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Ardmore, Pennsylvania
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
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Proper 27, Year C

Job 19:23-27a

Psalm 17:1-9

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

That bliss beyond compare

Recently I had the occasion to discuss heaven with a six-year-old girl. (She brought it up.) She was skeptical. “I don’t understand,” she said. “How could something be invented that would make things better than they already are?” “Invented?” I asked. “Yes,” she replied. “How could things be any better than they already are?”

It is such a sweet question. How could things be any better than they already are? It’s the question of a happy, if somewhat sheltered, child. I daresay that for most people the passage of time makes it obvious that things could be better—either for oneself or in general—and that the extent of deficiency poses a challenge to religious belief. The Bible wrestles with this question, and no place more directly than in the Book of Job.

At the beginning of the book, Job is doing really well. He is prosperous, he has a big happy family, and he is incredibly faithful. He is always blessing the Lord and giving thanks for what he has been given. He was “blameless,” it says, blameless and upright.

Then Satan gets involved. He dares God to allow him to afflict Job, in order to see if Job remains faithful. God allows it. Soon, all of Job’s stuff is destroyed by marauders: his sheep, his oxen, camels, his servants, and even his children. But still Job remained faithful: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Then Satan afflicts Job’s body, covering him with “loathsome sores.” But still he remains faithful. Mrs. Job thinks he’s being stupid: “curse God and die,” she says. But patient Job remains faithful, sitting there among the ashes, no livestock, no servants, no children. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

What pushes him over the edge, apparently, is the arrival of three of his friends, who, after a period of sitting with him in silence, decide that they have to get to the bottom of his misfortune. Most of their arguments hold that Job must have actually sinned, in some way or another, or else God would not have afflicted him in such a way. Job resists, and the author of the book resists: he is blameless and upright. When we get to the nineteenth chapter, today’s reading, Job states his faith both in himself and in God: “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 my eyes shall behold, and not another.”

It is a remarkable statement of faith. One day, these horrific losses and these loathsome sores will be ameliorated because, even if Job can’t see him just then, his Redeemer will do it. In the Christian tradition, we have come to identify this Redeemer with Jesus Christ. He is the one who will set all things right.

This Biblical wrestling with the problem of innocent suffering is reflective of many people's wrestling with the problem, then and now. What we think about the future is going to influence how we live today, and it's worth being reminded of what the Christian promise is, for that reason.

But many are skeptical including, I imagine, at least some of us, at least some of the time. Jesus faced this same skepticism that you might find in others or, indeed, in yourself. The Pharisees were a group that believed in the eventual resurrection of the dead in the end; the Sadducees did not. They thought it was a dumb idea. They go to Jesus to try to show how dumb it is. They ask him a rhetorical question to embarrass him. Let's say a woman is married to a man, and the man dies without them making children. According to the traditional law, the late husband's brother should marry the woman; this was a law designed to protect the widow. But then that brother dies, and the next, and the next; finally, the woman dies, too. So, smart guy, they ask Jesus, "In the resurrection ... whose wife will the woman be?" Gotcha!

Jesus does not answer their question, because it misses the point. In this age, we do things like marry and be given in marriage. But it isn't like that in heaven. Things are different there, different in a way that we can't quite imagine. Jesus' point is not primarily about marriage; it's about resurrection, it's about heaven. In the resurrected life, we are all children of God, bonded to God and one another in a way we cannot imagine.

One of my favorite hymns is "Jerusalem the Golden." In it, Jerusalem is used as a stand-in for the heavenly life, as the New Jerusalem. "Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest. ... I know not, oh I know not, what joys await us there. What radiance of glory, what bliss beyond compare." We know not what joys await us there. They are beyond our comprehension, and efforts to describe them in detail will necessarily fall short. Whatever it's like, it won't be like this. The Sadducees are stuck within earthly ways of thinking. But a different day is dawning. A different world is coming.

But the point for Job, and the point that Jesus is making, is that this world lies in the future. It is not a reality that is reachable on earth, not even by those who live upright and blameless lives. Earthly success is not a mark of the Lord's favor; earthly poverty is not a mark of the Lord's judgment. The world of justice, and solidarity, and health, and full communion with God and one another must wait for the resurrection. But it will come at the time of the general resurrection. This is the promise that Job holds on to; his Redeemer lives.

Again, our faith in this resurrected life affects our lives today in how we approach suffering and where we place our faith. Because, if this world is all there is, then our only faith can be in ourselves, and failures to bring about a world without suffering could invoke despair. But don't despair! We should work for justice, and solidarity, the alleviation of poverty, the health of people, and so forth. But we will never be entirely successful; ask Job. That doesn't mean that things can't get better. We should work for that and hope for that. But, in a world of sin, the most progressive progress will never achieve the kingdom of God, that "bliss beyond compare."

I was wrong about what the six-year-old was saying, by the way. I heard her question as sheltered and innocent, but I was wrong. She knew that things could be better. She just didn't understand *how*: what was going to be invented in heaven such that all the world's problems could be solved? She is a child of technology and she assumed technology could fix everything.

But it's not about inventions. Inventions can be good things; vaccines are good, plenty of things can make life easier. But no invention is ever going to eradicate all suffering in the world (or anywhere else!), because the world is one of finitude and vulnerability. Ask Job. As Jesus said, the rain falls on the unjust, and it falls on the just.

This can be discouraging, but it doesn't have to be. On the contrary, it can be a source of hope; it can encourage, not discourage, work for justice. That's because we know that a world of sin is not how things are supposed to be. In the life of the world to come, there are not masters and

slaves; that is not the Kingdom of God. There is not indifference to poverty; there is no poverty. We should work, without despair, for such a thing now, but not be discouraged. The resurrection life is assured.

But, assured for whom? Jesus says that the resurrected life is for “those who are considered worthy of a place in that age.” But who is worthy of that place? Are you? Am I? We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under God’s table. We are not worthy of that “bliss beyond compare.” The same sin that keeps us from establishing God’s rule on earth is the sin that keeps us from being worthy of a place in God’s kingdom.

No, we require a redeemer. A redeemer in Hebrew parlance is one who frees people from their debts by making the payment on their behalf. It is only through the great gift of the sacrifice of Christ that we are freed to join him in heaven. We know that our Redeemer lives and we look for him to come again.

This posture of expectation is the posture of the Church, and it is something we foreground during the season of Advent, which is coming up soon. At St. George’s, during Advent, we will celebrate the Eucharist at the High Altar at the 10 a.m. service, because it faces east, which the Church has traditionally given the symbolism as the direction from which Christ will come. Facing east, we await the return of our Redeemer. We await the day when he will raise us from sin and death and bring us to new life, in the New Jerusalem, with him, where things will be better than they already are—not by technology or human progress, but by God’s grace, and his grace alone.