

I Know That My Redeemer Lives

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Lessons for Pentecost 23, Proper 27 in Year C

Job 19:23-27a

Psalm 17:1-9

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

Earlier this year, when the preaching deacons were discussing with Pastor Paul what weeks we'd cover in his absence, I chose this week because I wanted to do the Job lesson. My completed sermon was "in the can" and ready for Pastor Paul's approval on August 30th. Then all Hell broke loose 12 days later. Yet, as I think about it, those events made my attention to this lesson all the more fitting.

We all know the words, and most likely we know them with music attached. The music from the hymn we sang a few minutes ago, and Handel's music, from *Messiah*.

I know that my redeemer liveth. And that he shall stand at the latter day upon the Earth. And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God...

But do we know where those words are from? Better yet, do we know the circumstances under which those words were said? Chances are that most of us don't. I'd like to hope that after today, you won't forget.

Who said these words? Well, if you were paying attention to the readings, you should be able to tell me that they were said by Job, the poor schlump who had the *bad* luck to be *good* enough to be in the middle of a contest between God and Satan. A contest in which just about everything he had was taken from him.

And if you're familiar with the story, you know that in the end, for his unwavering faith in God, Job had everything restored to him - sort of. If you want to know the full story, I'll let you go home and read it for yourselves.

Yes, we know that these words were spoken by Job. But *when*? You'd think that he'd say them at the end of the story, when everything had been restored to him, and when he had been vindicated. But that's not when it happened. He said them when things were at their worst. After all his children and servants had been killed; his flocks stolen; after he had been reduced to sitting on a dung heap with his body covered with sores; and when his "friends," such as they were, tried to "comfort" him by telling him that he must have done *something*

displeasing to God in order for all of this calamity to have befallen him.

He says these words when he has suffered so much that his wife says he should just curse God and die.

Now let's take a little side trip for a moment and talk about Job's wife. Over the years many people have villified Mrs Job for telling her husband he should curse God and die. But think about this, think about why she did it. Could it be that it wasn't out of spite toward God, but out of love for her husband, whom she couldn't bear to see suffer like this any longer? I think we really ought to cut her a little slack.

OK, now returning to the main road, Job says these words when things are at their absolute worst for him. At the point where most of us would be seriously doubting whether or not God exists, or at least wondering if God had it in for us, Job still calls God his redeemer. The question is, "why?"

If you're unfamiliar with the story, let me give you the set up. God and Satan are sitting around chatting about humanity when God mentions his faithful servant Job. Satan says to God, "Well of course he's faithful to you. Look at everything you've done for him. Bet he wouldn't be so faithful if we messed up his life a bit."

And so with that, God allows Satan to torment Job by taking away all that he has except for his life. Why? To see if Job will still praise God even though his life stinks.

In his book *God Was in this Place...*, author Lawrence Kushner tells the following story about Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Kotsk - known to his students as the Kostker:

The Talmud says: "When Nebuchadnezzar, the mighty king of Babylonia, wanted to sing praises to God, an angel came down and slapped him in the face." Asked the Kotsker: Why did he deserve to be slapped if his intention was to sing God's praises?" He then answered himself: "You want to sing praises while you are wearing your crown? Let me hear you praise me after having been slapped in the face!"

Satan seems to have been trying to make the same point about Job. "You sing God's praises when he gives you everything you want? Let's see how well you do after he allows you to be smacked around a bit."

We're faced with that question now, in the aftermath of September 11th. Can we possibly still praise God in spite of all that? Should we still praise God, even though he's apparently let us down?

Back in 1994, *The Lutheran* ran a series on Job by William Matthews, and I remembered disagreeing vehemently with something the author said. So much so that I had to track down and read the articles again before I responded to it in this sermon. I had to make sure that I was disagreeing with what he *really* said, and not merely with what I *thought* he said.

What did Matthews say that I took such offense at? He said that Job must worship God because God is God - *and for no other reason.*

Whoa. Stop. Hold it. Time out for a minute. He said exactly what I thought he said, and

I don't like it any more now than I did then. I've gained no great new insights over the past seven years that have made me see things differently and allowed me to peacefully accept what he said.

Job - and we by extension - must worship God because God is God, and for no other reason. Why do I object so vehemently to that? There are two reasons.

The first is that it makes worshipping God no different than fawning before Darth Vader. You have all the power, you could destroy me in an instant. And because of that, I will praise you no matter what you do to me or others. I don't buy this. It smacks too much of sycophancy - which is a ten dollar word for "sucking up."

