

22nd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.9.25

Job 19:23-27a

“O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!”

Haggai 1:15-2:9

In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: “Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say: Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land, and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts, and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.” (345)

600,000 people have died since USAID was unfunded in January, people who would not otherwise have died. Two thirds of these are children.

This isn’t an easy thing to determine. You might even say it can’t be accurately determined, so why even state it? Data on this scale defies such conclusiveness, especially when gathered and analyzed over a few months rather than several years.

Plus proving a counter-factual is a slippery prospect, speaking of what happened as opposed to what would have happened if the facts were otherwise. There’s something essentially unfalsifiable about it. It can’t be proven as *untrue* so you can’t really say it’s true.

But according to one way of looking at the data, tracking what programs once funded succeeded in doing (fighting malnutrition, fighting HIV-AIDS, fighting malaria) and then subtracting the numbers of success where funding has been denied, 600,000 people have died world-wide since USAID was “D.O.G.E.d.”

Two thirds of these were children.

One of them was Jane, a baby in Kenya, at a camp for refugees from South Sudan. Suffering malnutrition so severe her skin had begun to fall off in flaky sheets, she was now evermore vulnerable to infection. Her mother brought her to Clinic 7, twelve kilometers away

from her place in the camp. Clinic 7: known as where you go when malnutrition has set in, which is happening more and more, now that food supplies have been withheld.

The patients there who are children, which most of them are, must have an adult with them during their stay. But Jane's mother was visited by one of her older children, come to tell her that the ones back at camp hadn't eaten in a long time, couldn't find food. So, Jane's mother had to leave Clinic 7, sneaking out with Jane in the early morning, which necessary staffing cuts due to funding cuts made possible. No one was watching out.

She walked a full day with Jane strapped to her back, a binding that was torment to Jane because of the wounds all over her small body.

When the pair got home, Jane's mother managed to find food for everyone.

But the next day Jane herself died.

In the short documentary produced by *The New Yorker Magazine*, Atul Gawande, a physician with USAID, explains the success of the agency especially over the last twenty years: "Malnutrition deaths: we've shown that they don't need to happen. We've found the formula and we've delivered it and then we took it away."

Jane's mother explains it from her perspective: "My mind is so lost and confused. I feel the heavens have abandoned me."

Her neighbor also appears: "She feels that luck has totally turned its back on her."

And suddenly the book of Job doesn't feel like merely an ancient artifact of poetic drama, but something more of a press release.

You know the story, or maybe you do. Job had been a man of good fortune. He had a wife and children, a household and livestock. He enjoyed good health, which is itself akin to wealth, I have to remind myself a lot as someone who's always been healthy. He was a man of faith, Job was. God-fearing, law abiding. He spoke well and trustingly of the Lord.

But his fortunes turned because the Lord decided to test Job. The Lord decided this because Satan convinced him to.

This we learn in the frame of the story, the first two chapters of it and the last. Within the frame are a series of monologues set in poetry, written in some of the most sophisticated Hebrew in the Bible. From about the 4th century before Christ, it's of the so-called 2nd Temple period. But the frame of the story is ancient, likely drawn from Canaanite myth, some of the oldest bits of scripture we have.

Here we see the Lord as if a judge in a court. Satan serves there among the court, serves according to his name: *ha-Satan*, the accuser. His task is to accuse, to test and see if there's a case to be brought against someone—all of which is understood as in accordance with the Lord's purpose, the bringing about of the Lord's justice. Satan in the earliest days is imagined not as working against the Lord but for him and with him.

Job's wife dies. His children die. His livestock die. He becomes sick and covered in sores. Immiserated, he is miserable. And his friends come to him. In a series of poetic monologues, they beg him to confess his wrongdoing to God, for thus he'll be released from this suffering. They beg him to search his heart and search his living, to find the sin that would justify the suffering, and to rid himself of the sin and thus rid himself of the punishment, restore himself to good fortune.

