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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/10/2013, The 25th Sunday after Pentecost
Job 19:23–27a, Psalm 17, 2 Thessalonians 2:1–5, 13–17, Luke 20:27–38
Not a Grain of Your Goodness Shall Be Lost

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's sermon bears the title "Not a Grain of Your Goodness Shall Be Lost." I know that you have done a lot of good in your life so far, and that there remains much more good for you to do going forward. Do it, and it shall not be done in vain. That's because of the resurrection. My sermon is based on all three of our Bible Lessons, for they all speak of or long for the resurrection of the dead.

My beginning text is Job's great cry of confidence in God. All is bleak for the man. There is no solving of Job's troubles in terms of human strength. He is slandered by his friends, his children are dead, and err long, he will be too, judging by the weakness in his body. Yet he believes that he will be vindicated. Aye, and it will be God himself who will defend him. And best of all, with a kind of faith that perceives beyond the horizons of mortality, he believes that though he should die, he himself "shall see God":

²⁵For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; ²⁶and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh *I shall see God*, ²⁷whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
(Job 19:25-27, RSV)

Sunday by Sunday, liturgy by liturgy, we confess our faith in the "resurrection of the body." We shall do so again in just a few minutes. Our faith finds expression right there in the Creed:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the *resurrection of the body*, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Again, this morning's Bible readings all speak of or suggest the resurrection. Let's look at them in order. Let us rejoice in the blessed doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. Let us enjoy the confidence — even the defiance — of our Bible readings. We begin with our reading from Job.

JOB

It is a dear reading for many of us. Just recently it was on our minds because of the funeral of Sheila Burton. Who would have guessed just a year ago that I would be writing or saying these words, “the funeral of Sheila Burton”? But life is fragile, and we should do the best we can to put our house in order and to be mindful at all times of the brevity of our days. It is with each of us as the Bible says:

¹Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. ²He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not. (Job 14:1-2, KJV)

Now, this lament happens to come from the book of Job, from Chapter 14. It is a striking and realistic saying. But let me tell you an even more striking and realistic saying, also from the book of Job. It is this morning’s passage from Job 19:

²⁵For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; (Job 19:25, RSV)

This cry of confidence in God — “For I know that my Redeemer lives” — meant a lot to Sheila. She requested the hymn based on this text for her mother’s funeral, and I in turn used it in her recent funeral. There is such a godly tone of defiance in Job’s saying:

...*I shall see God,* ²⁷whom I shall see on my side, and *my eyes shall behold, and not another.* (Job 19:26-27, RSV)

So it is now with Sheila: She gets to see God, with her own eyes. She gets to see God “on my side,” as our text says. So, that’s from Job 19.

2 THESSALONIANS 2

Hastening on now, let’s take a glance at this morning’s Epistle Lesson, from 2 Thessalonians Chapter 2. Saint Paul is addressing a congregation of believers who have been rattled by some false teaching to the effect that the resurrection of the dead had already happened or was going on now in their midst.¹ I would

¹ The situation being addressed in 2 Thessalonians has again shifted. The Thessalonian congregation has been greatly shaken - frightened out of its wits - by the allegation from some source (spirit, word, or letter) that the day of the Lord has already come or is now present. Paul is quick to brand such teaching as deceptive. Then he elaborates on why such a rumor

be rattled too by such teaching. I mean, if *this* is the Day of the Lord, if these days of ours, with all their mixture of joy and sorrow, life and death, if this is the Day of the Lord, then it is pretty disappointing.

The apostle counters this false teaching by saying that before the day of resurrection happens, there must first be troubles on earth, signs in heaven and on earth, including the rising up of the antichrist — that charismatic seducer of humanity, the very incarnation of the Devil, who joins his Satanic lord in hating humanity. This “man of lawlessness” must first arise and then be vanquished by Jesus before the day of the Lord will come, including the resurrection from the dead.

So, the general resurrection has not yet happened. It was still ahead of the Thessalonians and it is still ahead of us.

It will have to be a sermon for another day, but Saint Paul ends this passage to the Thessalonians with a prayer for them. It is a prayer both for their *comfort* and for their *strengthening* in piety. The prayer goes this way:

¹⁶Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, ¹⁷*comfort* your hearts and *strengthen* them in every good work and word.

For the apostle, these two go together: comfort and strength for doing some good in this present world. Our hope of heaven should strengthen us for some good deeds on this earth below.