The other reason I object is because as Christians, I thought we were always taught about how much God loves us and cares for us. How, even though things may be bad in the short run, God always has our best interests at heart. In short, we praised God not just because he was all-powerful, but because he was gracious and loving as well. Isn't this what makes the Judeo-Christian perception of God different from that of so many other religions? Is it the sheer power that makes God great, or what he does with it?

And this is where the difference lies. Everything we've learned as Christians teaches us not that we praise God because he is Darth Vader, but instead, we praise him because he *isn't*.

We praise God because God is *good*. Not the "cosmic vending machine" type of good that Matthews alludes to in his article, where we praise God and then he gives us what we want. But because he gives us what we *need*,

even though we may not know it. Even though we may not even *like* it or understand it at the time, or for a long time hence.

We praise God because we believe that in spite of the regular ups and down, some absolutely horrible, in our lives and the lives of others, that God is not capricious. That everything he does, or allows to happen has some greater purpose that we don't know yet, and may never know. When you get right down to it, most of us here today believe that life may stink, but in the end, God is good.

And so did Job.

Children and servants dead, flocks stolen, lands laid waste, covered with sores from head to toe, and now surrounded by a bunch of useless friends who try to convince him that he had to have done something wrong for all this to happen to him, Job still praises God. Job says, "I know that my redeemer liveth."

To borrow a line from Martin Luther: "What does this mean?" What does it mean when Job says in the midst of all this emotional and physical suffering, "I know that my redeemer lives"?

It means that he, like us, praises God not as one who lives in terror of being destroyed by him. He doesn't praise God blindly and by rote, just because it's supposed to be done. No - he praises and continues to praise God because of his great faith in God's enduring goodness!

"I know that my *redeemer* liveth." What is a redeemer but one who rescues you? Job has faith that although horrible things are

happening to him now, *God will*, at some point, rescue him. Which, in the end, he did.

Satan asked at the beginning of the story, "Does Job serve God for nothing?" Do we serve God for nothing? I suppose the answer to that question depends on how cynical you want to be.

Is it so horrible to admit that we praise God because he first loved us? Does God really ask us to worship him for his pure, unvarnished power as opposed to the combination of his power *and* his love, or is that *Satan's* hangup? Could it be that it's *Satan* that doesn't get it? Is it maybe Satan who thinks that having all the power should be reason enough to be worshipped? And is that maybe the biggest difference between Satan and God?

Perhaps both Matthews and Satan are right. Maybe we *should* worship God simply because God is God, because he has pulled off the tremendous feat of creating the universe out of nothing, and because we owe our very existence to him. And perhaps we *can* do that. And yet, I wonder what kind of dry, obligatory worship that would be. I have to wonder if that's what God really wants from us.

Instead, we are able to worship and praise God *with joy* because not only is he great enough to create the universe and us along with it, but because he also loves us and cares for us. Because he is *our* redeemer.

"I know that my redeemer liveth." Job said these words when things were at their worst, and found himself rewarded for his faith within his lifetime. Could we do the same, with no guarantee that things would

improve within our lifetimes? Or is our faith totally shattered when disaster strikes?

I'll be honest with you. Mine pretty much was. It wasn't the attack itself that did it, but the fact that it was done by people who believed they were doing God's will.

And it was bad enough for Job that he had to suffer what he did, but then he was surrounded by useless friends. Friends who instead of comforting him, tried to point out why *he* was at fault. Friends who insisted that he must have done something displeasing to God in order to deserve such misfortune.

It was bad enough that Job had friends like that. But in the aftermath of September 11th, you and I were surrounded by friends like that too - and I know that didn't help *me* much. I'm sure that you can cite the names of several evangelists who said that we brought this attack on ourselves because we had done things that were displeasing to God.

Job's friends and their modern cousins think they're defending God's honor by saying that the victim must have done something to deserve it, but all they're really doing is defending their simplistic view that God only allows bad things to happen to bad people. They can't accept the fact that sometimes stuff just happens.

The good news here is that eventually God himself tells Job's friends that they're useless for spouting such simplistic garbage. And I have every confidence that God will, at some point, say the same thing to *our* so called friends.

Yes, my faith was shaken. But when I realized the similarity to Job's story, my faith was slowly restored. It's certainly a

good thing I had been working on this sermon when everything hit the fan.

"I know that my redeemer liveth." Job said this when things were at their worst, and while he was enduring the babbling of idiots.

What a great statement of faith. Do you believe it?

I do.