

Sermon – Now Crowned with Glory and Honor
Scripture – Job 1:1, 2:1-10 and Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
Sunday, October 4, 2015
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Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading comes to us from the book of Job, beginning with the first verse, and then continuing with chapter 2, verses 1 through 10.

1 There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

1 One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. 2 The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." 3 The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." 4 Then Satan answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. 5 But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." 6 The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life." 7 So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. 8 Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. 9 Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." 10 But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips. Here ends the first reading.

Our second reading gives us an excerpt from the opening words of the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 1, verses 1-4, and chapter 2, verses 5-12. Listen now for the word of the Lord to you.

1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2 but in these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom [God] appointed heir of all things, through whom [God] also created the worlds. 3 He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

5 Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. 6 But someone has testified somewhere, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? 7 You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, 8 subjecting all things under their feet." Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, 9 but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. 10 It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. 11 For the one who sanctifies and

those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, 12 saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

The title of the sermon: "Now Crowned with Glory and Honor"

The Text: "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters..." Hebrews 2:12

A pair of letters preserved by historians from the year 112 tells of the early spread of Christianity in the Middle East, recording a correspondence between Pliny the Younger, a Roman Governor in modern-day Turkey, and the Emperor Trajan. Pliny has begun encountering Christians, and never having presided over trials against them before, he is not sure what to do with these followers of an unusual, illegal religion. He writes of having had to judge a number of persons brought before him as Christians, and executing them if they persisted in their confession of faith. He seems to be puzzled by the phenomenon, though, and particularly upon receiving an anonymous accusation against a whole list of alleged Christians, he felt cautious and did some investigating into what these Christians were doing.

This only puzzled him more, because even under torture, all he could really figure out was that the people met weekly, early in the morning, sang a worship hymn to Christ, and bound themselves to an oath not to engage in theft, adultery, broken promises, or various other offenses, and that many of them had also met regularly to share an innocent-sounding meal. He gathered that worshipping the Emperor or cursing Christ was forbidden for any true Christian, so anyone willing to recant and do those things, he released. Pliny's conclusion is that a foolish madness was spreading around. Since this particular madness seemed to be contagious and was popping up everywhere, leading him to believe he was going to be seeing a lot more such cases before him, Pliny wants to check to be sure whether what he has been doing is in line with the wishes of the Emperor.

Trajan responds, telling Pliny that there is no all-purpose way to handle such cases, and that his tendency to examine each individually was therefore correct. He assures Pliny that the law must be followed, but that anyone who recants should be pardoned. He also declares that anonymous accusations have no place in the courtroom at all, and that neither should anybody be going and seeking out Christians to find and punish them.

The two letters are an interesting combination of things. They are partly quite disturbing, speaking of torture and execution of people for their faith. They are partly fascinating as a tiny, outsider's depiction of Christian practice in the early church, with elements we recognize even today as weekly worship and the Lord's Supper. And I, as someone named after the Emperor Trajan, have always found at least a little bit of gladness in the fact that he commanded there be no intentional, widespread persecution, and in his insistence that under his rule, justice was not compatible with giving any weight to anonymous accusations.

The oppression of Christians had been sporadically ongoing already for 80 years, back to the crucifixion of Jesus and many of his apostles, and it continued with varying levels of intensity afterward. Christians were widely distrusted for refusing to take part in public religious rituals, and

rumors persisted that Christians were incestuous and cannibalistic, which probably came out of hearing Christian language calling one another “brother” and “sister” and speaking of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Christ. Persecution became much more massive and intentional under the Emperors of the late 3rd and early 4th Centuries, until it was finally halted in 314 by the Edict of Milan, which made Christianity legal throughout the empire.

Its existence as a distrusted minority religious group, always under threat of public lynching and criminal punishment, was a formative experience for the early church as it grew and spread for its first three hundred years. And oddly, it did grow and spread, massively, over that time. There were people scared away from the faith by the threat. But many others seemed endlessly drawn to this weird, fringe religion for which they could be imprisoned or killed, and every death seemed to inspire numerous others to take up their own crosses and follow Christ.

