

Eternity Sunday Sermon
"We are a hopeful people"
A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church,
Edmonton, Alberta
by Carol Penner
November 22, 2015
Text: Job 14, I Thess. 4:13, Romans 15:15

What does it look like to be a hopeful people? More particularly on this Eternity Sunday, we ask, what does it look like to be a hopeful people as we remember our loved ones who have died?

Eternity Sunday turns our attention to the reality of death in our community, and it points us to the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. We come together to say, "Yes, we grieve", but we do not grieve as those who have no hope (I Thessalonians 4:13). We believe that Jesus conquered the power of death, and that we will see Jesus again after our bodies die.

I am glad that Eternity Sunday falls just before the beginning of Advent, because I have found that for me, the advent and Christmas season can be a time where we miss our loved ones the most keenly. Christmas is a family time, and when the family members we love are missing around the table, grief is very real. And so being reminded of our hope is important.

One of the traditions I have around this time of the year, is to listen to Handel's Messiah, preferably in a live setting. Handel uses biblical texts to tell the story of salvation. There is something about gathering together as a group, and listening to musicians presenting this masterpiece that touches my heart in a very deep way. And I look forward to hearing the moving words "I know that my Redeemer liveth"... an aria that never fails to bring me to tears. The soaring hope of life beyond death, combined with the soaring melody, always lifts me up.

As some of you know, this past week has been a time of grief for our family personally, with the death of my mom. And so the words from that aria, which are taken from this verse in the book of Job have been in my head:

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. Job 19:25-27

We need verses like this to steady us when we face heavy weather, like losing a loved one.

And so I decided that I would take these verses as a scripture for my sermon this morning. This is the last in our fall sermon series on identity, where we have been using Old Testament passages to think about our identity as the people of God.

And so I spent time this week reading the book of Job. I wanted to find out how this verse fit into the larger story of Job.

Well I found out a lot of things. When you read through the book of Job, you find it to be a dark book full of questions. Questions about suffering, injustice, betrayal (both earthly and divine). Job is a man who faces disaster after disaster. A wealthy man, his riches are erased. A man with a big family, all his children die at once. A healthy man, his health is destroyed. His body becomes covered with open sores and maggots, his skin turns black and falls off. Job doesn't flinch from cataloguing all his afflictions in great detail. Or rather he does flinch, the whole book is about him flinching in response to the pain he is experiencing. He describes his physical and mental anguish to God in great detail. He calls out to God, "Look at me, this is hard, this is dreadful, this is terrible, this is unfair! Why is this happening? And what are you doing about this, God?"

We aren't really sure of a date of the writing of the book of Job. Some researchers think Job is an extremely old story, a story from the time of the patriarchs, the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They make that guess because of the type of language used in the book, a very ancient type of Hebrew, and some of the cultural references.

The story is probably extremely old, but it's hard to know when it was written down. It might have been an oral tradition passed on for centuries, put into its final form by someone much later. We know for sure that Ezekiel in the 500's BCE during the exile knew about the story of Job, because he refers to the righteous men "Noah, Daniel and Job" (Ezekiel 14). But it doesn't necessarily mean that he knew about the book of Job, like we know it, he may just have known the story.

So where does this verse "I know that my Redeemer liveth" fit into the book? How does redemption and resurrection fit into the Job story?

As I read through the book of Job, I soon found that this is not a book about hope for life after death. On the contrary, over and over again, Job talks about Sheol, the place where all the dead go, as a place of forgetfulness and nothingness. Listen to the poetry of Job:

⁷ For there is hope for a tree,
if it is cut down, that it will sprout again,
and that its shoots will not cease.
⁸ Though its root grows old in the earth,
and its stump dies in the ground,
⁹ yet at the scent of water it will bud
and put forth branches like a young plant.
¹⁰ But mortals die, and are laid low;
humans expire, and where are they?
¹¹ As waters fail from a lake,
and a river wastes away and dries up,
¹² so mortals lie down and do not rise again;
until the heavens are no more, they will not awake
or be roused out of their sleep. (Job 14:7-12)

Job describes Sheol, the place of the dead, as a place where all people go, regardless of whether they are righteous or wicked. (Job 30:23) It's a place of gloom and darkness and no one returns from it. He uses numerous metaphors to describe death: Life is a breath (7:7),

our life is like a cloud that vanishes (7:9). Mortals are like flowers that wither, like shadows that flee (Job 14:1).

