

FAITH IN THE FUTURE
THE LAST APPEAL

Texts on Sunday, March 25, 2012

Job 23: 1-17; Luke 8: 42b-48

With the title of this series of sermons, “Faith in the Future,” I do not refer to faith’s object—for example, that we should place our faith in the future. That’s an empty box of chocolates. Rather, I invite you to give your attention to the future; to think about Christian faith in the future, what it must become, soon, if people of faith are to help shape a sustainable world. I hope that this series might give to you and me—for I preach first to this soul; if I didn’t need to hear it, then neither does the church—a renewed feeling for the reasonableness and the difficulty of faith, when superstition, projection, and wishful thinking are left behind.

This is not where our world treads. Consider. The *New York Times* called last Friday to learn what the head minister of The Riverside Church had to say about the knee-bowing Tim Tebow’s coming to quarterback the New York Jets. Now, God can surely look to the divine reputation by Godself, but the media do mangle this matter badly, always eager to egg religion back into the circus ring of superstition and silliness, where the world is comfortable with Jesus. I wished not to add a rap to that sheet, so I held my tongue when they called—and remembered my first personal run-in with faith and a bad news story. It took place nearly thirty years ago, when I was a seminarian.

While hiking high up in the Adirondacks, I was struck by lightning, and, as you rightly infer, I survived. A few days later, there appeared a column in the *Albany Times-Union* headlined thus: “Who He Knows Surely Helped.” Now, the columnist hadn’t bothered to talk with me; if a red pen were applied to its errors, his story could have doubled as a Yule tree ornament. But it was that title that galled me most. Those who turned out to be the first public audience of my nascent ministry received confirmation that faith is still safe and trivial. Do I think God considered my seminary training while training the path of that giant electric gun on a huge hemlock tree, and me, up there in the woods one summer afternoon? I do not. I do not think God works that way at all.

Nevertheless, as a result of that incident, my experience of faith did move further on down the road. The blast blew holes in my pack and clothing, in my flesh and my boots; it flung me into the mud of the downpour and paralyzed my legs. The whole story takes too much time to tell, so let me leap over almost all of it to this. When I returned to the seminary to begin a second year of study, I was limping heavily from this immense assault. Seeing my labored gait, classmates would ask after my health, and we would find ourselves waylaid for a spell as I spun out the whole story. You see, good things had come to me in my need, and no lasting injury, so these seminary friends turned prayerful

thanks to God. Their kind words tracked every step of the story: prayers from where we stood in the quadrangle, prayers for the doctors attending me in several towns, prayers for helpers who came alongside me and for the edgeless urge to live that surged within me up under that shattered tree—: all along the way, their prayers fell like crumbs on a forest trail.

But no one offered a prayer for the bolt of fire that broke from that tree into me. The absence of a prayer for the whole reality felt like a hole in me, as if a choir suddenly broke off from a great chorale, as if the music sheets went missing and the power and truth of the music just stopped. Can prayer touch what is holy if we seek for and give thanks for only what we like, or would like? What if God behind the God to whom we think we pray waits not at all where we wish her, but, as at the opening of Dante's *Inferno*, waits "*nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / che la diritta via era smarrita*"—in the middle of the road of our life, from which the straight way is lost. In the profusion of my friends' simple prayers, I found myself moving in a "thin space," awaiting a faith with capacity to hold—or be held in—a reality, a totality, such as no eye could see, nor ear hear, nor mind conceive; in a dazzling darkness growing from a shattered tree where my unspeakable prayer was awaiting words.

This, of course, is Job's situation. And Jesus' too. And yours. One of the claims in our series of sermons from *Job* has just this character, that the poet who penned this poem stood at a place in time when the traditional religion of his people (which can be called "the cult of Yahweh") had tumbled down the hill of history and lay now inert, old formulas stuck at the bottom of an historical crisis incapable of helping the people live into their actual situation without superstition, projection, or wishful thinking. That poet saw the decadence of his religion. Its signs appear in every age that faces reformation: on one hand, fanatical oppression in the name of God, combined with massive group-think armed to harm those who break with convention; and on the other hand, disgust and abandonment of religion by very, very many, whose hunger for truth exceeds their fear of harm. The religion called Judaism came into flower just this way in the 400s BCE, and not earlier, just as *Job* was written by that poet who so keenly felt a possibility for how faith must fly in the future.

In a new book, *The Underground Church*, UCC pastor Robin Meyers digs into the crisis of our time, and the future of faith in the coming reformation.