It seems strange, perhaps, to see someone punished severely, and then because of it to be attracted to the very thing which earned them that punishment. But there is a reason for that, which authorities all the way up to the present day regularly forget: When misery is inflicted upon someone for holding firm in his or her convictions, that makes two public statements. It first proclaims that anyone who takes up this cause will suffer. This does push people away. But it also proclaims, by demonstration, that the people who hold this faith have found something that makes them so strong, steadfast, and sure of the promise they have obtained that even pain and death are nothing next to it. This is a powerful form of testimony, and it is not too strange, after all, for onlookers then to seek after whatever it may be that can inspire such unusual, unfaltering commitment.

Suffering, then, evil as it may be in itself, is also a means of witness in how it is endured. “Martyr” is a Greek word meaning simply “witness”,¹ and this is how we came to apply the label “martyrs” to those who witness through their suffering. We see that very theme laid out before us in our readings today. Job is set up for his tribulations specifically because he is blameless and faithful. Satan, “ha-satan” in Hebrew, or “the accuser” or “adversary”, comes in confident that Job will forswear God if only he undergoes great misery, that this will demonstrate that faith is only based on worldly happiness, and that even the strongest-looking dedication to God will fall away when life turns to agony and disaster.

Of course, as we see when we progress through the rest of Job, some of which we will read over the next few weeks, this test ultimately winds up demonstrating the opposite. Worldly voices assail Job with the insistence that God has abandoned or turned against him. Job is supremely confused and distraught in his suffering, but he perseveres, and the story then becomes a teaching lesson which communicates that sustained hope in God is warranted even in our own confused suffering. Job suffering despite his blamelessness also teaches us to recognize that the worldly circumstances of a person, good or bad, do not give any evidence to whether a person’s faith is strong or weak.

This message of Job might also make us wary of certain kinds of Christian teaching that tend to draw big crowds by promising material abundance and everyday happiness as a result of faithfulness. Just as a Roman governor promising death as the result of faithfulness can backfire, by demonstrating

¹ A tidbit worthy of note: The apostle Stephen, stoned to death for his beliefs, was the first recorded Christian martyr, and his name, Stephen, means “crowned.” This links in a linguistically interesting way to the Hebrews text we read today when it describes Jesus being “crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death.”

the awe-inspiring depth of faith found in those who willingly accept that fate; a Christian preacher promising wealth or a happy home as the result of faithfulness can backfire by encouraging the very sort of shallow, fair-weather faith that Satan thinks Job has, one which will be demolished when pain, bereavement, and grief appear in life.

Jesus, by contrast, promises his disciples straightforwardly that some will suffer for his sake, and insists following him means willingness to suffer on each other's behalf. He takes this message all the way to the cross, and his own willing acceptance of crucifixion is the first and highest example of Gospel witness through suffering.

It is this, Jesus's proclamation of salvation by his own sacrifice, which today's second reading discusses. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets," we hear, "but in these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son."² The prophets come first, and if you read the words of the prophets, you find that they are usually accusatory, reminding us of the disparity between God's righteousness and our own ways of life. The Son, however, coming after, is a voice demonstrating the grace and mercy of God, by suffering with us. By paying the price of the suffering we cause, that voice testifies to the salvation which comes to us out of God's love. Becoming human and suffering with us, Christ is God's own entry into the world to stand with us, and as Hebrews says, Jesus is "not ashamed" to call those he saves his "brothers and sisters."³

Jesus himself discusses witness and suffering in similar words in Luke 9.⁴ "If any want to become my followers," he says, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."⁵

Here and elsewhere, Jesus directly states that witness may well *require* suffering in many cases, and that we should be prepared to expect this. But all this may seem far away and long ago. Do we suffer for our own faith?

Well, we certainly suffer the deprivation of whatever worldly pleasures we could have, but deny ourselves for the sake of Christian love. This is a form of witness, and we should remember that, every time we choose whether to give to ourselves, knowing it is at the cost of not giving to someone else.

We also suffer as Job suffered—anguish and confusion at the assaults of the world on our lives, adversity and grief whose origin and meaning we cannot explain. This, too, is a form of witness, when our voice cries out in pain and yet we remain resolute in our trust of God.