I read the text of Job, and I read commentaries, and I was surprised to realize that in the verse that Handel used, Job was not talking about a Redeemer who would help him after death. No...Job is looking for redemption in this life. Handel's aria uses the words of the King James Version, and Handel's lyrics go, "Though worms destroy this body..." I have always taken that to mean, "after we die..." But Job had some horrible skin disease, and the problem he actually had was that he had open sores with maggots in them. Handel's song speaks of God redeeming him in the "latter days", but a more accurate translation is "at the last". As in, in Job's lifetime, at the end, God will redeem or heal his body, and in Job's own flesh, he will see that happen. And that is exactly what happens in the story. Job regains his health, his wealth, and has a new family before he actually dies at the ripe old age of 140. His prayers are answered.

Commentators explain, that while as Christians we like to go back and find evidence of a belief in life after death in the Old Testament, this passage is not about that. In fact, the book of Job is such an old story, they are quite certain that when it was written Israelites hadn't even conceived yet of the possibility of life after death. That comes much later in Israel's history.

And so this verse, this mainstay of hope for life after death, is in fact not about resurrection after death. It's a verse about Job's expectation that God will help him in this life.

The book of Job uses the word *enosh* which means "mortal man" over twenty-five times. We are mortal, our lives end in death, our flesh is frail and weak, like grass. One of Job's complaints against God was, "Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as mortals see?" Job's complaint finds an answer, years later, in the person of Jesus Christ, the son of God, sent to us with eyes of flesh, to see as mortals see. Jesus resolves the misery of mortal man with a good news message of eternal life, which is gained through him. Jesus conquers the power of death in our life and redeems us.

And so the Christian community rejoices in this victory. Without knowing it, Job was pointing to the hope that would become the hope of all ages. We read the words of Job and we see them as foreshadowing. Job himself says,

"Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." Job 42:3

And so Job provides a message of hope before its time, a verse of hope in a whole book of questions about suffering and loss. What lessons can we learn from this verse?

For me, it's important that the book of Job is in the Bible. There are seasons of our lives where we need this book. While I was reading the book of Job, I found it really resonated with what I was feeling this week. We may believe in the resurrection of the dead, but it can seem infinitely distant when we stand next to our loved ones who have died. Death is a reality in our lives, a cruel and hard reality. We are parted from our loved ones. Someone you love is there, and then they are not there. A body, once warm and animated, becomes lifeless. A living body, a living body that you loved, becomes a corpse. Dead is dead. They are dead and gone, the world knows them no more. Job's bleak and powerful poetry about the darkness of the grave speaks to us: death brings us low, life is a breath that disappears. We are acquainted with that land of gloom and chaos where light is like darkness. (Job 10:21-

22) And to me it's comforting that there are words in our holy scriptures do not gloss over the pain and fear that descend upon us when we experience the death of our loved ones. It is tempting to detour the valley of the shadow of death, to pretend it's not there, to speak only of the happy place of resurrection.

And that reminds me of a story. When I worked as a hospital chaplain, we were often called to be with family members whose loved one was dying or had just died. I was called one day to be with a woman who had just lost her husband. It was an extremely sad time, a time of tears, a time of grief. Then a friend of this family came into the room, a friend who was a member of their church. She came in and gave the woman a big hug. Then she held both of the wife's arms and looked her in the eyes and said, "This is a time of resurrection. This is a time of resurrection! Isn't it? Isn't it?" She said it with great conviction and with a smile of love. She wanted the wife to answer her. She was waiting for an answer. There were a couple of us in the room, and we were all still, in the tension of that silence. I still remember the wife of the dead man, not being able to maintain eye contact with her friend, looking down and away, saying in a small voice, "Yes, I suppose it is."

Now the woman who said, "This is a time of resurrection," was telling the truth. Everyone in that room was a Christian, and as Christians we all believed that death is the gateway to life, and that the person who had just died was welcomed into heaven by Jesus.

It was not factually wrong what she was saying. That's the story we believe in. It's just that she was jumping into the story at the wrong place. At such a wrong place, that it was jarring. When someone is grieving, they need space to be able to grieve. Their heart is reeling with shock and loss and disbelief that someone they love is gone. The impermanence of life is fresh upon them.

Will they be able to speak about resurrection and believe it with conviction? In good time they will. Some people are able to do that with remarkable rapidity. For example, the woman who walked into the room, she was there already. She had lost a friend, but she was filled with the hope of resurrection. Well, that's great if you can go there. But not everyone can go there. Some people, I would say most people, have to hang around death for a while. I am happy for people who are given the gift of an assurance of resurrection that they can really feel right at the moment when their loved ones die. What a gift from God. And I would not take that away from them. But many don't get that gift. It's something that dawns on most of us gradually.

