

Last week we concluded with the words, “I know that my Redeemer lives.” A confession of faith Job makes, as he wrestles with his suffering and the unfairness of it all. The only thing that kept him going was a deep knowing that somewhere, out there, any minute his redeemer would come and put things right.

As powerful and necessary as this confession is, I left last week wondering if I made it sound too easy. Just join Job in proclaiming “I know that my Redeemer lives.” And that will solve all your problems and maybe inferred that we shouldn’t lament when bad things happen. That was not my intention. The intention of these bracelets is to decrease the whining and complaining we fill quite a bit of our conversations with ... the way we describe things in the negative, instead of the positive ... like when it rains, we grumble that we’ll have to mow the grass ... or how much time we spend speaking of where God is not, instead of where God is. These bracelets are not meant to silence the sorrow of wrestling with a diagnosis of cancer or providing corrective vision to injustices in the world. Job named his affliction, but he also cast a vision of what he intended his future to be ... a life redeemed.

I start here because much of the Bible is written to address people when they are in difficult times, times that threatened their ability to say, “I know that my redeemer lives.” The threats of war, exile, illness, other religions, wealth, poverty, natural disaster, and more were as real and challenging for them as they are for us. Like

the people of the Bible, we all have times when these words will not come readily to our lips.

For me, one of those times came when I was a camp counselor out in Colorado, the summer of 1993. It was a normal Thursday at lunch, ... we had storms come through the night before, but that morning was sunny, beautiful and blue sky as far as you could see. But, during lunch, a couple of the staff noticed a plume of smoke rising over the trees, on the mountain, above the camp. It looked like what you see from a chimney or a campfire. We weren't too alarmed because of this, but it had been a dry summer and campfires were restricted, except for in designated areas. Our site manager decided they better go check it out, but we shouldn't raise the alarms because it was small and they figured it could easily be taken care of, so we cleaned up from lunch, then headed for rest hour.

As we hung out in our cabins, the light outside the windows started to get dimmer and turned orange. A knock on the door led to an order for us to calmly, yet quickly get our campers down to the volleyball court where we would evacuate the camp. At this point ash was falling from the sky.

We safely moved everyone down the road several miles. The director and fire marshals both said this was a precaution, because the fire had spread, they were having trouble getting to it and winds were predicted, but even so, it was still small and they should be able to get it contained and have us back in camp later that

night. But, the winds did come, the flames spread, and instead of going back to camp, they let a few staff into camp to get tents, the kids sleeping bags, and a few other supplies for us to take care of the kids in a horse pasture, where we could see the flames crowning the trees up on the side of the mountain, while planes did there best to drop slurry and water to try to fight back this growing threat, to a place deeply woven into the faith journeys of not only me, but 30 summers of campers. The question we weren't saying yet, but was hovering in the back of everyone's minds was, "How could a place so devoted to God, be destroyed?"

The same question hovered in the minds of the people and disciples gathered outside the temple of Jerusalem with Jesus. They were admiring the stonework and the beauty and the amount of gifts that went into reestablishing this place of power and worship of God. It took a great deal of work and thought and was a sign for them that even though Rome ruled their land, the temple stood for the steadfastness of God. I picture the people coming up to Jesus and saying, "Aren't you proud of our church ... how beautiful it is?" And Jesus responds, "Actually, it doesn't have a future. There will be a day when every one of these stone walls will be torn down and scattered, so that not one will be left on another.

What? How can this be? Why would God allow God's dwelling place and place for the people to encounter God, to be destroyed? Doesn't that show weakness? A lack of control? Shouldn't we fight? Or actually, maybe we should make a run for it, because if the temple isn't safe, then probably God's people aren't safe either. And

there is the response of the Thessalonians, in our second lesson, at the news of the coming day of the Lord. Their response is to turn to idleness. If the world was going to end as they knew it, then what was the point of doing anything for this world?

Well, for the campers and staff, it was kind of an adventure the first night. We truly tried to continue in the mode of camp, just a different location. We were optimistic and actually challenged the campers to reflect the hope and faith in the Lord that we lived and celebrated when everything was fine and normal. We camped under the stars, sang boldly our confidence of what God would do, we prayed and we went to sleep believing we would return to normal by the next afternoon, at the latest.