We rarely suffer the sort of trials early Christians endured under the Roman Empire, where we might have to carry a literal cross. But this choice might still be there for us to make in some small form—Jesus using wording about being "ashamed" of him brings this uncomfortably close to home.

² Hebrews 1:1-2 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

³ Hebrews 2:11 (NRSV).

⁴ And in a parallel passage in Mark 8.

⁵ Luke 9:23-26 (NRSV).

For there are different sorts of weaknesses by which our faithfulness might be attacked. I have long preferred to imagine that I am the sort of person who would boldly continue to proclaim Christ under threat of death. Maybe I even am...but am I willing to admit to him publicly under threat of embarrassment, in a culture that looks funny at people who take their Jesus too seriously? As we have noted with those early Christian martyrs, what we fear to suffer, or do not fear to suffer, is a form of witness to the world. And if being unafraid of death is a powerful testimony for Christ, surely being afraid merely of popular culture is also a testimony to how much we actually trust in him.

But neither are actual, old-fashioned persecutions gone from the world. According to the Pew Research Center, 27% of countries have high or very high restrictions on religion. Since this includes some of the most populous countries, there remain an extraordinarily large number of people subject to penalties of law for their faith. Christians, it is noted, suffer popular or government harassment in more countries than any other religion today. Part of that is simply that Christianity is the world's largest religion and so there are Christians present to be harassed in more places compared to many other religions. Nevertheless, there are 102 countries where it is problematic to be a Christian, which is a disturbing fact.⁶

It also is a fact we often fail to take seriously. We tend to see things only as they are in our context. Being in a place where Christian faith has dominated, where the worst we are likely to suffer is social embarrassment, serious persecution of Christians doesn't seem realistic to us. Or maybe we cringe when we hear certain public figures yelling about one or another of our politicians being "anti-Christian", and so we subconsciously think we're allying ourselves with some kind of extremists if we acknowledge that anti-Christian persecution is a real thing. Or perhaps, in humble acknowledgment of the times and places where our ancestors' witness to Christ involved killing people who did not follow him, and knowing we Christians are the largest group of people in the most prosperous nation on earth, we are cautious about getting onboard the cause of seeing Christians as victims. And that may be fair.

But not every place is America. Not everybody's life is lived where free exercise of religion is protected, and not everybody's church history is Western church history. Christians in some parts of the world have been minorities forever, or for centuries, and have been threatened for much or all of that time, to the present day.

The current state of things across much of the region which was the birthplace of our faith is worst of all. Small, Christian communities here and there have managed to pass their faith down for hundreds of years, but now Christianity is on the verge of being wiped out altogether across most of the Middle East, thanks to the most violent purges in a hundred years. Since 2003, the chaos in Iraq and the anarchy following the Arab Spring uprisings spreading from Tunisia all the way to Syria have left people vulnerable to fierce extremists who have swept in and taken over through mass murder, kidnapping, rape, and destruction. Their brutality is not solely toward Christians, by any means. But it is distressing to read the letters from bishops of eastern churches, pleading their kinship with the rest of us who follow Christ around the world and fearing they have been forgotten and ignored.⁷ And it should grieve us to hear that "for the first time in [nearly] 2,000 years, there are no church

⁶ See <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/>

⁷ See <http://www.kofc.org/en/resources/christianRelief/archbishop-jeanbart-letter.pdf>

services in Mosul,” or in numerous other formerly Christian outposts in Iraq and Syria where today the churches lie burned to the ground, and the people all killed, enslaved, or driven away.

This is not a new experience for followers of Christ, but it is a heartbreaking one, and one we should mourn and pray for. It is also one we should take to heart; and, with some appreciation for their suffering for the sake of Christ, take care for how well we live our own lives as witnesses, considering that we have it so easy compared to so many people in the world.

This week it is World Communion Sunday. When we take and share the body and blood of Christ today, may the Holy Spirit move us to true communion with the whole church, knowing we all take of the same bread of life and cup of salvation, a meal shared by all of us, from the earliest Christians whose practices so confused Roman officials, to the entire body of believers across the world today, all of us remembering and testifying to the witness of Jesus Christ, who by sharing in our suffering and death and rising again is “now crowned with glory and honor.”⁸ Amen.

⁸ Hebrews 2:9 (NRSV).