explanation of the second article of the Creed (“I believe in Jesus Christ”), found in the *Small Catechism*, our 500-year-old Confirmation textbook:

“[Jesus] has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.”

Our Lord Jesus Christ is our *go'el*, our Savior, the One who has redeemed us from sin, death and the devil, the One to whom we belong, our kinsman-defender who has “bought us with a price,” as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:20a.

In the midst of our most “ungodly suffering,” we have holy hope, even in the midst of what may be our deep anger and/or our terrible fear. We have hope not because we are faithful but because God is. God is the Promise-keeper par excellence:

- *“I will never leave you or forsake you....”* (Deuteronomy 31:6)
- *“The one who watches over you will neither slumber nor sleep...”* (Psalm 121:3-4)
- *“I will not leave you orphaned....”* (John 14:18)
- *“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:20)
- *“Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”* (Revelation 21:4)
- *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* (Philippians 4:13)

A final reflection by a person of faith:

“As a pet trusts its keepers, as a child trusts her parents, children of God must trust their creator. Beyond our limitations, there is God... Beyond the gate of everything that limits and frustrates us, even death, there is Love.” (*Homily Service*, Nov. 8, 1998, p. 33)

Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham