

## **I KNOW THAT MY REDEEMER LIVES!**

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, November 11, 2007  
Proper 27 / Ordinary 32 / Pentecost +24  
First Congregational United Church of Christ, Washington, DC*

(Disclaimer: Since I actually preach the sermon without notes and without a manuscript, this text is not the sermon as it was actually preached; but it is the background and foundation for the sermon.)

Text: Job 19:21-27a

<sup>21</sup>Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me! <sup>22</sup>Why do you, like God, pursue me, never satisfied with my flesh? <sup>23</sup>“O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! <sup>24</sup>O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever! <sup>25</sup>For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; <sup>26</sup>and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, <sup>27</sup>whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!

I want to begin this morning by acknowledging the Lutheran influences on my sermon. I just happened to notice that this well-known verse from Job—“I know that my Redeemer lives”—is inscribed on the wall beside the lectern here at First Trinity Lutheran. As I was preparing this sermon earlier this week, I happened to come across a sermon preached on this same text three years ago, when it last appeared in the lectionary, by Dr. Frederick Gaiser, who is Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary. (I emailed Dr. Gaiser and asked for permission to quote him at length, and he gave me permission.)

Job's problem is twofold. He's a victim of suffering, and he's a victim of religion.

The suffering part we understand. At the beginning of his story, Job is everything we would want to be. He is righteous and prosperous. He's a family man with a great marriage and ten wonderful kids. He goes to church every day, to offer sacrifices and to pray for his children. All is well with Job and his family and his faith.

But then the wheels start to come off the bus. In a matter of just a few days, it seems, Job loses everything: his wealth, his children, his own health. It gets so bad that Job's wife says to him: "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die!" But Job replies, with some irritation: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?"

Job has three friends who hear about his suffering. "They meet together to go and console and comfort him."<sup>1</sup> When they see how great his suffering is, they sit on the ground with him in silence for seven days and seven nights. After this week of "sitting shiva" in silence, Job breaks forth into an extended lament about the injustice of what has happened to him.

Job's friends then work together to use religion to help Job understand what has happened to him. So far, so good. Who among us would not want our friends to come and console us and comfort us when we are suffering? Who among us would not look to our religion for meaning and for healing?

The problem with religion is that it's not necessarily faith. As Dr. Gaiser said in his sermon:

The "essence of religion since the beginning of human history" can be summed up in just a few words: "Be good

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick J. Gaiser, "I Know That My Redeemer Lives," sermon preached at Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church, November 7, 2004. All non-biblical citations are from this sermon. Accessed online on 11/09/07 at <http://www.luthersem.edu/fgaiser/Sermons/Job19.htm>.

and get the goodies. Act right, believe right, and success will be yours.” Another definition of religion is “Let’s make a deal.” “Hey God, show me the rules, and I’ll obey them. Show me what I need to do to appease you. And I’ll obey your rules, I’ll appease you, and I expect you to make me healthy, wealthy, and wise.”

This is the religion that Job has been taught: Be good, and you’ll get the goodies. It’s the religion that his friends are convinced is true: Be good, and you’ll get the goodies. And when you don’t get the goodies, that means you haven’t been good. This is the “religion that is supported, in sometimes trivial ways and sometimes very sophisticated ones, by Job’s friends whose dialogues comprise the main part of this book.”

Now if Job’s friends were all enrolled in clinical pastoral education, and they had to report back to their supervisor and their peer support group how they were caring for Job, they’d probably all get criticized for being so preachy and not very good listeners. You have to admire these friends for spending a week in silence with Job; it’s when they start talking, and when they keep trying to convince Job that religion means Be good and you’ll get the goodies, that they aren’t being very pastoral.

You see, Job doesn’t want religion. He wants God. He wants to have face time with God. He wants to argue his case directly with God, not indirectly with his friends and their religion. He wants to know directly from God why bad things happen to good people like himself.

At the time in the story when Job speaks the words we heard in this morning’s reading, he has not yet had face time with God. He’s still dealing with his friends and their religion. He pleads with them to have pity on him. And then, suddenly, he offers this remarkable confession of faith:

<sup>25</sup>For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; <sup>26</sup>and after my skin has

been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God,  
<sup>27</sup>whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold,  
and not another. My heart faints within me!

Perhaps one of his friends should have warned Job: Be careful what you pray for, because you might just get it. Job does get his face-to-face audience with God at the end of the story, and it's not all that pretty. In a clear voice, God answers Job "out of the whirlwind":

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements —surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" (38:1-7 NRSV).

God says a lot of things to Job out of the whirlwind, and it becomes painfully clear that God is not the least bit interested in the let's-make-a-deal form of religion. What God expects of us mortals is faith understood as being-in-relationship. Faith is being-in-relationship with One Who is far more powerful and far more mysterious and far more gracious than we can ever imagine. Faith is recognizing and accepting our human limitations and boundaries. Faith is coming to know that God who is the Creator of the universe is also our Redeemer.

Faith as being-in-relationship with God is something like the marriage relationship. When we make a commitment to be in relationship with God by doing our best to walk with Jesus, it's something like when two people stand up in front of witnesses and promise to love and cherish each other, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until we are parted by death. One important difference, of course, is obvious: death does not part us from

God, but rather brings us closer to God. Another important difference is that marriage is a relationship of equals, whereas in faith we are clearly not equal with or to God.

Marriage, as we are fond of saying, is something we have to work at. Faith, like marriage, is something we have to work at. It took a lot of work—and suffering—for Job to stand fast in faith against the religion of his heritage and his friends. It took a lot of work—and suffering—for Jesus to stand fast in faith against the crucifixion. It's going to take a lot of work for serious Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to stand fast in faith against popular religion—you know, the modern version of religion as “let's make a deal.” Invite Jesus into your heart, and you're guaranteed a place in heaven. But faith is not religion. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

So I think Job and Jesus have something to say to our congregation today, both short-term and long-term. In the course of the next two years, our life as a community of faith is going to require work. While a whole lot of people are going to be involved in the physical work of constructing a new and unique and remarkable building on the corner of 10<sup>th</sup> and G, we're going to be involved in the spiritual and intellectual work of discerning who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do—the gift and the task of discerning our identity and our vocation.

Job affirmed it, and Jesus confirms it: our Redeemer lives. Because our Redeemer lives, we can give ourselves wholeheartedly to the spiritual practice of discerning together our identity and our vocation as a discipleship community. Because we know that our Redeemer lives, we can be confident that we are talking together in the light of God. We can trust that we are walking together in Jesus' way, which, to borrow from Robert Frost, is the road less traveled by. This is what makes all the difference: our Redeemer lives! Thanks and praise be to God. Amen.