But he can't do that because there is no sin. He's done nothing wrong. He's being punished but for a crime he didn't commit. So to confess to such an uncommitted crime is to commit the crime of bearing false witness, and yet only by these means can he be released from suffering. And yet by so doing he would deserve the punishment, having committed the wrong.

Yet through it all he will not curse the Lord. Through it all he remains faithful that the Lord is good—

and thus he passes the test of the accuser, who is seen to have served his purpose. In the end, all is made right again. Job gets another wife. He has substitute children. His health is restored. Even his wealth is restored. All is made right.

Right?

I mean, is it?

Where we meet Job this morning, he's yet within the frame. Satan has made his test, set about the spirit of accusation. His friends have pressed their case, accepting the accusation as implied in the misfortune. Job alone will be his advocate—because the cosmology at work at the time of this book doesn't yet include an advocate. In the courtroom drama that is life in the world, there's a judge, there's an accuser, but there isn't yet an advocate. That won't come until much later, centuries later, as promised in the Gospel of John. The *ad-vocare*, the one who calls to and speaks for, is the Holy Spirit breathed into a world too long suffering the spirit of accusation, too long tested with little relief.

In the meantime, there is but Job, lonely-voiced Job. "O that my words were written down!" he says, searching for a witness outside himself to testify to the truth—that he hasn't done anything wrong, that he doesn't deserve all this suffering.

“O that they were inscribed in a book!” he insists, that his suffering such injustice might become its own witness, its own insistence that the world and even the heavens aren’t structured quite right.

“O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever!” which the fact of this book now made sacred scripture and found everywhere, all around the world, though on paper also enduring, stonily enduring, suggests that it happened, that he got what he was advocating for, self-advocating for.

“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!” And thus comes into our cosmology redemption, this concept that meets injustice and insists it be otherwise, meets injustice and refuses to call it right.

That said, redemption isn’t an unproblematic idea, and the promise of redemption is not one beyond corruption. Redemption can rather be a wonderful release for us from having to do justice where injustice is more convenient. It can make us go light on the sinfulness of our world, go easy on the horrors of history—because, let’s remember, everything happens for a reason. (Right? Isn’t that in the Bible somewhere?) The theological promise of redemption can form a permission structure for putting off to that distant by-and-by what is *ours* to do in the here-and-now—because if we know it will all come out in the wash, then we can go ahead and allow for all sorts of filth and degradation.

No. We must rely but lightly on God’s future redemption. We must not take Job’s faith that all shall be well and be heedless about how very unwell the world currently is, an unwellness often of our making, an utter sickness that has seized the reigns of political power worldwide. This is ours to make right, not God’s alone. Job couldn’t change his lot in life and his faithfulness in spite of that is something to admire. But we should be loath to make evermore Jobs.

It’s on this question that I often hesitate in choosing hymns for singing on Sunday morning that derive from Negro spirituals. Enslaved Black people, as given voice in these songs, knew they would come into kindness, knew they would enjoy rest and good grace. What the world denied them they yet knew they deserved, knew was their heritage. But it wouldn’t happen until they died. It wouldn’t happen except at hands of God, in the by-and-by. They would cross over into Jordan, but not in this life, not anything approaching that in this life.

Which gives an easy out to those who held the whip, cheap grace to those gathered at the lynching tree, holding the noose. The faith of the enslaved involved an astonishing acceptance that this world would never change. Power was too great against them. Evil was more than could be imagined as overcome in this life at least. But then there would come the next—and all would be well.

Their redeemer lives.

Meanwhile, the masters could sit on the porch while the cotton came in.

Redemption is a divine promise and a charge. It is a godly hope, something done for us, and a command, something we must do. Job was lonely in his advocacy, which though gives it all the more power and gives us permission not only to hope against hope but also to put up a good fight, not simply to accept the terms put upon us but rather to mouth off that this isn't alright.

