

Sermon: Year C, Proper 27

Texts: Job 19:23-27a

II Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

Luke 20:27-38

The words read this morning from the book of Job were the culminating cries of an exasperated man. Job had lost everything he had had: his goods, his land, his family, and every possible sense of any possible future. It was all gone, all but the pain of loss and the merest thread of his own continued breathing. Utter catastrophe had hit Job in the cruelest way, without warning and in the absolute silence of seemingly cosmic indifference. Ludwig Wittgenstein once noted that “no torment can be greater than what a single human being may suffer,” and Job represents precisely that anguish.

As the text informs us, a few of Job’s remaining friends gathered around him in the effort to make some sense of the disaster that has befallen him. They spoke both quietly and firmly, with pious humility and confidence. They told Job of God and God’s justice. They explained that there must be an explanation for his woes, a hidden reason that one day would be made clear to him. Their every attempt was to bolster him and offer, at very least, an inkling of the good providence of God that, they said, would make all things right.

Job’s reply to his friends, however, was scathing. He accused them of being miserable comforters, who had contributed nothing. They had only added, as he described them, “windy words” to the stubborn silence of God. They had multiplied his grief by showing only how completely removed they were from his own torment, as if, with lofty ideas, abstract at that, they could mend some portion of his affliction. They didn’t know or see or understand anything about him.

Suffering isolates. It’s a particular form of aloneness, and, sometimes, it leaves us without any companions at all. And there are no words, then, that can bridge the yawning chasm it has opened – no two, no ten, no ten thousand.

Some years ago, the novelist Walker Percy, himself an enormously gifted wordsmith, remarked, with no small amount of dismay, that we have been able to design a spacecraft that, after six years of flight arrived at Titania, a satellite moon of the planet Uranus. And we knew when it arrived that it was exactly three seconds off schedule and, after traveling more than three billion kilometers, was less than one hundred meters off course. We have words for this kind of task and discovery. We can calculate and measure and describe our physical world with almost infinitesimal exactitude. We can literally cross the galaxies and map them with impressive precision.

But we are still unable to reach across the intimate abyss of human grief or take the true measure of the distance between one person and another. Here our words – our finest asset, which define us and distinguish us from all other creatures – fail us. (This, by the way, might be considered the real location of sin. It’s not misbehavior writ large. It’s the slim but consuming darkness of our persistent human separateness.)

Job's cry expresses the last, desperate fury of a man teetering on the edge of collapse. It's full of bitterness and sarcasm. God is an offense to him. God's justice reeks of foul inadequacy. All talk of a master plan, hidden but operative, is simply grotesque. He insists that over against his friend's inane blather and over against God's mute stoicism, he will be vindicated. He may well die, but, nonetheless, there will be someone – there will be someone – a Redeemer, who will prove him right in his anger and justified in his spite. Eventually, even God will be forced to face him and admit the legitimacy of Job's wrathful defiance. The injustice of our human suffering, Job insists, will be what endures, eternally. Our words will come to their end in accusation.

Job's diatribe is as serious as any statement can be, harsh and resolutely honest. What is most astounding about it, though, is how this very cry has come to be heard now in the light of Christ, within the life of the church. Job's words are included in our Prayer Book. They are the first words spoken in our Burial service. They ritually announce and concede the reality of someone's death, of life and of words having been taken away from someone, who is no more. But, precisely in this context, as we stand as close to death as we possibly can, in grief and in helpless resignation, these incisive words are not bitter; they are, rather, our courageous declaration of hope and promise... All the fury of Job has been radically overturned. It hasn't been denied, but our faith is that our suffering has been unusually answered, and in that answer our deepest anger and isolation has been transformed into assurance and redemption.

For our trust is that God has, in fact, spoken. God has spoken conclusively. The vast silence that Job heard has been broken, and in this specific way. God's own word was delivered to us, not as abstract theory or as cosmic law, but in the extraordinary particularity of incarnation. God himself came to stand with us, as no more than a human being and, thereby, as no less than a full companion, as the sole word that could close the gap of our separateness by dying under the sentence of our own wrath. Unlike Job's friends, God did not respond from the safe distance of critical observation. God stepped out from himself into the very same darkness of our vulnerability. He offered no opinion nor any judgment. He offered himself. His only word was his life.

What is remarkable about the Christian passion narrative, which is routinely forgotten, is that God has provided us no explanation for Jesus' death or resurrection. No balance sheet was conveniently posted on the open grave. No detailed account of God's own reasoning was given to the disciples. God simply became a companion in our injustice so that we might be companions with him in such love that overcomes all division.

I have presided at the burial of several hundred persons. Any one would have been enough. But I have never ceased to marvel at the words given us to say and to hear, words themselves transformed, words born of severest misery and malice that have come, instead, to declare God's boundless embrace of us in the mystery of salvation. I can't say these sentences lightly. I'd give up almost all the other words I know to keep just these. In them, all the accusation of humankind lifts into the infinite wholeness of God. "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; and though this body be destroyed, yet shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold, and not as a stranger." In Christ, this has become a

blessed statement of perfected union that is, then, complemented by this exception-less conclusion: “For no one of us lives unto himself. No one dies to himself. If we live, we live unto the Lord. If we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.”

The heart of Christianity, is the repeated exercise of this Jobian transformation, which can be effected in life as well as at death. It’s our refusal to fall to fear and fear’s restless dividing, and in its stead, our choosing commitment to unwavering companionship. It’s practicing a patience that doesn’t rise to anger but holds to the deeper trust that being with someone, even in confusion, is more godly than being against them, claiming righteousness on your side. Jesus instructed us to love our enemies. That can’t be done by force of will. But it can be imagined when we hear Job’s own words of searing bitterness turned into the declaration of God’s abiding with us through all things. Vindication doesn’t come as someone’s victory accomplished by another’s defeat. Its only true form is communion, which we are charged by God to enact – sacramentally and socially.

This is the possibility set before us – not, as the Gospel reading reminds us, to be diverted into endlessly petty arguments about marriage in heaven or angels on the head of a pin. The claims of Christ are profoundly radical, even more radical than all anticipation or experience of terror. We have Job’s words to show us their true strength and their beauty.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen