

22nd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.6.22

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!

Luke 20:27-38

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.” Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.” (310)

The Sadducees didn’t care about the Resurrection. They weren’t asking Jesus this question because they actually wanted to know about it. They didn’t *believe* in the Resurrection. They didn’t need to. Theirs was a consolation very much of this world. They were the elite of the elite. The brahman. The Ivy League. The cultured despisers of their day, the people who knew better.

They *were*. At the time of Jesus’ living, they were the 1%—masters of all the religious ceremonies, but also allies with the imperial power, handmaids of Rome and the local Herodians. That was at time of Jesus’ living. But at the time of Luke’s writing, they were all but gone—with the Temple. Gone with the Temple.

Sadducees were a sect, a school within Judaism. They practiced a version of the religion that but strictly adhered to the Torah. If it wasn’t in the first five books of the Bible, then it wasn’t a part of their practice. If it wasn’t in the books of Moses, then it didn’t factor into their religious life.

As for what *was* in those first five books, what *is* in there: it’s all the stuff about the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph), and then Moses and the exodus and the wilderness and the law, included in which were all the dictates of the Temple, how it was to be built, how it was to

be filled with God's glory, how it was to be used for sacrifices of different sorts and for the dispensing of justice and the stabilizing of society.

Mind you, the Temple itself wouldn't be built within the time frame of the Torah. The building of it would come later, much later in fact—past when the people settled in the land after Moses had died, past when the judges ruled (for better and for worse), in the time when kings ruled, when David had established Jerusalem after winning the city in war and then his son Solomon would reign. He had the Temple built. He realized that long-standing plan.

Actually, it's said the Sadducees were descendants of the priest Zadok, who lived at the time when King David had the Ark of the Covenant recovered from the Philistines to be housed now in Jerusalem. It's said Zadok was there, among the other Levite priests, carrying the Ark with his own two hands; and he was there when this priesthood established religious practices as had been outlined in Torah for the people now that they were in the Promised Land. Zadok was there when Solomon succeeded David on the throne, and when the Temple was built, and when the priesthood established the Temple cult.

That's what's said, what the Sadducees said anyway: their ancestor was there, at the time of founding.

Like bragging you had an ancestor on the Mayflower. A silly thing to brag about. But you know that I do, right? Four ancestors, actually.

And now, the Sadducees: they were at the center things. On the catbird seat. At the pinnacle of power. May it long withstand.

With ties like that to the past, they couldn't be expected to be all *that* excited about the future.

They didn't believe in the Resurrection. They didn't have to. It wasn't really in their *interests*.

There's this funny persistent move throughout our history, a decision that here was where and when God's word would be final, a decision that now was when there was no more left for God to say, there would be no more left for the world to receive and discern and interpret as of God.

The revelation of God's will was now complete.

Period.

A couple decades ago, our denomination, the United Church of Christ, embarked on a marketing campaign. We'd been called by some prominent somebody "the best kept secret in American Christianity." So, the denomination invested time and money in trying to change that.

TV ads. Clever slogans. Branding in red and black.

(As it happens, this is what brought Walton and Barbara to this church. They saw one of the tv ads.)

One slogan come up with was this: "God is still speaking." It was often paired with something Gracie Allen (wife of George Allen) was credited for having said: "Never put a period where God has put a comma."

And lots of congregations of our denomination adopted this slogan and paired it with a big comma, black on red. "God is still speaking," printed on posters, began declaring on church signs and church doors all across the land.

Legend has it that on one town green, where two churches stood, the UCC congregation announced on its church sign: "Never put a period where God has put a comma. God is still speaking," and across the town green, the (let's say) Baptist church responded with its own sign: "Never put a comma where God has put a period. God has spoken. Period."

The Bible. Of course, the Bible is the word of God. So say they.

(Notice, please, though. that the Bible says Jesus is the word of God, and it's a living word.

That's the Bible speaking.

Eh, details.)

This move to pin to a point in time when exactly God has finished in speaking to us: the funny thing about this is how, in silencing God "from now on," the "now" is always at different times, depending on what group is doing the declaring.

The biblical literalists of our day swear the Bible is God's final word, but that book is itself many books, whose writing spans 1200 years, and whose collecting and canonizing took three centuries or so, if you don't include Luther's coming along 1200 years later and reevaluating everything and reordering things and casting some books out that had long been in there and including some that he'd just as soon have written off. (Luther had no truck with the book of James, for example, and found the book of Revelation nearly heretical, though he ended up deciding both could stay.)

This is all to say that the Bible is itself a document that is hardly so static as the so-called literalists might imagine, and moreover that the God to whom the Bible testifies seems to be

evolving as the centuries pass. Or is it that the people are evolving, are responding to history, and these things give way to new understandings of God, new ways of imagining God, new theologies that speak forth from new insight about the truth of God?

The Sadducees didn't believe in the Resurrection because they considered that God had said God's final word once the Torah was complete. And now it was just a matter of honoring that word strictly—which is to say by living in the land and practicing in the Temple as led by Sadducees from their time-honored seat of power.

At last Jesus had reached the Temple, where the Sadducees were as waiting for him.

And they asked a question about the Resurrection, though they didn't want to know about the Resurrection, for they didn't believe in the Resurrection, for there's nothing of Resurrection in the five books of Moses, though Jesus does seem here to have found a small loophole.

Bigger ones come later.

But not as much later as you might think.

In the 9th century before Christ, the prophets Elijah and Elisha performed miraculous resuscitations of individuals who had recently died, which are considered “proto-resurrections.”

