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Job 19:23-27a

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“Your Project”

This time of year I often think of the book of Job, not because the darkness is closing in but because in our lectionary readings, it generally comes in the fall. I admit that what with traveling and a little tangential derailment, I’ve not been in church the past couple of weeks so I don’t know if you’ve been working your way through the book or not. Regardless, we are plunging in today to the prescribed section of this enthralling, complex and fascinating story.

Our reading today falls about in the middle of the book. It is the tail end of Job’s response to his friend Bildad. If you can call him a friend. What Bildad and Job’s other friends have told him is that his suffering is his own fault, that the sins of the children are visited upon the father. They blame the victim, but we know from the prologue of the book that Job is indeed the victim of a cruel wager between God and Satan. One of the greatest lessons of the Book of Job is its clear and unequivocal teaching that suffering is not retribution for sin. We know this because Job was chosen by God explicitly because he was blameless. The hardship he was to endure was in no way related to anything he had done wrong. We have not learned this lesson entirely. Victims of HIV AIDS, especially homosexuals, are still held culpable by some. When trial strikes us all, particularly if it seems unrelenting and persistent, there are few of us who have not wondered, “What have I done to deserve this?” The Book of Job tells us that suffering and pain afflict the guilty and the innocent alike. As William Safire says in his book on Job, *The First Dissident*, “The essential moral point in Job is that God never has been in the retribution business---at least not on earth---no matter what other portions of the Bible may lead believers to believe. The blameless and the upright are tested, or suffer for no apparent reason, along with the sinners and downright wicked. ...Sometimes the victim is guilty, sometimes not. The fact of victimhood is not admissible as evidence of moral culpability in the case. The Book of Job stands as a firewall between the victim and

blame; theology was never the same after the notion of retribution got what it deserved.”
(The First Dissident. 72-73.)

In this portion of the Book of Job, Job rails against his friends who have been less than comforting and who accuse him of deserving his fate. “How long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words?” Not only does Job blow off at his friends, he blows off at God and the injustice that God has visited upon him. Job knows he is blameless and knows that he does not deserve the fate that has befallen him. He is convinced of his innocence and is likewise certain that eventually this will be known. Which is when he utters the most famous lines in the entire book of Job that Handel put to music in the Messiah. “I know that my redeemer liveth, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth.” If you’re like me, when I hear this aria, I am filled with hope and just a little envy at the beauty of the proclamation.

This is not, however, what Job had in mind at all. Examining this passage brings us smack dab to the question of how we read the Bible---the Hebrew Bible especially in this case---as people of faith, as Christians and as individuals concerned with the moral dimension of discourse and dissent. Much of the New Testament is seen as fulfilling the Hebrew Bible so it is entirely appropriate for us to look back at this passage, as Handel did, and see it through the light of Christ’s revelation. But that is not how Job meant it.

The Hebrew word that is translated as “redeemer” is *goel*. It has many meanings, among them: the blood avenger for the killing of a close relative, the next of kin with the responsibility to buy family property when it comes for sale and one who defends the accused or oppressed. In light of the legal language in much of Job’s speeches, most scholars believe that what Job is referring to is a defense attorney who will argue his case and assure final vindication. Thus the terms “vindicator” and “defending counsel” are the most frequent footnotes to the term “redeemer.”

The question, of course, is who is Job’s defense attorney? Is it God? Some human being? Since he believes that it is God who has wronged him, it’s a somewhat tortured extension to think that he believes God will defend him. On the contrary it would seem that God is his adversary, not his redeemer.

Certainly this has not been a universally accepted interpretation. Many translations capitalize the word “redeemer” thereby suggesting that it is, in fact, God. One might support this claim given Job’s assertion that his goel “lives” and that “in my flesh shall I see God.” But this particular verse, verse 26, is accepted as being so corrupted, so unreliable, as to render its interpretation up for grabs. In the middle of the book, where our passage lies, there is little to support the idea that Job is thinking warm and friendly thoughts towards God. What he envisions more is a court where his case will be argued and his innocence proclaimed. If God is not his defense attorney, God is certainly the one before whom the case is to be argued.