"The trick is not to mind it," is a line of G. Gordon Liddy, he of the Watergate break-in. It serves as a refrain in Lily Tomlin's one-woman show, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*. Agnes Angst, one of the many characters, uses this refrain in her performance art piece. She is a teenaged girl, an angsty punk whom the play, written and premiered in the 80s, has set at exactly my age. When I saw it as a high-schooler her life mapped onto mine.

She claims recently to have read Liddy's book *Will* in which he bragged of being able to hold his hand over a lit candle, for the trick is not to mind it—and she vows to give it a go herself, to master this trick, not to mind it. She was, after all, as she claims born "after the time of the crime known as Watergate," and therefore "must have missed out on those things that made America great."

"But I don't mind it," she insists. "And I don't mind it, I want my skin to thicken so if I am panic-stricken when the Greenhouse Effect is here, I won't even feel the fear as I watch me and the world disappear. The trick is not to mind it. If you're looking for peace, this is where you will find it.

"Gordon Liddy showed me the way. I have been on heavy metaphor maintenance all day. For life is like that candle flame, and we are like Gordon Liddy's hand hovering over it. And it hurts like hell. But the trick is not to mind it."

And she stands with her hand over that flame.

She stands there, open hand facing down.

Until she flinches and admits: "I mind it. I mind it."

Job gives us permission to mind it. Though his friends would place blame elsewhere, place it on even on *him*, he would insist upon something more disturbing, that suffering doesn't imply culpability, that misfortune doesn't mean you deserve it. Job thus gives us permission to mind it and to speak our minds about it as well. To mouth off when injustice befalls, denies that it is injustice, purports rather to be justice. To mouth off even against God when there's no witness to lift the pall of blame, there's no advocate to say, "I see what you're up against." To mouth off against the world that would offer us many tricks not to mind it.

Many tricks.

I'm often surprised by how many goods and services are marketed as means toward peace of mind, from gummies to yoga, from massage to meditation—though with seldom an insistence that the problem so often isn't our minds but in our world. Job didn't need an attitude adjustment. And yoga wouldn't have helped. He needed justice and a witness; he needed the truth he insisted upon. He needed redemption, some mysterious fulfillment by which the injuries inflicted would fall away forgotten, the wounds would become flesh and skin again and the cause for weeping would dissipate like fog.

I cannot imagine how this is done, though I can imagine it's not to be replacement parts, a new wife, replacement children, new livestock. Okay? Happy now? I cannot imagine that some future good might be so profoundly good that the evils playing out even now might be dissolved to nothing. I don't know how Jane's suffering will come to righteousness. I don't know how her mother's suffering will come to righteousness. I don't know how those 600,000 now dead who need not have died might rise to rejoice, singing as I would hope to join them: "Alleluia! Alleluia!"

I don't know how this is to be done, and I caution even to imagine it, for so to do is to risk making light of so heavy a thing, too heavy a thing—that God's glorious end might have us forgive and forget all of history's holocausts. I only know what Job said, and I join him in saying it, his insistent unrest, his furious confession while also demand: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another."

The question of how to start amidst all that's wrong with a letting go of all that got us here, a setting forth for renewed hope: this is an enduring question. It's what animated the prophecy we heard this morning.

Haggai is a prophetic voice who speaks from the return. Contemporaneous with the poetic parts of Job, Haggai is with the people upon their return. They were eighteen years in to being

back in the land, after the war, after the exile, now back in Palestine though having returned to ruin. They'd rebuild their homes. They'd try to rebuild the Temple.

But it wasn't as good. It wasn't as glorious. It was a facsimile of what splendor had been.

The people stalled on it. Political will was stubborn against it. Why bother? Why bother building a place where the Lord might dwell and the people might come near? Why bother building a place where word of justice might be spoken, word of truth might at least whisper. Why bother with the effortful building up of an obvious stand for something other than what the world offers?

It's easy to give up.

We must not give up.

Rest, yes. Be restored, yes. But then rise again and build.

Thanks be to God.