That's why I think that I appreciated reading the words of Job so much this week. Death as a shade? Death as gloomy? Death as the end? Check, check, check. Scripture going with us to that dark place.

I think about Jesus, when he went to visit the grave of his friend Lazarus. If there was ever a human being in the world who understood that resurrection is possible, and that there is life after death, it was Jesus. You would think Jesus might approach Mary and Martha with a smile and say, "This is a time of resurrection", because he absolutely knew that it was going to be a time of resurrection. But what does Jesus do? Jesus goes to the tomb with his friends and weeps. "Jesus wept." And the people said, "See how he loved him."

Job's accusing words to God were, "Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as mortals see?" And here's God's answer. "Yes, yes I do." Jesus stands at the grave and weeps real tears of grief, "This is what death is like, this is what death is about." He feels it in his bones.

A few weeks later, in a dark garden, Jesus will weep again as he kneels praying the night before his own death. He faces that horrible death and weeps real tears. Even on the cross he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These are human words, words that are wrung out of us when we face death.

Paul's advice to the Christian community in Rome was "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." (Romans 15:15) Enter compassionately into the experiences of people you encounter. I think of the woman who came into the hospital room with such a strong faith. She was convinced without a doubt that the man whose body was lying in the bed, was now with Jesus in heaven. She had been given the gift of a great faith. But perhaps what she was being invited to in that room was the greater gift of love. She had a woman before her, a live woman, who was stricken, whose eyes were swollen with weeping. Would the visitor go with that wife, enter into that place and shed some tears with her?

Like Job's friends, too often we would rather keep our distance and throw out some religious truth at arm's length. We want to feel strong, we want to feel in control, we want to feel we can rescue people from hard things. No need to be sad, just be happy like me.

That's not what God did. God sent a live person down to be with us. God with flesh on. God to sit with us, and cry with us, and suffer with us. He suffered his way into resurrection, he waits with us as hope is born in us. Hope comes in that realization that God is with us. Truly with us. Jesus is Immanuel.

As a community of hope, we incarnate love when we see a suffering person and enter into that space with them. We visit the sick person in the hospital. We reach out to the neighbor whose child has died. We visit the prisoner in the federal institution who feels alone and abandoned. We provide a home for a Syrian refugee family in spite of our society's fear of strangers, of terrorism.

I remember when a congregation I was in sponsored a family from Bosnia. I was part of the committee that was in charge of making sure their first welcome and their first year went smoothly. I soon realized that I was out of step, we were out of step with where that family was at. I was just like that woman in the hospital room. We felt like we were giving this family a new life, it was a time of resurrection! I think inwardly I felt, "Here, you have a home, now be happy, we've rescued you." And yes, there is a rescue element to sponsorship, you have provided them with a new home. But the most essential part of sponsorship is compassion. These people from Bosnia had suffered great losses, they'd seen family members killed, their society had been destroyed. Everything they loved, was lost or torn away: home, family, friends, culture. They did not choose to come here, it was forced upon them. And in Canada the weather, the food, the language is not the weather, the food, the language that they feel comfortable in. The family we sponsored was not in a mindset of resurrection, they were in a mindset of very deep grief. As sponsors, we were happy, and it was a shock to me to realize that they just couldn't go there yet. In fact it took around four years for them to emerge from their trauma. Now some refugees come with a different mindset, but we needed to meet this family the way they came.

We need to meet people where they are at. We join together in worship services and remember that grief is a long journey. We decide to go the distance with each other, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

When we meet together we sing words of resurrection, knowing full well that sometimes some of us can't sing the words, they are too much for us. That's when it is OK to be silent and listen, as the community around sings, "I know that my redeemer liveth." Over time, the community sings us back into faith. We carry each other in song.

Our hopefulness comes, I think, from being a loving community that and grieve with those who grieve, and laugh with those who laugh. When we grieve with the grief stricken, when we really enter into their pain, people will say, "Look how much they love each other."

In this way, being with each other, we become a people of hope. We live out the coming of Christ again and again, even for those who walk in the valley of the shadow of death.

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In this way, being with each other, singing with each other, we become a people of hope, a people who incarnate Jesus again and again. We live out the coming of Christ again and again, even for those who walk in the valley of the shadow of death.