

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 10, 2013
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Job 19:23-27
Psalm 17:1-8
2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5
Luke 20:27-38

Today is one of the few Sundays in the year when our Old Testament lesson comes from the book of Job. You may recall that the book tells the story of Job, a man who is described as a "blameless man of complete integrity." He is described as a man who fears God and shuns evil.

Job is also described as a man with a large family and great wealth. The book tells the story of how Satan argues with God and tells God that Job only serves God because his life is so blessed and because he is so prosperous. Satan's contention is that if Job's health and family and possessions were stripped away, he would curse God and abandon the faith.

So God allows Satan to strike Job's life with complete calamity. His children are killed; he loses all of his vast wealth and possessions; his health is taken, until he is left sitting on an ash heap scraping boils from his body with a broken piece of pottery. His wife's advice: "Why don't you just curse God and die?"

Job's famous response to her is: "I came into the world with nothing, and I'll go out with nothing. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord."

At this point in the story Job's "friends" come along. With friends like Job has, he doesn't need enemies. His trusted "friends" come to him and engage him in a series of conversations. They accuse him of disobedience. Their argument is that Job has obviously sinned, or else this horrific predicament would not have befallen him.

Our text today comes in the second cycle of these conversations. In spite of Job's persistent claims of innocence, his friends continue to accuse him. As he sits on the ash heap, he begins to think that maybe his life is coming to an end. So he says to his accusers, "I wish my story could be written in a book, so that when I'm dead and gone you will see that you were wrong about me."

But books sometimes do not last, so Job says, "I wish my words could be engraved with a hard stylus on granite or stone, something that will last forever and prove to you yahoos that I'm innocent before God and have done nothing to deserve what has happened to me."

Then Job speaks the familiar words of verse 25: "But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and that he will stand upon the earth at last."

Those of us who have come later read these words and we instinctively apply them to Christ. This is legitimate, but is a little beyond the book's context, and is only one of many possible interpretations.

The term "Redeemer" can have many meanings in the Hebrew. It can refer to one who avenges the killing of a close relative. It can refer to the next of kin who has the right or the responsibility to buy family property when it comes up for sale. It can refer to one who defends the oppressed or accused. And it can refer to a defense attorney who pleads another man's case and vindicates him. In the context of Job's words here, it is this last meaning which is the most likely. Job is expecting his "vindicator" to come forth and plead his case. He believes that in the end, he will be vindicated -- either *before* God, or *by* God.

Job is so convinced of his vindication that not even his death (which appears to be at hand) can prevent it. So he says: "and after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God" (v. 26).

Now let's move to the Gospel lesson. Luke tells us that Jesus is confronted by the Sadducees, a group of wealthy, aristocratic priests who regarded only the first five books of Moses as authoritative for faith and practice. Luke tells us parenthetically (but very importantly) that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection.

The Sadducees often "baited" their opponents with impossible "what if" questions, and that's what happens here. They ask Jesus a question based on an elaborate story about a widow woman, and which of a series of brothers would fulfill the role of caring for her in the resurrection. (Interestingly, the one who fulfilled such a role was often referred to as the "redeemer kinsman.")

The Sadducees have no interest in the answer to the question, because they do not believe in the resurrection. Their belief is that the soul is immortal, and the body is regarded as a prison from which the soul seeks release.

Jesus deals with their question and their rotten attitude behind it. He speaks not about the immortality of the soul, but about resurrection to new life. Greeks may have spoken of the soul as though it were separate from the body, but the Hebrews didn't. In Hebrew thought, human beings were embodied creatures. Soul and body were all of a piece.

In his answer here to the Sadducees, then, Jesus seems to affirm what Job said so many years earlier. We may die, we may be buried, and we may literally rot in the grave. But our bodies will be raised up, we will stand before God, and those corruptible bodies will be transformed into bodies that do not know pain, disease, or decay.

As proof of this, Jesus makes reference to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus says, "remember how Moses spoke of God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob, long after they were dead? That's because God is the God of the living, and those patriarchs are all alive to God."

So between Job and Jesus we appear to be at the heart of the mystery of Christian faith. The mystery is this: We are embodied creatures, not immortal souls shackled in human bodies. When we die, we are buried, and our bodies may rot in the ground. But on the last day, we shall be raised up, bodies and all. And in the meantime, in the mystery of God's wisdom, those who die in the Lord are somehow alive to God while they await the resurrection at the last day.

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, the bread and wine are tangible signs to us that what Job said is true. They are signs not only that vindication is coming, but that in our bodies we will see God. They are a promise to us that all who die in Christ are somehow alive to God.

So come with faith. Receive these signs of God's promise, and the grace that comes with them. And then walk out these doors and live your life in the assurance of this truth.

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