LUKE 20

Next, let’s take a look at our Gospel Lesson. You would think that it would be hard to have a frivolous or mean-spirited discussion about the resurrection to eternal life, but this morning’s Gospel Lesson gives us such a discussion. In fact,

cannot be true by outlining a series of apocalyptic events that must precede the parousia: first comes the rebellion, then the “man of lawlessness” is revealed. Next, this “son of perdition” exalts himself, pollutes the temple, and claims to be God. Then and only then will the Lord Jesus appear to destroy him and his satanic powers. This sequence of apocalyptic signs is taken largely from the book of Daniel (8:11-14;11:31-39) with additional pseudepigraphical expansion and rabbinical commentary. But once again the author does not present this information as something unknown in the community, but he calls upon them to recall what he had said to them when he was still with them (2:5). (Brevard S. Childs. *The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Kindle Locations 2613-2619). Kindle Edition.)

this discussion takes on an ominous tone when we read this verse just a few verses before our reading:

²⁰And they [the chief priests and the scribes] watched him, and sent forth spies, which should feign themselves just men, that they might take hold of his words, that so they might deliver him unto the power and authority of the governor. (Luke 20:19, KJV)

This is the context for this morning's visit by the Sadducees and their mean-spirited question about the widow and the seven brothers. They *seem* to be righteous men, but you cannot help but think about them that their design is to "take hold of his words" — to get Jesus to deny one or the other key doctrine: either he must deny the resurrection of the dead, which he cannot do because he believes in the resurrection with all his heart and want us to also, or he must deny the authority of Moses. Either way, they figure they had him trapped.

But in the end, Jesus impresses them and silences them. Indeed, we read that the answer of Jesus to the Sadducees was recognized by all as being definitive and impressive, and so we read this:

³⁹Then certain of the scribes answering said, Master, thou hast well said. ⁴⁰And after that they durst not ask him any question at all. (Luke 20:39-40, KJV)

The key claim used by Jesus in silencing the Sadducees goes this way:

³⁷But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord *the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*. ³⁸Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to him. (Luke 20:37-38, RSV)

If God is the God of the patriarchs or of anyone, that person lives. You can't lie there dead as a doornail before our God, for he is the God of the living.

I would love to linger to spell out the full logic of this dispute with the Sadducees about the woman who married the seven brothers, but I think I will confine myself for now to this particular point, because it is a point that concerns you and me too: Our God is the God of the living, not of the dead.

Notice that the Lord did not say "I am the God that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob believed in back when they were alive, though now they are dead." No, he spoke of a relationship to the patriarchs that is too important to be disrupted by death. He is their God — present tense. He *still is* their God. When they

lived on this earth, they committed themselves to him. He is not the God of a mosquito, of a mere flash of lighting, a being that lasts for only a second or two compared to his great eternity.² When Abraham or any one calls upon “God,” they are not calling upon a finite, limited Savior. And they are not asking for scraps from the table. They are entrusting themselves to God for eternity. They are willing to risk everything on him, to leave behind their native land and to risk everything on this God. And our God is the one who is willing to be their God. He is willing to be *our* God. He does not simply help us in these threescore and ten years or whatever modest amount of years we might have. Rather, he is willing to be our God, with all the tones of eternity that belong to him.

MOST TO BE PITIED

So, we are not insects and our God is not a block of wood or stone incapable of raising up the dead to eternal life. When we are speaking of our God, we are speaking of the God of the living.

Saint Paul once said that of all people we are the most to be pitied if Christ be not raised from the dead:

¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:19, NRSV)

But Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! It is our great Easter acclamation. We believe that Jesus lives again and that will too.

Let me close with an interesting passage in a sermon by Charles Spurgeon. This passage interests me because it is so barebones, somehow. Spurgeon was blessed by God with a kind of Biblical eloquence. He spoke the language of Zion, and was perfectly capable of multiplying Biblical passages to support any point he wanted to make. But in this particular passage, it is as if he simply sets aside all documentation of his arguments, all other authorities, and simply speaks of his own puzzlement at how unbelievers can make it in this world. He said this:

I cannot understand what those do who have no God; I cannot comprehend the condition of those who have no “good hope through grace.” What can they do? They have to work very hard from Monday morning to Saturday night; on Sunday, they have no day of rest, no thought of a world to come, no rising to a purer atmosphere. They lie in

² A point made in Spurgeon’s sermon “Departed Saints Yet Living,” preached October 4, 1885.

bed, perhaps, in the morning; and then get up, and lounge about in their shirt-sleeves, there is nothing for them to get but what is found beneath the moon, and very little of that. It is better to be a dog than a man if there is no hope of a hereafter...Surely, you who are without God and without Christ, have your sinking, your mourning [your grieving], your dull times, have you not? What do you do then? Perhaps you try to drug yourself with strong drink. Alas, some do that; and this is mischievous indeed, to try to poison conscience, and silence the best friend you have within you! Do not so, but think about God, and about "our Lord Jesus Christ." This way lies hope, where stands that cross, and he pleads who received there those five wounds for sinners; this way lies your only hope. Oh, that you would think of it, and consider it!³

We are not to be pitied, because heaven is ahead of us. Of all people we should be the most happy people and the most willing to pour out our lives in good works and good words, because not a grain of goodness will be lost.

And so we are glad to make our great confession: We believe in the resurrection of the body and eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

³ Charles Spurgeon, "Comfort and Constancy," sermon for March 15, 1888.