

STS General Retreat 2002
19 September 2002
Techny, IL
Job 31:1-23; Acts 15:1-11

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

In the Church's prayer, morning is the time of resurrection of body, soul, and mind. At the beginning of this day, as we are privileged to gather together in this hour of resurrection, we hear the case of Job, who has awakened to yet another hour of grief and misery. I think it is possible fruitfully to consider Job as a type of Christ our Savior and, by baptismal extension, of the Church.

Job has already lost his family, his possessions, his livelihood, and his health. He has, by all modern depressive standards, no reason to live. He is empty, emptied.

By his own admission, he considers God to be absent from his life -- for if God were present, there would be signs of life, not death.

It is, I suspect, this sort of reasoning that was behind the recent PBS 9/11 anniversary show entitled "Where is God?" The question seems to assume not only that *God's presence is manifest in signs of life but that God is validated by the absence of death.*

Unlike much of the world, for whom death is a daily reality, for us it is considered a scandal.

I suspect the question that sticks in the minds of many is not one of location, but *How are we to believe and trust a God who does not protect us from such great evil, who does not act to make death absent from our life?*

With Job, we have been formed to turn to God for just such protection: "I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where is my help to come?" The Lord is my refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." "He will cover you with his wings and his angels will bear you up."

But none of this happened for Job on that day, as it didn't happen for many on 9/11 or, for that matter, for many today or on any given day.

But Job does something that is very important and that may strike our enlightened minds as a bit, well, backward.

He does not limit God to the visible. He looks for God in signs of life around him, but Job does not limit God to those visible signs.

He rails against the invisible, Almighty, omnipotent God whose *absence* is what he perceives-- and perhaps learning from Job how to rail would be a good thing.

For Job, it is certainly true that signs of life on earth make God manifest; but the corollary is NOT true that the absence of death is what validates God.

Instead, Job is able to say “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

For Job, the Lord -- God -- is bigger than the earthly signs. The earthly signs are just that -- signs -- that point to something far greater.

We should note the seriousness with which Job not only asserts the transcendent God, but *engages him personally*.

In the verses we’ve heard, Job acts as his own defense attorney in a court of law in which God is his adversary.

Point by brilliant point, he lays out his case before God -- confident that God would hear him out and take action for him.

Job builds on a foundation of core convictions:

1. That God in transcendence is the same God who appears immanently and therefore can be appealed to for earthly prosperity.
2. That God is essentially concerned about individual human life.
3. That God is perfectly just in maintaining order within creation and among humanity.

These are three things worth remembering.

Nevertheless, Job falls into error -- not because he believes wrongly, but because he judges the whole situation solely on human terms.

By accepting the premise that he must defend himself with a “not guilty” plea before God his adversary, he has in fact put himself in the sinful position of *presumed righteousness*. And while he may be able to win his case in a human court of law, it is untenable in the divine court.

Moreover, it is his own notion of order and justice that he brings to bear, which cannot stand before God’s own argument of righteousness.

In the final analysis, Job is brought face to face with God, with his own sin and unbelief, and so is brought to repentance and true faith, and the blessing of a just and merciful God. In that face-to-face encounter with God, Job comes to his own hour of death and resurrection and must leave behind his claims of righteousness.

But we are not quite there yet. We are still looking for signs of life in a world desperate for the absence of death -- and the Lord has not yet spoken to us out of the whirlwind.

Except for this: That on a particular day in earthly space and time, on a cross outside of Jerusalem God was present in the rejection, suffering, and death of Jesus of Nazareth, and on the

third day, raised him from the dead. The Father received the Spirit the Son delivered up and in love, restored it to him and, through him, to all humanity.

It is this sign of life in the midst of death -- a sign merging heaven and earth, things human and things divine -- this sign of life above all others exposes as *false the notion that God is validated in the absence of death.*

What Job knew and what so many of us are yet learning -- is that God needs no validation beyond God's own self. And God is bigger than any earthly sign --even if he does fully fit into one.

As crucial as the incarnation is, I think sometimes we Lutherans can get incarnationally unbalanced.

What I mean by that is that we get so focused on the richness of the incarnation, the theology of the cross, and the sacramental means by which we may cling to God -- that *we can overlook the full glory of the transcendent majesty* of Christ hidden therein, which, as expressed in the Solid Declaration (SD VIII:65) "asserts itself mightily and publicly before all the saints in heaven and on earth, and [which] we too will see[as] 'his glory' 'face to face' in the life to come." (It is this vision of glory for which buildings such as this were fashioned, that we might, in some small way, get a glimpse of the glory to come.)