In the 6th century, the prophet Ezekiel was shown a valley of dry bones, the whole house of Israel gathered as in a mass grave, but which came together as Ezekiel watched, bone to its bone, and then sinews and flesh filling out the skeletal promise, and at last the spirit come to fill this flesh with life, until the once-dead now stood alive, together. The dead, fully alive!

In the 4th century, the long-suffering Job, in his desperation, confessed, “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 by my side, and my eyes shall behold...!”

Job. This is itself a story stitched together across time. The first two chapters of it, and the last part of the last one, are thought to be some of the earliest text found in the Bible, a pre-Hebraic story, a Canaanite myth.

There's a man who is righteous, whose faithfulness to the great God is unassailable.

Or is it?

One of the entities on God's counsel is named Satan, whose name means adversary and whose job it is to test the righteousness of those seeming so very righteous. His job is to bring adversarial forces into a person's life so God can ascertain whether it's merely good fortune that

makes the one righteous, whether when bad fortune comes the person will disavow righteousness, or if the righteousness is of firmer stuff than all that.

Satan besets Job, and Job loses everything, family, household wealth, livestock, personal health. He becomes covered in sores, his skin thus destroyed, and utterly shamed.

His wife tells him to curse God for this bad fortune.

His friends even came to witness the suffering.

And what follows is forty chapters of poetry, which develop in history much later than that early story-frame. These are thought to be from the 4th century before Christ, during the 2nd Temple period, far later than what the Sadducees might consider true.

Here Job's friends try to convince him to admit his guilt. He must have done something. He must have offended God somehow. He must deserve the suffering he's getting. Just admit it and move on. Just confess and get clean.

But Job won't. He won't confess. Because he didn't do anything to deserve this. This is just suffering for no reason, suffering for no good. Because *not* everything happens for a reason. And *not* everything that causes you pain makes you stronger. And God doesn't use suffering for some greater purpose. Sometimes life is just uselessly cruel, and once was the time that this was thought to be God at work. "God tests us," goes the thinking. "God never gives us more than we can handle," says the truism. But Job in his witness problematizes that. Though the story of Job accepts that such is God's workings in the world, that God might use suffering to some godly end, the character Job will not accept that premise. The character Job pops out of this story like pictures in a pop-up book. The story can't contain the character, whose witness speaks from it in such a way as breaks the frame.

"O that my words were written down!" which (look!) they were.

"O that they were inscribed in a book!" which (notice, please) they were.

"O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever!" which they effectively have been, thus defying time as if it were a living text.

"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!"

Job is the conscience of this story—Job whose suffering, turns out, was meaningless, like all suffering, which we ascribe with meaning at our own peril. Suffering simply is. It is woven into the warp and weft of the world.

And though it has no cause from the past, it can be redeemed in the future.

Somehow. Somehow.

And not in such a way that trivializes it: “Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

And not in such a way as denies it: “Everything happens for a reason.”

But in such a way as is more mysterious than that, mysterious beyond what I could say of it, anyway. Somehow, somehow, God’s redemption and purpose in resurrection makes the suffering of this life not the all-in-all, and not even the most-in-all. And I don’t know how.

But I do know when.

And this is when: both beyond time and also in time.

Resurrected life, redeemed life: it comes to us beyond time, in God’s glorious eternal reign, and also in time, as Christ did come in time and did also redeem the time. We are to live resurrection in time, as if the eternal realm were breaking and entering into this mundane realm.

Job’s testimony suggests anyway that he was confident of this. When he says, “...after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God,” it could be either the case that he’s confident his health in this world will be restored or he’s confident that in the next world there will involve somehow the body, the flesh—that in the eternal realm, the realm beyond time, somehow the body, as all creation, will be wrapped up in that.

What’s more, the spirit of the Satanic, that adversarial force, will fall away from God’s purpose, for now God will be on Job’s side, not against him, not “testing” him, but standing as advocate with him, beside him.

Did you know, do you remember: one name for the Holy Spirit is the *Paraclete*, which is Greek for what in Latin is *advocare*, “to call to,” which in English is rendered advocate. The Holy Spirit is the advocate. Essential to the character of God in more recent imagining isn’t that God is adversarial, but that God is our advocate.

Woe unto those who hold to a God who has spoken, period. For there is much beauty in how our theological imaginings within our same tradition have evolved. This, while also staying true. Woe unto those who are stuck in some fixed past, while the future unfolds and it might very much be a place where our best hope is that God yet reigns, God yet speaks, and ours is to listen, discern together, decide, and act.

The Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection. So, they decided to try to make a fool of Jesus, believing this thing that, technically, is hard to explain, that, technically-speaking, is really quite absurd.

But so is strict materialism, which is the other choice available when you follow each line of thinking to its end. Either there is an eternal realm that reigns beyond time, by which matter is made spirit within time; or there's not, and spirit is made flesh by some self-contained accident, breath enlivens matter by some self-contained serendipity, or tragedy when you consider how very painful life can be—which just sounds more absurd to me, not to mention enervating, even cruel. If life isn't because of love eternal creating time and history and humanity and creation, but is because of chance, then why bother, since this chance had made a situation so relentlessly hard?

Less pressingly, this is just a stopping up of the imagination. It's a placing a period at this which we can see and prove, rather than a comma in recognition that there's a limit to our sight, there's a limit to our power to prove.

Did you know that the seal of Harvard University includes three books? Across the three are inscribed the word "Veritas," which is Latin for "truth." Two of these were facing up and the third was facing down. This was to recognize all that will ever remain a mystery to human knowing.

Sometime, in the middle of the 20th century, that third book was turned up and open. Now the seal has three open books. Everything was known—or at least everything would soon be known.

I find that funny.

Thanks be to God.