That did not happen. The winds picked up. News given to the staff was that the fire was a half-mile from camp. Hot Shots had been called in. Don't let the campers know. Keep positive. Continue with programming and keep the campers happy. We had a mixed camp that week with Juniors (4-6th grade) and Junior High (7-9th graders). Initially, we encouraged the older kids to help support the younger ones. But, using outhouses and not getting showers and not getting to change clothes and the looming smoke and fire visible in the distance, getting closer and closer to the camp, began to wear on the community.

You know what happens when stressful situations continue among groups of people. Trust began to erode. The older kids accused us counselors of lying to them that we knew more about what was going on, but wouldn't tell them. They got tired

of having to being strong for the younger kids and needed more support for themselves. Squabbles grew to fighting. Accusations and blame were thrown around. Rumors started spreading about what was and was not happening. And youth and adults started to feel the hollowness of our prayers ... we were becoming less and less sure God was actually hearing or if God was hearing, we weren't seeing any activity that was a sign of things turning around.

To questions like these and in warning against those false teachers, who tend to take advantage of times like these, times when people will follow anyone who will tell them that it will be all okay, if they but follow and listen ... (Who can really blame us? We want a way out. And cultural religion doesn't usually connect suffering with a life following Jesus ... actually, we tend to teach that if you are with God and faithful enough then you can discover the sunny, happy life you have always dreamed of.)

But, Jesus doesn't ever say this. Instead, he tells those gathered that change is coming and change always brings with it conflict. There will be some who will want to keep things the way they are. There will be some who will be so overwhelmed with the loss of the temple that they will also lose sight of God. There will be some who think they know what the change should look like and get out ahead of God, always needing to be in control. And there will be some who will not want the relationship and life and loss of power that will come with the reign of God, to the point that they will resort to violence (even crucifixion) and later try to silence the

followers' testimony. People will do anything in order to stop change, including you. It will shake your faith, but Jesus says, don't be terrified, because the change is not up to you. The world as you know it is ending, but do not be afraid. I am with you to the end of the age. And I don't expect you to prepare and build an argument for what is to come ... the Spirit will give you the words you will need. Stay the course.

My Spirit, words and wisdom are what I give you. It is enough for today and what is to come. Stand firm in this and you will know life ... yes, it will be well with your soul. Or as a pastor reflected, "[Jesus] holds his own fast through the worst. It is not stoic determination that gets us "gain of soul," but faithful reliance on his promise of grace sufficient in weakness, a grace that works in everything for the gain of the soul."¹

Now, in sharing my camp story, I am not trying to equate this evacuation or even the threat to the camp to the magnitude of what the destruction of the temple in 70 AD meant to the people of God or the persecution they faced during that time, for following Jesus. It is the biggest challenge for us as listeners and readers of these words from God and trying to engage its meaning for us today, because we are not a persecuted people. But, we do face daily challenges in our life of discipleship and especially what it means to stand firm in this reliance of grace, as sufficient in times of joy and weakness.

¹ **Gaining One's Soul (Luke 21:5-19)** by F. Dean Lueking <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=621>

It took a young girl, to bear witness to us in that horse pasture 10+ years ago. We were getting close to our second night out, without the shelter of our dear camp. The grumbling was growing louder. The distrust and pointing of fingers grew more regular. The counselors' normal tactics of games, diversion, singing, praying, and everything else we could think up was growing less and less effective. Probably because our own hearts were growing less and less sure, so our words were ringing hollow in everyone's ears. News from the mountain was not good. Then, word started spreading that everyone was supposed to meet in front of the ranch house for an announcement. We all hoped that it was news that the weather was changing or the firefighters had gained the upper hand or fearfully, we wondered if the news would be that the flames had reached the camp.

Instead, there stood this camper and with her hands, she began to testify that she knew in her heart that God's hands held us and covered that camp. God would protect and hold it fast, as God had been doing for years and would do for years to come. Her testimony, and our promise, no matter the outcome. The light no darkness can overcome. In these words, we gained new life and hope. In the Word, made flesh, you and I stand fast, weep, and lift our voices in praise, because indeed our past, present, and future are held in the hands of God and this Word is what makes all the difference.

Let us pray, the peace that surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.