

Pentecost 22 Proper 27– Year C – Track 2 – 11-10-2019

There is a conspiracy of sorts going on. No, I'm not talking politics. I am talking about our readings from today, our celebration of All Saints last Sunday, our movement toward the end of the year in the church calendar, and the change of seasons with the leaves falling and the snowflakes coming. That last part, of course, is a reinforcement from nature given to us in the Northern Hemisphere. - All of those are "conspiring" to lead us into a reflection on some serious questions: What are we doing here? What is the end-game? What do we really believe about death and resurrection?

In the Epistle from Second Thessalonians, Paul or one of his followers is attempting to calm the believers that are becoming concerned because the expected immanent return of Christ has not yet happened. The "end-game" for which *they* were waiting was not appearing. He tells them other things must happen first and describes a "lawless one" who "opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God." We could not count the number of times some people, somewhere, have thought this had indeed happened – perhaps even now – and have proclaimed that "the end" must be near! But the point of the writer is this: "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word." In other words, "Be hopeful, and continue speaking and doing good." Why? "so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

We tend to think of "[obtaining] the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" as a reward that awaits us "in heaven," wherever that may be. The problem with that thinking is that any time we frame something in terms of "reward" or "punishment" – as we do with our concepts of heaven and hell – the assumption is that someone has to judge previous behavior to determine if the "reward" has been *earned*. And our experience alone can tell us that a worldview based on people getting what they have "earned" is deeply flawed.

And today's first reading gives us that lesson in spades. Let us look at the story of Job.

Episcopal priest Frederic Guyott summarizes it well:

“The simple story is that Job was a righteous man who was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." It is a difficult book because the story of Job becomes a contest between Satan and God for the soul of Job. Satan challenged God to abandon Job and see if Job would continue to be faithful to God. The book recited the many trials and tribulations Job suffered, including being taunted by his friends to forsake his faith in God. In the passage we read today, Job responded with perhaps the most well-known affirmation of faith in the resurrection: “For I know that my Redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has thus been destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God.”¹

The problem that the book of Job poses is that Job has lived a righteous life, and in the worldview of “earning” a reward, he has earned the good things in his life. When all those things are taken away, when the rewards are gone, will he maintain his faith, his relationship with God? Will he continue to be faithful? And the answer is, yes. Job ends by saying, “I *know* that my Redeemer lives...” Not “I hope” or “I believe” – but “I know.”

That is the kind of certainty we all wish to have. It is that desire for certainty about what will happen to us *in the end* that drives many people to churches that proclaim sure salvation through their definition of being reborn, or certain proscriptive and prescriptive actions, or accession to certain creeds and dogmas.

We all know people, of course, who think there is nothing after death. No reward, no punishment, just dead. My own grandmother was in that camp. She “said her prayers” every morning, wouldn’t let herself turn on the television for her soaps and game shows until she had done so. So when she told me one day that she did not think there was anything after death, I asked her why she prayed, then. And she told me she had promised God that since she had no time to pray when she was raising her family, she would pray when they were all grown, and she was keeping her promise. She was continuing to be faithful. With no reward or punishment in sight, she was simply being true to her relationship with God.

In the Gospel, we are given a picture of other people with no belief in life after death – the Sadducees. They come to Jesus with their question about whose wife this seven-time widowed woman will be in the resurrection, a question designed to show just how ridiculous it is to *believe* in resurrection. It was like the question posed by a boy to one of my friends teaching a Sunday school class about God being everywhere.

The little boy *JUMPED* from one place to another, and then asked, with a note of triumph in his voice, “If God is everywhere, did I just step on him?” to which my friend replied, “No, God is also very fast.” In both situations – the question of whose wife the widow will be, or if the boy stepped on God – the answer is outside the boundaries drawn by the questioner. The answer is about who *God* is – and who we are in relation to God.

Jesus tells the Sadducees this about those in the resurrection: “Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are *children of God...*” Not “will become” but “*are*” *children of God*.

In today’s collect, we acknowledged that Jesus the Christ came “to make us children of God and heirs of eternal life.” We can choose whether or not to live in the reign of God here. We can choose to live the “godly lives” to which we were urged last week – we can choose to live the life of God, the way of God the *values* of God – or not. But we cannot change who we are, where we come from. We are children of God. It is God who breathed life into us, and to whom we shall return. We have not earned that. It is not a reward. It is who God is, and who God made us to be.

There’s a quote from Tuesdays with Morrie that says the same thing in a different way:

"I heard a nice little story the other day," Morrie says. He closes his eyes for a moment, and I wait. "Okay. The story is about a little wave, bobbing along in the ocean, having a grand old time. He's enjoying the wind and the fresh air-- until he notices the other waves in front of him, crashing against the shore. "'My God, this is terrible,' the wave says 'Look what's going to happen to me!' "Then along comes another wave. It sees the first wave looking grim, and it says to him, 'Why do you look so sad?' "The first wave says, 'You don't understand! We're all going to crash! All of us waves are going to be nothing! Isn't it terrible?' "The second wave says, 'No, you don't understand. You’re not a wave – you’re part of the ocean.'"

Amen.

[Job 19:23-27a](#) [Psalm 17:1-9](#) [2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17](#) [Luke 20:27-38](#)

¹ Frederic Guyott, <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/todays-gospel-reading-proper-27-c-2007>