You can’t help but admire Job’s spunk. He has been robbed of everything---his family, his wealth, his health; that he mentions skin and flesh is no accident since he is covered in suppurating sores. Job demands we protest what we see as unjust, that we confront authority if we believe wrong has been done, that we express ourselves with force and courage.

A few years ago, I had the great pleasure of hearing James Forbes, then the Senior Minister from Riverside Church in New York, preach at a Missions Conference at First Church in Burlington; maybe some of you were there too. When he was serving Riverside, I made a point of hearing him whenever I was in NYC on a weekend, which admittedly, was not often. So having him in Burlington was a real treat. Coming before the gathered 700 people that night in his stunning pink and blue and purple and green and orange and red robe of many colors—the standard vestment for Riverside--he quite simply filled my heart. I’d like to tell you how that happened.

He started by telling a story about a lunch date he had earlier in the week with two of his best friends and colleagues. One man, whose name unfortunately I don’t recall, said to the other two, “Listen, I’ve got great news. I’ve just been offered a full, endowed professorship at Harvard University. Do you think I should take it?”

“Well,” the third friend replied, “You haven’t been here all that long. Before coming here you taught at Yale for just two years. Before that you were at Princeton for a relatively short time as well and now if you leave and go to Harvard, it won’t look especially good on your resume; people will start to think you’re unstable.”

“That doesn’t matter,” he replied, “because wherever I am, I’ll be doing my project.”

When he had left the table, James Forbes observed to his friend, “Isn’t that wonderful! He is so clear about his “project,” so clear about what God wants him to do, that it doesn’t matter where he is or what others think.”

What is your project? The hidden blessing of times when we feel ourselves skinless, like Job, of times when we are down in the dumps or discouraged, or abandoned, defeated, defiled or hopeless is that we often see God best in that bunker. “Yet in my flesh”---whatever remains of it, the core of us, our heart and soul and mind, whatever remains when we have been stripped of what we thought mattered and protected us---“Yet in my flesh shall I see God.”

And when you see God, when you sense, in whatever way it is that you come to know things best, that God is calling you, speaking to you, listening to you, then your project often comes most clear.

What is your project? Why are you here? As Forbes so acutely said, “When you die and people are rummaging around in your papers, what will they find to say about you in your obituary?” What was your project? Was it to feed the hungry? Was it to work for justice and equality by participating perhaps in Habitat for Humanity or worldwide missions or political change? Was it to awaken people’s understanding of the Spirit through art or music? Was it to care for the earth by living responsibly with the environment? Was it to work in corporate America and lead it to understand that ethical business is good business? Was it to teach children? To heal the wounded? To serve justice? Or was it to live out your faith by honoring, respecting, loving and serving those close to you? Perhaps it was by affirming the gift of love between all people, gay or straight. Was it to further, in whatever way you could, understanding between people who differ? Nations that differ?

What is the project that you and God have come up with for you?

In this country right now, the same question is being asked of what used to be called “mainline Christian churches.” They, we, are no longer mainline; evangelical, fundamentalist churches have swiftly become the mainline. We are marginalized; we

who have grown up thinking of ourselves as the majority, the status quo, the “regular” somewhat liberal churches---the Methodists, American Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Quakers, members of the United Church of Christ---we no longer represent the power. If we don’t face that right now, face that we have lost a lot of our family, that numbers of friends have deserted us, that our stake in the world has become muddied, that our pleas and protests go apparently unheard, that we have boils upon our skin, we will not see God and discern the project before us.

This much is clear: the spiritual high ground has been claimed by others and aspersion cast upon our faithfulness, our spiritual passion. Of all people, we in Vermont know what this feels like; we experienced years ago the struggle of having the moral high ground snatched from beneath us in the fight to “Take Back Vermont.” What stings is the sobering reality that we too tend to view ourselves, of course, as morally correct.