I think the corrective to the imbalance is to *engage* this transcendent, glorious, Lord, even as we wait for his coming; As Job, to shake our fists and ask our questions and state our case before the big God in the presence of the "little man on the cross".

But this means giving up control.

It means giving up the presumption that right makes might -- that our definition of orthodoxy as such gives eminent domain.

It means giving up the notion that God's will can be bottled into the collective wills of a group of humans -- or into the single will of oneself.

Each of us faces the temptation, from one direction or another, from within and without, to settle for less than the big God.

Whether it is the claim of a churchwide assembly to speak the mind of Christ in making this decision or that;

whether it is the claim of this society or that fellowship to uphold the only true and right faith and so to do the will of God;

whether it is the claim of one's own mind and heart to knowing what is right or wrong, good or evil, and being an army of one.

As with Job, each claim is, finally, before Almighty God, utterly false, sinking sand.

And we must beware of the devilish way that our fractious presumption tears at the fiber of the very sign of life that God has given to demonstrate his existence on earth: the Church itself.

For instead of gathering around the one body of the one Lord, we gather around fragments, proud of our own staked-out turf, eagerly leaving others to their morsel.

But this is not the portion our Lord has promised those who remain faithful to him. And if we settle for it, we will have only the morsel, instead of the fullness of glory the Lord intends for us.

We do have a problem: The church we have isn't the church we want. I admit to doing my share of publicly whining and privately putting my head in the sand and so contributing to the problem. We need to be and do differently in order to make a difference.

Here is one further thing Job has to teach us.

Job engages the transcendent God seriously, but does so actively. He does not simply shake his fist and rail against God and then passively wait for God to do something. *He waits in active obedience.*

The case Job lays out is one for a holy life -- a life lived in the presence of the big God, the God who holds death and life together. A life lived therefore in both fear and hope. God is, after all, watching -- watching those he has chosen for holiness, for life.

As Job lays out his case, every relationship is considered deliberately; and this deliberation is commended to us.

Marriage is upheld and lust and adultery restrained.

Fair labor practice is upheld, and those with complaint given a fair hearing.

The poor, widows, orphans, those in poverty in the community are all considered in their need.

Family, friends, and money all come within the realm of holy living.

Peer pressure, opportunity, desire -- these are all known to Job from within his own soul, and *disciplined* in the constant presence of God.

Job knows that the privilege of approaching the bench where God sits is directly tied to a life of obedience to his Word.

Some argue that obedience is irrelevant since humanity is created *imago dei*, as though they can, therefore, do no wrong. Those who would argue that humanity is on a par with God by virtue of the created order simply forget that creation itself is the product of God's Word, bound by obedience. To live holy lives in obedience to God's Word is simply what it means to be human creature.

So we must beware the lie: That to be human is to give full expression to all manner of human desire and impulse. It is precisely against this that Job defends himself: that he did in fact restrain himself and conduct himself impeccably with regard to God's Word.

Nowadays, the counter-argument runs something like this:

Christ is the only one who was perfectly obedient.

We are saved by our faith in him and by his merit of obedience.
Therefore our obedience is unnecessary -- it may even harm our faith to try.
Christ is above the law and, in him, we are above the law.

Camel-scat, I suspect Job might say. To have a Savior from the destruction and alienation brought about by our sin is a wonderful thing -- *but it doesn't revoke our obligation to obey God's Word*. In fact, it provides a new basis for doing just that -- a basis of hope rather than desperation.

Canceling the relationship in which we were created by the living Word of God in fact severs us from the vine, disconnects us from the source of our life, and not only absents us from God but removes from us any means of appeal.

To say we no longer need to live holy lives of obedience to God is as much as to say there is no God except us.

Pastors do live under a double standard. It is especially important for pastors to set an example for the Church. We are to reflect Christ. When we are giving in to our passions and aggressions, it obscures our witness and the glory God means to shine through us.

Obedience is the fruit of faith in God's Word. It is rooted in Christ, Son of the Most High God. Job perseveres in obedience, even when there is no perceptible gain for him. It is the almighty and ever-living God whose presence he continually asserts, even in the absence of signs of life; even in the presence of death.

Today, in this hour of resurrection, that is what we must remember as we continue to tend our flocks and as we struggle for faithfulness in the Church.

Holy obedience is the conversation by which *the Church* becomes the visible sign of God's life to the dying world, that faith might abound in many.

Having drunk deeply of Christ and savored to immense grace of God given to us in the fellowship of this Society, may we by our lives of obedience glorify the majesty of God as, together with the whole Church, we eagerly long to see him face to face.

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