The church is in such disarray, so tempted to save itself by redecorating [or] changing ministers, that a dirty little secret must now be told: . . . The number one reason for the decline of the church in our time is often left unsaid: no one really expects anything important to happen. This makes church, for the most part, dull and dishonest . . . Most of our churches are friendly, comfortable, and well appointed, [but] more passion is generated by a service that runs too long than by the destruction of the planet. Churches split over how to serve communion. An unfamiliar hymn can sour the whole morning. . . . They say there is no fight like a church fight, and that's often because the intensity of such a battle is inversely proportionate to [its] significance . . . *Who is that sitting in my pew? Why don't younger women want to be part of the guild anymore?* But who goes [to

church] expecting to be “undone”? Who expects to weep at recognizing the world as it really is, or to shudder at the certain knowledge that until we start taking risks, it is likely to stay that way? (pp. 3-5)

For those with ears to hear, Job was written in times like these for times like these. As the poet moves down into the pathos of our situation, hear me say once again that *Job* is not about Job, a certain man who you might imagine actually to have lived. *Job* is about a whole people, a beloved community, and how in the midst of great suffering, they might learn to lay hold of the very roots of their religion to pluck it up from bad soil to plant it anew in good. In the hands of his master the poet, Job passes into fierce hope that out of the mists of generations of injustice and sorrow, something must happen now.

Job is slowly giving shape to a strange desire. He wants a trial, with God in the court to try and to convict, or to acquit. The first time the idea comes to him, in Chapter 9, he dismisses it: “If I summoned God, and he answered me, I would not believe that he was listening to my voice.” In Chapter 13, he turns heavenward, “See! I have prepared my case; I know that I shall be vindicated . . . Only . . . withdraw your hand from me; then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me.” Though there comes no reply, Job’s once-acute desire to die and be done is now displaced by hope to have his case heard.

In Chapter 19, he raises his voice yet more clearly. “Oh that my words were written, inscribed in a book, penned in lead, graven in rock for ever. For I know that my defender is living, and at the last, he will stand on the dust, after my skin has been stripped off!” How much is at stake for Christians in this short passage. Who that loves Handel’s *Messiah* does not ♪ *know that my Redeemer liveth* . . . ? Indeed, all our Christian translations capitalize *Redeemer*—where in the Hebrew bible only the word *defender* stands; there are no capital letters. All our translations force Job to serve our projections and wishful thinking, as if he now predicts his own resurrection and redemption before Redeemer Jesus. But no: this is not Job’s mind. Job speaks of a defender—a *go-el*, a family member committed to argue Job’s case *against* God even though Job be dead, thus to secure his good name on earth. Then, of a sudden, Job drops this line of thought. He moves down, deeper in, seeking words for an unspeakable prayer. “But I would see God from *my* flesh. I would see God for myself; my eyes would see, and not a stranger’s.” From this word forward, Job never again wishes to die, but only to see. This is what faith must be in the future.

In today’s reading, Job feels ready for his trial. His language is confident as never before.

I would lay my case before God, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what God would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. Would God contend with me? No; but he would give heed to me . . . But look, if I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; I turn to the left and the right, but I cannot see him.” (Job 23: 4-9)

Has not the poet named the real situation of faith, of which we hardly know to speak, that just when I needed you most, as the love song has it, I meet your absence, O God? Job has wept every tear and lost every health but his soul's. Old formulas and prayers have ceased to work. He has made his last appeal, but he cannot deliver the summons, for God is not there. No answer comes. Have you been there? Have you not been there?

In its timidity and trite conventions, the American way of faith—a faith in the past in every sense—supposes that religion should work as money works, well before the last appeal. It is a kind of trade of belief for benefits, especially for health and wealth. But why have we so supposed it? Why should faith work before it has been tried? Rather, we should see that faith is not faith until it is tried. It was just the fabric of our imagination, a child's idea of comforts now grotesquely stretched over a grown-up life. But only after we have made the last appeal, knowing not even where to send it, do we commit our whole heart, our whole mind, our whole strength to the *unknown*. Only then do we step onto holy ground. Only then, after the last appeal, can God come to us on God's terms. Then, in the words of the medieval Jewish mystic Solomon Ibn Gabriol, "I will flee from You to Yourself." After the last appeal, no more will you be satisfied with church, unless they usher you toward your own experience of God on God's terms.

This theme is traced all through our Christian story. See the woman with a flow of blood for long years, who has spent all she has on cures and now makes her last appeal at the hem of Jesus' garment, and receives her own experience. Jesus tells her not "I have healed you" but "Your faith has made you well." That is faith, laid down in the last appeal. There God works, and not as we imagine.

How then shall we stand in the silence of the dead, in the silence of God, after another boy is shot to death by a peace officer? May we of the coming faith, all we of Riverside, come to know that though the boy's last appeal seems to have been recorded on that 911 tape, our last appeal has not yet been recorded. We have not yet walked the whole line in faith. We have not yet, not as one body, nor as members individually of the one, hungered for our own experience of faith, driving us toward our own prayer, our own new language, our own art, our own act at the hem of his garment. But we are going there, to a place so far from the mere troubles of institution and organization which have vexed us. Hungering after our own experience of God, we will make the last appeal on behalf of the littlest and lost, the deceived and the dead, and thus we shall meet God anew on holy ground in the faith of the future.