There is little time or point to playing tug-o-war over the moral high ground. The moral agenda—now euphemistically called “the ideological agenda” of this country is being set, in the name of Christ, as a tea party in a way that troubles many and frankly, irritates me. It irritates me because I wish I’d coined the phrase “tea party.” It’s brilliant, really; it combines elements of protest, history and independence under the feel good, soothing image of a kitchen table, a friend and a cup of tea. Clearly my irritation stems from jealousy and envy more than ideological combativeness. But the fact remains that as a body of Christ, the church, we are being called to define our project and give voice and feet to it. As Christians we are called to protest against injustice in the tradition of Job, to not give up, not go under but hold accountable whatever authority we believe responsible for perpetrated ills. In the face of war it is the church’s project to maintain that there is another way. We must also listen and learn and try to understand others, recognizing always that those who differ from us---be they Evangelical Christians or members of Al Qaeda, are children of God. And let us also resist the easy view that all who call themselves Fundamentalist do not share our core faith and even, perhaps, some similar political views. Steer away from condemnation, as you would have others not condemn you. But at the same time we must give voice to our faith in compelling and

embracing fashion; we must become evangelists in the true sense of the word: as people who spread the good news.

And what is the good news? The good news is that as Christians we do know that our Redeemer lives. We know that in Christ there is always a new beginning, that no defeat, no hardship, no trial, tribulation or distress can separate us from the love of God in Christ. On the contrary, just when it seems that all is lost, that is when we rise to glory. So this is the time for us, each and every one of us, to figure out what our project is.

And what is the project for the Charlotte Congregational Church? Where is it that we feel the pulse of God beating in this congregation, throbbing against its flesh. Isn't it fortuitous that next week we are having an all-church retreat to explore exactly this idea, to discern, as best we can, what we feel our project to be.

How we define the Charlotte Congregational Church's project will come directly from our own individual definitions and our collective responses to God. Now is the time for us all to work this out in the next week in our hearts and souls, kitchen tables and homes. What we bring next weekend to the discussion will be a gorgeous collection of different hopes, dreams, laments and aspirations, a sort of coat of many colors like Joseph's and Rev. Forbes. My prayer is that we enter into the retreat knowing that in God's house there is room for all people and many projects.

Your own personal project need not save the world, but it does need to make it a better place in some small way. Part of knowing what your project is is figuring out what you love to do and sharing it with others. Projects are doomed to failure if they are embarked upon because we think we "ought" to do them. Go with your gifts, your talents, your passions, your joys, no matter how great or small.

A friend of mine loves to sail; it is his passion. For many years he worked in Manhattan during the week, lived on a sailboat outside the city and came home to Vermont on weekends. In many ways going home to a boat at the end of the day was heaven for him. But he knew it was a great gift that he was able to do so and he wanted to share the joy that sailing gave him with others. So he spent a lot of time taking inner-

city kids sailing around Manhattan, out to see the Statue of Liberty, up the Hudson for a stretch. It was his project.

Today we celebrate communion, and though I use that word, “celebrate” whenever we do so, it often seems more like a dirge than a celebration. Today we do have something to celebrate and that is that we know the one who redeems us. It is not a defense attorney who will prove our innocence, or argue our case before a judgmental God, but a savior who lives today to guide, nurture and inspire us, a Christ who has, in ways our stubborn intellectual minds will never fully understand, broken the chains of death to dwell with us now and, as the psalmist says, “even” forever more. (Psalm 121.KJV)

Ironically, in a twist of fate, what we are called to do now is to be Christ’s goel, Christ’s redeemer. We must show that the God we know lives today; we must witness to our faith by being God’s hands and feet on earth, by walking in Christ’s footsteps, by teaching the good news to our children, by protesting against injustice and upholding the downtrodden. These are not ephemeral goals, they are real and tangible and attainable. Christ is not gone from us; if death could not contain Him, then you may be certain that no vision of him that places him in a small box of judgment and exclusion is going to hold him in for long. With our help---and without us it cannot, it will not happen---with our help and with the redeeming grace of God that is us all, we can become the messengers of peace.

Shake off your despair, let go your equivocating rationalizations, your silent musings, your anger. Bring your questions to this table; demand to know how faith works in this world today, how you yourself can be a voice and body of hope. Come in thanksgiving for the God who has shown you in Christ that the final word is always one of hope, forgiveness and love. Eat this bread, taste its sweetness and remember how much God loves you and needs you, empowered, nourished and free.

Amen.